

HARRY HARRISON

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RETURN
TO EDEN

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(Eden - 3)

Harry Harrison

The conflict between the human Tanu and the reptilian Yilanè reaches a climax as the two implacable enemies face each other a battle for the destinies of their races. Harrison 's conclusion to his alternate prehistory of Earth excels in its detailed depiction of alien civilization that might have been.

Return to Eden

by Harry Harrison

~~This is a story of the world today.~~

This is our world as it would be if a meteor had not struck the Earth 65 million years ago.

The world at that time was populated by the great reptiles. They were the most successful life forms that the Earth had ever seen. For over 140 million years they had ruled the land, filled the sky, and swarmed in the seas. Scuttling beneath their feet were the mammals. These mammals were the ancestors of mankind. Tiny, shrew-like animals that were preyed on by the larger, faster, more intelligent saurians.

Then, 65 million years ago, this all changed. A meteor six miles in diameter struck the Earth and caused disastrous atmospheric upheavals. Within a brief span of time over seventy-five percent of the species then existent were wiped out. The age of the dinosaurs was over; the evolution of the mammals that they had suppressed for 100 million years began. The world as we know it was born.

But what would our world be like today if that meteor had not fallen?

This is the story of that world.

Today.

PROLOGUE: KERRICK

Life is no longer easy. Too much has changed, too many are dead, the winters are too long. It was not always this way. I remember clearly the encampment where I grew up, remember the three families there, the long days, friends, good food. During the warm seasons we stayed on the shore of a great lake filled with fish. My first memories are of that lake, looking across its still water at the high mountains beyond, seeing their peaks grow white with the first snows of winter. When the snow whitened our tents and the grass around as well, that would be the time when the hunters went to the mountains. I was in a hurry to grow up, eager to hunt the deer, and the greatdeer, at the hunters' side.

That simple world of simple pleasures is gone forever. Everything has changed, and it must be said, not for the better. At times I wake up at night and wish that what happened had never happened. But these are foolish thoughts and the world is as it is, changed now in every way. What I thought was the entirety of existence has proved to be only a tiny corner of reality. My lake and my mountains are only the smallest part of this great continent that borders an immense ocean to the east.

I also know about the others, the creatures we call murgu, and I learned to hate them even before I saw them. I will tell you about them.

As our flesh is warm, theirs is chill. When you look at us you see that we have hair upon our heads. A hunter will grow a proud beard, while the animals that we hunt have warm flesh and fur or hair. But this is not true of the murgu. They are cold and smooth and scaled, have claws and teeth to rend and tear, are large and terrible, to be feared. And hated. When I was very young I learned about them. I knew that they lived in the warm waters of the ocean to the south and on the warm lands to the south. They cannot abide the cold so although I grew up fearing them I also knew they could not trouble us.

All that has changed so terribly that nothing will be the same ever again. That is because there are murgu called Yilanè who are intelligent, just as we Tanu are intelligent. It has become my frightening knowledge that our world is only a tiny part of the Yilanè world. I know now that we live in the northern part of a great continent. Know as well that to the south of us, over all the land, swarm only murgu and Yilanè.

And there is even worse. Across the ocean an even larger continent exists — and in this distant land are no hunters at all. None. Yilanè, only Yilanè. The entire world is theirs except for our small part.

Now I will tell you the worst thing about the Yilanè. They hate us as we hate them. This would not matter if they were only great, insensate beasts. We would stay in the cold north and avoid them in this manner.

But there are those among them who may be as intelligent as hunters, as fierce as hunters. And although their number cannot be counted it would be truthful to say that they fill all of the lands of this great world.

I know these things because I was captured by the Yilanè, grew up among them, learned from them. The first horror I felt when my father and all the others were killed has been dimmed by the years. When I learned to speak as the Yilanè do I became as one of them, forgot that I was a hunter. I even learned to call my people ustuzou, creatures of filth. Because all order and rule among the Yilanè comes down from the top I thought very well of myself. Since I was close to Vaintè, the eistaa of the city, its ruler, I was looked upon as a ruler myself.

The living city of Alpèasak was newly grown on these shores, settled by Yilanè from across the ocean. They had been driven from their own distant city by the winters that grow colder every year. The same cold that had driven my father and the other Tanu south in the search for food sent the

Yilanè questing across the sea. They came here and they grew their city on our shores. When they found the Tanu who were here before them they killed them. Just as the Tanu killed Yilanè on sight. is a shared hatred.

For many years I had no knowledge of this. I grew up among the Yilanè and I thought as they did. When they made war I looked upon the enemy as filthy ustuzou, not Tanu, my brothers. This changed only when I met the prisoner, Herilak. A sammadar, a leader of the Tanu, who understood me far better than I understood myself. When I spoke to him as enemy, alien, he spoke to me as flesh of his flesh. As the language of my childhood returned so did my memories of that warm earlier life. Memories of my mother, family, friends. There are no families among the Yilanè, no suckling babies among egg-laying lizards, no possible friendships where these cold females rule, where the males are locked away from the sight of all the others for their entire lifetime.

Herilak showed me that I was Tanu, not Yilanè. Because of this I freed him and we fled. At first I regretted it — but there was no going back. For in escaping I had attacked and almost killed Vaintè she who rules. I joined the sammads, the family groups of the Tanu, joined them in flight from the onslaught of those who had once been my companions. But I had other companions now, and a friendship of a kind I could never know among the Yilanè. I had Armun, she who came to me and showed me that which I had never even known, awoke the feelings I could never have felt while I was living among that alien race. Armun who bore our son.

But we still led our lives under the constant threat of death. Vaintè and her warriors followed the sammads without mercy. We fought back — and sometimes won, even capturing some of their living weapons, the death-sticks that kill creatures of any size. With these we could penetrate far to the south, eating well of the teeming murgu, killing the vicious ones when they attacked. Only to flee again when Vaintè and her endless supply of killers from across the sea found us and fought to kill us.

This time the survivors went where we could not be followed, across the frozen mountain ranges to the land beyond. Yilanè cannot live in the snows; we thought we would be safe.

And we were, for a long time we were. Beyond the mountains we found Tanu who did not live by hunting alone, but who grew crops in their hidden valley and could make pots, weave cloth and do many other wondrous things. They are the Sasku and they are our friends, for they worship the god of the mastodon. We brought our mastodons to them and we have been as one people ever since. Life was good in the Sasku valley.

Until Vaintè found us once again.

When this happened I realized that we could run no more. Like cornered animals we must turn and fight. At first none would listen to me for they did not know the enemy as I did. But they came to understand that the Yilanè had no knowledge of fire. They would learn of it when we brought the torch to their city.

And this is what we did. Burnt their city of Alpèasak and sent the few survivors fleeing back to their own world and to their own cities across the sea. Among those who lived was Enge who had been my teacher and my friend. She did not believe in killing as all the others did, and was the leader of a group who called themselves the Daughters of Life, believers in the sanctity of life. Would that they had been the only survivors.

But Vaintè lived as well. This creature of hatred survived the destruction of her city, fled on the uruketo, the great living vessel of the Yilanè, vanished into the trackless ocean.

I put her from my mind because of more urgent matters. Although all the murgu in the city were dead, most of the burned city had survived. The Sasku wished to stay with me in the city, but the Tanu hunters returned to their sammads. I could not go back with them for the part of me that thinks like Yilanè kept me in this Yilanè city.

That and the fact that two of their males had survived the destruction. I was drawn to this hal

ruined city, and to them, and forgot my responsibility to Armun and my son. It must be truthfully said that ~~this selfishness nearly led to their destruction.~~

We labored to make this murgu city one in which we could live, and we succeeded. But in vain. Vaintè had found new allies across the ocean and returned once again. Armed with the invincible Yilanè science. No attacks with weapons this time, but poison plants and animals instead. And even as the attacks began the sammads returned from the north. Their death-sticks had died in the winter and they could not survive without them. Here in the city we had these deadly creatures, so here the sammads must remain despite the slow approach of Yilanè destruction.

The sammads brought me even crueler news. Since I had not returned to her, Armun had tried to return to me. She and our son were lost in the deadly winter.

I would have ended my life then were it not for one tiny spark of hope. A hunter who traded far to the north, with the Paramutan who live in that frozen wasteland, had heard that a Tanu woman and child had been seen among them. Could it be them? Could they still be alive? The fate of the city and the Tanu and Sasku living in it meant nothing to me now. I had to go north and search for them. Ortnar, my friend and strong right arm, understood this and went with me.

Instead of Armun we almost found death. Had the Paramutan not discovered us it would have ended there. We survived, although Ortnar is still crippled by his frozen feet. The hunters of the island saved us, and to my great joy Armun was with them. Then, in the spring, they brought us safely back to the city in the south.

Which was Yilanè once again. The sammads and the Sasku had retreated to the distant Sasku valley and were being followed closely by Vaintè and her forces, dark portents of certain death. And we could do nothing. My little sammad and the two Yilanè males were safe enough for the moment at our hidden lake. But the others would die and I could not save them.

It would be difficult enough to save ourselves for it was a certainty that one day our hiding place would be found. I knew that the Paramutan who had brought us here would soon be crossing the ocean to hunt upon the far shore. Perhaps there might be safety there. Annun and I joined them and crossed the sea — only to discover that the Yilanè were there ahead of us. But from death came life. We destroyed them, and in doing so I discovered where Ikhalmenets was, the city on the island which was aiding Vaintè in her war of destruction.

What I did was either very brave or very foolhardy. Perhaps both. I forced the eistaa of Ikhalmenets to stop the attack, to stop Vaintè at the very brink of her victory. In this I succeeded and the world is again at peace. My sammad is once more joined and complete at our hidden lake. The battle is ended.

Yet there were other things that had happened that I did not discover for a long, long time. Eng, my teacher and my friend, was still alive. She and her followers, the Daughters of Life, had found refuge in a new land far to the south. They had grown a city there far from the other Yilanè who wished to see their destruction. Another place of peace, another end to strife.

But there was yet another thing that I did not know. That creature of hatred and death, Vaintè, was still alive.

That is what has happened in the past. Now I stand by our hidden lake squinting into the sunsets, trying to see what will happen in the years to come.

CHAPTER ONE

Uveigil as lok at mennet, homennet thorpar ey wat marta ok etin.

No matter how clear the river, there is always some darkness upstream drifting down towards you.

Marbak proverb

There was silence and peace.

It had been a hot day, for the days were always warm here. But the evening air was a little cool with the light breeze blowing over the water. Kerrick squinted into the sun, wiped some of the perspiration from his face. It was easy to forget the slow changing of the seasons of the year this far to the south. The sun, as always, was setting behind the lake, the last glint of it shining on the unruffled waters, with the red sky reflected there as well. A fish stirred the surface and waves of color moved out in all directions. This was the way it always was, unchanging. Sometimes there would be clouds or rain, but no really cold weather, no slow cycle of seasons. The rain and fog were an indication of winter. Then the air was cooler at night as well. But there was never the fresh green of spring grass or the russet of leaves in the autumn.

Never the deep snow of winter; there were some things that Kerrick did not miss at all. In damp weather his fingers still ached where they had been frozen. Far better the heat than the snow. He squinted at the vanishing sun, a tall, erect man. His long, pale hair reached to his shoulders, was bound about his forehead by a thin band of leather. In recent years wrinkles had formed at the corners of his eyes; there were pale scars of old wounds on his tanned skin as well. He turned to look as the water moved in larger waves as something dark broke the surface just offshore. There was a familiar rumbling snort that Kerrick recognized. Schools of hardalt came close to the surface at dusk and Armehei had grown adept at netting them in the failing light. He came ashore now, puffing and blowing with a netful of the creatures. Red reflections glinted on their shells, their tentacles trailed down his back. He dropped them before the shelter where the two Yilanè males slept and called out attention in speaking, firm authority in his voice. Nadaske emerged and expressed sounds of approval as the man opened the net. There was peace in sammad Kerrick — but still peace at a distance. The Yilanè stayed on their side of the grass clearing, the Tanu on theirs. Only Kerrick and Arnwheet were at home in both.

Kerrick frowned at the thought and rubbed his fingers through his beard, ran them along the metal ring about his neck. He knew that Armun was not pleased that Arnwheet visited the Yilanè. To her the males were just murgu, creatures that would be better off dead and forgotten rather than waddling about, repulsive companions to their son. But she was wise enough not to speak of it. On the surface at least there was peace in the sammad. Now she emerged from the tent that was sheltered under the trees, saw Kerrick sitting there, came and joined him at the water's edge.

"You must stay under the leaves, not out here in the open," she said. "Are you not the one who tells us always to remember the bird who watches by day, the owl by night?"

"I said that. But I think we are safe from them now. It has been two years since I first came here with Ortnar and those two on the shore there. We have not been disturbed in all that time. Lanefenu ended the war as I told her to. She said she would do that so it was done. The murgu cannot lie. The attackers have returned to the city, have never left it since."

"But their hunting parties must still go out."

"We are far from them and remain watchful."

"There is still fear."

He rose and put his arms about her, sniffed the sweet smell of her long hair, held her close, but not too tightly because of the rounded swell of her body. "It would not be easy for you to travel now," he said. "After the baby is born I will scout to the north with Harl. He is old enough now to be a hunter and Ortnar has trained him well. He is no longer a child, this is his sixteenth summer. He has a good spear. We will search to the north. I know that there are more lakes there, that is what Ortnar says."

"I don't want to be left here. When you go I must go as well."

"That we will talk about when the time comes."

"It is already decided. I would like to go to another lake. And when we leave the two murgu will remain here?"

Kerrick did not answer but instead turned and with his arm still about her started back towards the tent. The baby was due now, was perhaps late, and he knew that she was in pain although she did not tell him. This was no time to discuss the Yilanè males. The sides of the tent were rolled up, it had been a very warm day, and he could see Arnwheet already asleep on the skins. Six years old now and growing fast, a strong and happy boy. The girl Darras was still awake, for she was much older, lying there and watching them in silence. She was still very quiet and only spoke when talked to. If she thought of her dead parents she never mentioned it. She was very much like a daughter to them now.

The night was so still that the murmur of voices from the hunters' tent could be clearly heard. One of them laughed and this pleased Kerrick. Ortnar, crippled as he was, still had a place here. As long as his skills could be taught to the two boys there was no more talk of walking into the forest and not returning.

A night bird called in the distance, the lonely sound emphasizing the silence. There was peace and food for them all, the family and the sammad. Kerrick wanted no more. He smiled into the darkness until Armun's whispered words disturbed him.

"I wish the baby would come. It has been a long time."

"Soon. Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

"No! You should not say that — it brings bad luck to speak well of things that have not happened yet. That is what my mother said. No matter how clear the water in the river is, there is always something dark upstream drifting down towards you."

"Rest now," he said, reaching out to find her mouth in the darkness, placing his finger gently against the cleft in her lip. She murmured something but was close to sleep and he could not make out what it was.

When Kerrick awoke it was to the grayness of a misty dawn. The haze would soon burn away under the searing touch of the summer sun. Armun sighed in her sleep when he gently took his arm from beneath her head. He stood and yawned and made his way from the tent as silently as he could. Arnwheet must have slipped out at first light for he was returning now from the direction of the lake, chewing on a rich lump of raw fish.

"Nadaske and Imehei go far around the lake today," he said. "To a place where fish live/grow/swarm richly."

He shook his hips with this, for he had no tail to express the modifier of expansiveness. As always when he had been with the males he spoke Yilanè to Kerrick. In the time his mother and father had been away, the best part of a year, he had grown proficient in speaking. Kerrick glanced back at the silent tent before he answered. They were careful to talk only in Marbak when Armun was present.

"A good exercise/walk for male/fat/Yilanè. But a young ustuzou hunts in the forest with me today."

"Yes, yes!" Arnwheet said, clapping his hands and falling into Marbak. "Harl too?"

"And Ortnar. They have found a tree where there is a bansemnilla den and will need help driving them out. Go get your spear. Ortnar wants to leave while it is still cool."

Armun heard them speaking and emerged from the tent. "Will it be a long hunt?" she asked worried, her hands unknowingly resting on her rounded midriff. He shook his head no.

"The den is very close by. I won't leave you alone until after the baby comes, not for longer than the smallest part of the day. Don't be afraid."

She shook her head and sat down heavily. "Return swiftly. Darras will be with me," she added and the silent girl joined them. "It might happen today."

"I don't have to go..."

"It won't happen that soon. There are no signs."

"Tonight we will eat bansemnilla. Baked in mud in the coals."

"I would like that very much."

Before they set out Kerrick walked along the lake to the vine-covered shelter that the males had grown at the water's edge. One of them emerged and Kerrick called his name in greeting.

"Imehei."

Kerrick smiled to himself as he realized the name meant soft-to-touch. Nothing could be less appropriate for this squat, grim Yilanè who now shaped his arms in respectful acknowledgment of welcome. His round eyes, both looking towards Kerrick, were empty of emotion. But his great jaws opened slightly in the gape of pleasure, to reveal a white row of conical teeth.

"Eat with us/join with us," Imehei said.

"I have already eaten, regretful thankfulness. Arnwheet tells me you explore the world today?"

"Little wet-from-the-sea sees our small journey as a great adventure/exploration. Along the lake shore is water of some depth/ springs of fresh water. Fish of great size abound. Desire to catch/eat. Will small/soft go with us?"

"Not this time. Bansemnilla have been found in the forest and we mean to hunt them."

"Lack of knowledge of creature/name unknown."

"Small furry, long-tailed, pouched; good to eat."

"Pleasure of contemplation of a portion! We will bring back fine fish in exchange."

"May your nets be full, your hooks sink deep."

Nadaske emerged in time to hear this and signed pleased gratitude. Kerrick watched as they shouldered their rolled nets, secured their hèsotsan so that it rode high, then eased themselves into the water, to swim off easily along the reed-covered shore. They had come a long way from the protected existence in the hanalè of the city. They were now strong and secure individuals in their own right. A shrill ululation sounded behind him and he turned to see Arnwheet calling out and waving to him.

"We are here, Atta," he said.

Kerrick walked over and saw Ortnar standing in the shadows. As always the wooden crutch was tucked under his left arm, supporting his weight. The falling sickness had not killed him, but the strength had never truly returned to his left side. His leg dragged and his arm had just enough strength to hold to the wooden support. With its aid he could limp along, slowly but steadily. There must have been pain, though he never mentioned it, because sharp grooves were cut in the skin below his eyes; he never smiled. But the strength of his right arm had not been affected and the spear he held was as deadly as ever. He tipped it towards Kerrick now in silent greeting.

"Shall we have good hunting?" Kerrick asked.

"That — and good eating. There are many of them there, but one fat one that lives in the tree, that is the one we must try to get. I have watched it."

"Then show us the way."

The two boys had bows as well as spears, but Kerrick brought only his hèsotsan. The cool length of the living weapon stirred in his hands as he walked last in the column. The darts that it spat forth were

instant death for any creature, no matter how large. Without this Yilanè weapon, death-stick the Tan called it, life would have been impossible in the forest. Their spears and arrows could not kill the large murgu that roamed here. Only the Yilanè poison could do that. They had only three of the weapons now, one had died, drowned by accident. It was irreplaceable. When the other three died — then what? But they were not dead yet, it was too early to worry. Kerrick shrugged off the dark thought. Better think of the hunt and the sweet flesh cooking in the fire.

They walked in silence along the forest track — even more silently when Ortnar touched the spear shaft to his lips. It was hot in the still air under the trees and they were quickly drenched in perspiration. Ortnar pointed to a large-boled tree, at the thick branches high above.

“There,” he whispered, “you can see the opening of the lair.” A squat dark form scurried along the branch and Arnwheet giggled with excitement until hushed by Ortnar’s sharp gesture.

But killing any of the animals was not that easy. They sped along the branches and vanished among the leaves, aided by their clutching claws and agile tails. Arrows were fired, missed and retrieved. Ortnar had sharp words to say about their accuracy. Kerrick stood aside, watching the hunt when he could, but keeping more aware of the surrounding forest and any dangers that might be hidden there. In the end both boys had to climb the tree and hammer on the trunk with their bows. When a dark form scurried out along a branch Ortnar’s deadly spear made quick work of it. The impaled bansemnilla squealed once as it fell into the shrubs below, to be retrieved by the happy shouting boys. Kerrick admired the fatness of the still form while Ortnar muttered about the excessive noise. In single file, the boys carrying the creature on a pole between them, they returned to the camp by the lake.

As they emerged from the trees, Ortnar stabbed his spear skywards in sharp warning. They stopped, frozen in their tracks. Moving air rustled the leaves above their heads and through this sound they heard a muffled cry.

“Armun!” Kerrick called out, brushing past Ortnar, running forward. She emerged from the tent with a spear in one hand, her free arm wrapped protectively about the sobbing girl.

“What happened?”

“That thing, the marag, it came here, screaming and twisting, attacked us, I used my spear. Made it leave.”

“A marag? Where did it go?”

“Yours!” she shouted, anger pulling her face into a livid mask. “There by the shore. The things you allow to live close to us, that will kill us all...”

“Be silent. The males are no threat. Something is wrong. Stay here.”

When Kerrick ran across the grass to the shore Nadaske emerged from hiding, his arms clasped about his body, stumbling and swaying. There was foam on his lips and the tip of his tongue protruded from between his teeth.

“What is wrong?” Kerrick called out, then took him by the thick, hard flesh of his arms and shook him when there was no answer. “Where is Imehei? Imehei. Tell me.”

Kerrick felt the shudder pass through Nadaske’s body when he heard the name. The nictitating membrane slid away as he rolled a reddened eye towards Kerrick.

“Dead, worse, not known/end of life...”

His words were muttered, the motion of his limbs hesitant and slow. His crest flamed red and he twisted in agony. It was a long time before Kerrick could understand what had happened. Only then did he let the distraught Yilanè slip down to the grass, turn away and walk back to face the others.

“Imehei may be dead, he doesn’t know for sure.”

“They murder each other, then attack me!” Armun screamed. “Now kill that thing, finish it.”

Kerrick fought to control his temper; he knew she had reason to feel like this. He handed her

weapon to Harl and put his arms about her.

~~“It is nothing like that. He was trying to tell you something that is all/speak to you, trying to find me. They were on the other side of the lake, fishing, when they were attacked.”~~

“Murgu?” Ortnar asked.

“Yes, murgu.” Kerrick’s voice was cold as death. “Their kind of murgu. Yilanè, females. Hunters

“Then they have found us?”

“I don’t know.” He pushed Armun gently away from him, saw the fear still in her eyes. “He was just trying to talk to you. His friend is captured, perhaps dead. He fled, escaped, did not see what happened after that.”

“Then we must find out what these others were doing at the lake, what they know about us,” Ortnar said, shaking his spear in impotent rage. “Kill them.” He dragged his foot towards the lake, stumbled and almost fell.

“Stay here and guard,” Kerrick said. “I leave the sammad in your trust. I will go back with Nadaske and find out what has happened. We will be very careful. Remember, the hunters saw only their own kind, they can not know of our existence.”

Unless Imehei is still alive, tells them about us, he thought to himself, keeping his fears silent. “We’re leaving now.” He hesitated a moment, then took a second hèsotsan. Ortnar watched grimly.

“The death-sticks are ours, we need them to survive.”

“I will bring it back.”

Nadaske sat slumped back on his tail in exhausted silence and only stirred slightly when Kerrick came close. “I lost all control,” he said with sharp motions of self-deprecation. “Stupid as a fargi on the shore. I even dropped the hèsotsan, left it there. It was their voices, what they said as they seized Imehei. All intelligence fled. I fled. I should have stayed.”

“You did the right thing. You came to me. Now you have a weapon. You won’t drop it this time.” He held out the hèsotsan and Nadaske took it without thinking. Seized it incorrectly, a thumb near the creature’s mouth. He scarcely noticed when it chewed his flesh with its sharp teeth. Then he slowly drew his thumb away and looked at the drops of blood.

“Now I have a weapon,” he said. Then heaved to his feet. “We have weapons, we will go.”

“I cannot swim as you do.”

“No need. There is a track along the shore. I came back that way.” Resolutely he waddled forward and Kerrick stayed close behind him.

It was a long walk in the noon sun. They had to stop often while Nadaske slipped into the lake for cool; Kerrick seeking shade under a tree while he waited. The sun was halfway to the horizon before Nadaske signed alertness/ silence, then pointed.

“Beyond those tall reeds, that is the place. Move/water/ silence/unseen.”

He led the way, knee-deep in the swamp, parting the reeds as they went forward, slowly and carefully so they would not be seen. Kerrick was close behind him, wading just as silently through the murky water. The reeds thinned and they went slower, looked out from the sparse cover. Despite the need for silence a strained moan came from deep in Nadaske’s throat.

It took Kerrick long moments to understand what was occurring. A Yilanè was sitting on her tail, her back turned to them and very close, a hèsotsan clasped in her hands. Carrying packs lay on the ground beside her, as well as two more weapons. Beyond her was a locked immobile group of Yilanè that she was staring at intently. There were two, no there were three of them, clutching to one another in strange embrace. Then Kerrick realized what was happening.

It was Imehei who was stretched out on his back on the ground. There was a female sitting on his back holding him down with outstretched, immobile arms. The other female was sitting on top of Imehei’s head, well, locked in the same immobility. While they watched Imehei writhed slightly and moaned. The

two females were as motionless as though carved of stone.

~~Unbidden the memory seared across Kerrick's eyes, obscuring the scene before him. Vainly holding him that way when he was a boy, pressing him to the ground, forcing herself upon him. Pain and pleasure, something new then, terribly strange.~~

No longer new. In Armun's arms he had found there could be warmth in this embrace, happiness. Forgetfulness.

But now at this entwined sight he remembered clearly what had happened to him and hatred overwhelmed all thought. He pushed forward through the reeds, splashing noisily through the shallow water. Nadaske cried a warning as the watching hunter heard him, stood and turned, raised his hèsotsan.

Fell forward as Kerrick's own weapon cracked out a dart of death. He stepped over the body, heard Nadaske running after him, strode towards the fierce, silent coupling.

The females did not stir, seemed unaware. Not so Imehei. He gasped beneath their joined weight, writhed, rolled pained eyes towards Kerrick. Tried to speak but could not.

It was Nadaske who killed them. Fired and fired again then ran forward to push at the collapsing bodies. They fell, hitting the ground heavily, already dead.

As they fell their muscles relaxed in death, releasing Imehei. One, then the other of his organs withdrew, and his sac closed. But he was too exhausted to move. Kerrick had no idea what to do next.

Nadaske did. Death by silent dart was too simple a fate for these two. They could not feel his attack now, but he could, could release his hatred upon them. He fell on the first one, worried his throat with his teeth until he tore it open, did the same to the other. Blood flowed and splattered. Only when this had been done did Nadaske stumble to the lake and push his head under the surface and wash himself clean in the clear water.

When he returned Imehei was sitting up wearily, un-speaking. Nadaske sat down slowly next to him, supported his weight, also in silence.

Something terrible had taken place.

CHAPTER TWO

efenenot okolsetankènin anatirènè efeneleiaa teseset.
We live between the thumbs of Efeneleiaa, the Spirit of Life.
Ugunenapsa's first principle

“Good foot. Fine foot. New foot,” Ambalasei said slowly, her open palms moving with color speaking the simple Sorogetso language.

Ichikchee lay before her on the thick grass, shivering, her eyes wide with fear-of-unknown. She looked down at her foot, then quickly away. The pink skin that covered it was so different from the green skin of her leg above. This troubled her very much. In an attempt to comfort her, Ambalasei reached down and lightly touched her ankle, but she only shivered the more.

“They are simple creatures,” Ambalasei said, signing her assistant Setessei to her side. “As simple as their language. Give her something to eat, that always has a calming effect. Good, see she eats and registers pleasure. We leave now — follow me.”

Ambalasei had become a familiar sight to the Sorogetso, by design and not by accident of course. She had the patience of the true scientist so did not hurry her contact with these wild creatures. They had always been hesitant in the presence of the larger Yilanè, so she was careful not to rush forward and issue orders or question them. Enge had done her work well in learning their language and had taught Ambalasei, who had become a fluent speaker, her vocabulary much larger than Enge's since Enge was so occupied with the city. Now, when the Sorogetso were unwell or injured, they looked to Ambalasei for help. She was always there, asking them only about their symptoms, with perhaps a few other small questions that seemed relevant. Her knowledge grew.

“They are completely lacking in fact/knowledge, Setessei — look on and be amazed. You might be peering back through time at our own ancestors, as they existed soon after the egg of time cracked open. Poisonous spiders thrust forward as a defense, as we used crabs, lobsters. And there, see how they have assembled bundles of reeds? Wrapped and tied they have excellent insulating properties, not to mention being a haven for insects. With what care they assemble these into walls of small structures, spread them above to keep out the rain. We are so accustomed to having our sleeping chambers grown to order that we forget that we once lived just as they do.”

“Preference of city comforts: dislike of sleeping on bare ground.”

“Naturally. But forget comfort and think as a scientist. Watch, consider — and learn. They have no water-fruit so again artifice comes to their aid. Hollowed-out gourds to hold water from the river. And something of even greater relevance which I discovered on my previous visit, when I came alone.”

“Apologies amplified for absence at that time — importance of fungal procedures needed for plant infection.”

“Apologies unneeded: I ordered those procedures. Now through here...”

“Back, back, don't come here!” Easassiwi shouted at them, springing forward from his hiding place in the brush, his palms flaming red. Setessei stopped, stepped back. Ambalasei stopped as well but reacted sternly.

“You are Easassiwi. I am Ambalasei. We talk little.”

“Back!”

“Why should I? Give reason? Easassiwi is strong/male not afraid of weak/female.”

Easassiwi signed negative, looking warily at Ambalasei. He still made a face of rejection but the color faded from his palms.

“Here is good food,” Ambalasei said, waving Setessei to her side with the container. “Eat it. Ambalasei has plenty food. You think I take your food? That food in hole there.”

Easassiwi hesitated, then accepted the gift, muttered to himself as he chewed on the piece of eel, watching the strangers closely all the while. He expressed relief when Ambalasei turned and moved away. He signed a protest but did not move aggressively when Ambalasei reached up and pulled an orange-colored fruit from the tree that arched over his head.

When they were out of sight Ambalasei stopped and handed it to her assistant. “Do you know this fruit?”

Setessei looked at it, then broke it open and bit a mouthful from the pulp inside. Spat it out and signed positive knowledge. “It is the same as the one you gave me to test.”

“It is. And what did you find?”

“Glucose, sucrose...”

“Yes, of course,” Ambalasei snapped. “To be expected in a fruit. But what did you find that you did not expect?”

“A simple enzyme very close to collagenase.”

“Good. And what does this lead you to conclude?”

“Nothing. I simply did the analysis.”

“Asleep in daylight/brain ossified to stone! Am I the only one in this world who possesses rational processes of thought? If I tell you that I found meat in that hole in the ground beneath that tree, the freshly killed carcass of an alligator, what would you think then?”

Setessei stopped and gaped, accepted the momentous thought. “But, great Ambalasei, this is the discovery of impossible magnitude. The connecting tissue in the meat would be dissolved by this enzyme, the tough meat rendered edible. Just as we do in our enzyme vats. This is, could be, we are watching...”

“Exactly. The first step up from brutish manipulation of mechanical artifacts, the beginnings of control of chemical and biological processes. The first step on the path that will lead to true Yilan science. Do you understand now why I ordered that the Sorogetso be barred from the city and not allowed to remain in their normal state?”

“Understanding achieved — with great appreciation. Your studies here knowledge/expanding value/incredible.”

“Of course. At least you have some little comprehension of my great work.” Ambalasei, who had been sitting, comfortably slumped back on her tail, straightened up now, groaning as she did.

“Intellectual pleasures marred by age of body/dampness eternal.” She clashed her jaws angrily and signed Setessei to her. Her assistant held out the carrying creature with both hands. Muttering to herself, Ambalasei dug through the contents of the container. Anticipating her wants, Setessei reached in as well and extracted the tiny basket.

“Killer of pain,” she said.

Ambalasei snatched it from her angrily — were her needs this obvious? — opened it and took out the tiny snake, holding it by the tail. It writhed unhappily as she seized it behind the head by her thumbs, forcing the jaws open, then pierced her skin over a vein with its single fang. The modified toxin brought instant relief. She slumped back comfortably on her tail and sighed.

“Ambalasei has not eaten this day,” Setessei said, restoring the snake to its basket and digging deeper into the container. “There is preserved eel here, still cool from the vats.”

Ambalasei stared grumpily into the distance but allowed one eye to, look down at the jellied flesh as her assistant unwrapped it. It was true, she had not eaten this day. She chewed slowly and let the juice trickle down her throat; reached for a second piece. “How does the city grow?” she asked, some of the modifiers muffled by her full mouth. From long experience Setessei understood the old scientific

well enough.

~~“Fertilizer is needed for the inland water-fruit groves. Nothing more, all else grows well.”~~

“And the inhabitants of this city, do they also grow well?”

Setessei moved in a quick indication of ambiguity as she sealed the container and straightened up. “Pleasure in knowledge continual in the service of Ambalasei. To see a city grow, to discover this new species of Yilanè, is pleasure overriding labors. To live among the Daughters of Life is labor overriding pleasure.”

“Excellent observation: more eel. Then you are not tempted to join them in their head philosophizing, to become a Daughter yourself?”

“I grow in strength and pleasure in your service; I need serve no other.”

“Yet if the eistaa were to order you to die — would you not die?”

“Which eistaa? We have dwelt in many cities. Your service is my city, therefore you are my eistaa.”

“If I am — then you live forever for I order no one’s death. Though with these Daughters... I am sorely tempted. Now, amplify earlier statement. Groves in need of fertilization, qualifier of incompleteness termination. The Daughters?”

“Ambalasei knows all, sees through solid stone. Twice aid has been requested, twice postponed.”

“Not a third time,” Ambalasei said with modifiers of destiny-certain. She struggled to a standing position and when she arched her body the bones in her spine crackled. “Slackness grows, work diminishes.”

They walked back along the trail through the grove, aware of hidden Sorogetso eyes upon them. A figure moved halfseen along the track ahead of them, and when they came to the floating tree it had already been pushed into position by Ichikchee. She lowered her eyes and turned away when Ambalasei raised a green-to-red palm to sign her appreciation.

“She shows gratitude,” Ambalasei said. “Labor given in return for service. They are simple creatures, yet complex in many ways. They will bear more study.”

She led the way across the floating tree to the far bank, then pointed at the stream they had just crossed.

“Eel,” she ordered and held out her hand. “Have you wondered, Setessei, why we cross on this tree to their island instead of walking through these shallow waters?”

“I am without curiosity in these matters.”

“I am curious in all matters, therefore cognizant of everything. I have applied my great intelligence and have solved this minor mystery.”

She dropped the piece of meat into the stream and the waters roiled and seethed with movement.

“Tiny carnivorous fish in great numbers. A living barrier. This new continent abounds in wonder. I go to the ambesed for the afternoon warmth. Send Enge to me there.”

Setessei went ahead of her carrying the container, her head bobbing as she walked. Ambalasei saw that her crest was gray and ragged at the edge. So quickly? She remembered quite clearly the young fargi struggling to be Yilanè, listening and remembering, eventually to become an invaluable assistant. All those years of patient work while Ambalasei probed the secrets of the world. To end up here in this newgrown city with its fractious inhabitants. Perhaps it was time to leave; certainly it was time to make careful records of all that had been discovered. Yilanè of science, still unborn, would gasp in awe at the scope of knowledge revealed. Scientists alive this day might turn black in the face and die of envy. A pleasant thought.

The root of the sunwarmed tree was genial against Ambalasei’s back, the skin even warmer along the length of her rib cage. Her eyes were shut, her jaw opened wide in the heat that soaked into her aching muscles. The search for knowledge was endless and pleasurable, but very tiring. Her thoughts

were broken by the sounds of attention to presence. She opened one eye, slitted it against the light.

“It is you, Enge.”

“It is spoken that you wished my presence.”

“I am displeased. Something must be done. Your Daughters of Drudgery drudge even less every day. You know of this?”

“I do. It is my fault. Caused by my inability to find the correct solution to our problem. I labor in despair at attaining the needed grasp of knowledge of Ugunenapsa’s principles. I know the answer to our difficulties is there before my eyes — but I do not have the vision to see it.”

“You confuse theory with reality. One of them exists, the other might.”

“Not for us, great Ambalasei, you of all people know that.” Enge’s eyes glowed with proselytizing fervor as she settled back comfortably on her tail; Ambalasei sighed. “The truth of Ugunenapsa’s words is proven. When an eistaa orders one of her Yilanè to die — she dies. We do not.”

“Easily explained. My researches on the subject are complete. You live because your hypothalamus is not triggered, nothing more.”

“Absence of knowledge, desire for instruction.”

“I just wish the rest of your Daughters of Dissipation were desirous of instruction as well. Listen then and remember. Just as we progress from egg to ocean, fargi to Yilanè, so has our species progressed from ancient to modern form. We know from our teeth that we were once eaters of shellfish for that is the function they are shaped for. Before we had cities, before we had assured food supplies and defenses against inclemencies of existence, hibernation played an important part in our survival.”

“Humility at even greater ignorance. This hibernation, did we eat it?”

Ambalasei clacked her jaws together angrily. “Closer attention to speaking. Hibernation is a torpid state of the body, between sleep and death, where all of the vital functions slow down greatly. It is a hormonal reaction caused by prolactin. This normally regulates our metabolism and sexual behavior. But too much prolactin overloads the hypothalamus and causes an unbalanced physiological state that ends in death. This is a survival factor.”

“Survival — that ends in death?”

“Yes. Death of an individual that aids survival of the group. Another form of the altruistic gene that appears so counterproductive for the individual, yet very positive for the species. If the eistaa rules, the social order survives. Errant individuals die when so ordered. Essentially they kill themselves. They believe that they will die — so they do. The terrified reaction to the imminence of death releases the prolactin. The individual dies. A self-fulfilling prediction.”

Enge was horrified. “Wise Ambalasei — are you saying that Ugunenapsa’s great work is nothing more than the ability to control a physiological reaction?”

“You said it — I didn’t,” Ambalasei responded with great satisfaction. Enge was silent a long time, rigid with deep thought. Then she stirred and made an approving-appreciation gesture.

“Your wisdom is infinite, Ambalasei. You state a physical truth that makes me doubt, forces me to consider the truths that I know, to find the answer that reinforces these truths. It is there, the answer clearly stated and only waiting for interpretation. All of Ugunenapsa’s wisdom is stated in her Eight Principles.”

“Spare me! Must I be threatened with all of them?”

“No threat, just revelation. Just one of them embodies them all. The first and most important. That was Ugunenapsa’s greatest discovery and from it all the others flow. She said it was her most significant insight. It came as a revelation, something long hidden and suddenly revealed, a truth once seen never forgotten. It is this — we live between the thumbs of Efeneleiaa, the Spirit of Life.”

“My mind grows numb! What nonsense are you speaking?”

“Truth. When we recognize the existence of Efeneleiaa we accept life and reject death. The eistaa does not control us then since we are a part of Efeneleiaa as Efeneleiaa is a part of us.”

“Enough!” Ambalasei roared. “Abandon heady theorizing for more pedestrian activities. Each day your Daughters work less and less and the city suffers for it. What do you intend to do about this?”

“I intend to explore deeply in Ugunenapsa’s Eight Principles, because you, great Ambalasei, have shown me that the answers to our problems lie there.”

“Do they? I hope so. But you had better explore quickly, as well as deeply, because even my well known patience has its limitations. Without me this city dies. And I grow weary of your endless differences. Solve them.”

“We shall. Give us but a bit more of that patience for which you are so well known.”

Ambalasei closed her eyes as Enge finished speaking, did not see the motions of the modifiers that indicated what was well known about her patience. Enge moved slowly away, seeking the solitude she needed to explore the insight revealed to her. Yet when she reached the shadow-dappled walkway under the trees she was confronted by the one whom she wished least to see at this moment. But that was an ungracious thought and a selfish one. If this daughter was disputatious it was only because she was a seeker after truth.

“I greet you, Far!, and ask why you express desire to speak in my presence?”

Far! had become even thinner of late; her ribs projected in rounded rows. She ate little, though she worked much. Now she wound her thumbs together in a knot of suppressed emotion. She had difficulty expressing herself and her large eyes grew even larger with the effort.

“I struggle... with your words, and my thoughts, and Ugunenapsa’s teaching. And I find them in conflict. I seek guidance, instruction.

“And you shall have it. What disturbs you?”

“It is your orders for us to obey Ambalasei as though she were our eistaa. Now we do this although we have rejected the rule of the eistaa when we accepted Ugunenapsa’s principles.”

“You forget we agreed to do this only until the city was grown and complete. Because without the city we cannot exist and any other action would be against life.”

“Yes — but look, the city is grown. It appears to be complete, and if this is so then the time of servitude is at an end. I, and many whom I have talked to, feel that we cannot proceed in this manner...”

Enge’s raised palms stopped her; a command that demanded instant obedience. “Do not speak of this now. Soon, very very soon, I will reveal to you all of what has been revealed to me today. The secret to our continued existence is there in Ugunenapsa’s Eight Principles. If we look carefully it will be found.”

“I have looked, Enge, and have not found it.”

Was there a slight modifier of rejection, even contempt, in her speech? Enge decided to ignore it. This was no time for a confrontation.

“You will work for the city, under Ambalasei’s instruction, as will I and every one of our sisters. Our problems will be resolved, very very soon. You may go.”

Enge looked at the thin, receding back, and not for the first time felt the burden of her beliefs and realized the freedoms of an eistaa. Who would have ended this problem simply by ordering the death of this one.

Still very much alive Far! walked away under the trees.

Also under the trees, on the distant shores of Entoban* across the sea, Vaintè walked at a plodding pace. Stopping often, her tracks in the mud wandering as haphazardly as her thoughts.

Sometimes, when she first awoke, she saw clearly what was happening to her. Abandoned

rejected, lost here on this inhospitable shore. At first her anger had sustained her and she had hurled threats after her betrayer, Lanefenuu, secure aboard the uruketo that was vanishing out to sea. Lanefenuu had done this to her and hatred of that eistaa possessed her. She had screamed her anger until her throat hurt and her limbs grew weary and foam flecked her jaws.

But this had accomplished nothing. If there had been dangerous animals here she would have been killed and devoured during this time of her madness. But there were none. Beyond the strip of muddy beach there were shallow rotting swamps, quicksand and decay. Birds flew among the trees, a few creatures crawled in the mud, nothing had value. That first day her violence had made her thirsty and she had drunk from the scummed waters of the swamp. Something in the water had made her ill and retchingly weak. Later she had discovered where a spring of fresh water bubbled up among the trees and ran down the mud flats into the sea; now she drank only there.

Nor had she eaten at first. Lying motionless in the sun she had not needed to eat, not for many days. Only when she had fallen down from weakness had she realized the stupidity of this. She might die — but she would not die this way. Some spark of the anger that had possessed her at her desertion and betrayal drove her into the sea. There were fish there, not easy to catch, the skills that had once enabled her to do this long forgotten. But she caught enough to keep alive. Shellfish in the muddy inlets were easier to find and soon formed the main part of her diet.

Many, many days passed in this manner and Vaintè felt no need for any change. Very rarely now when she awoke at dawn, she would look down in puzzlement at her muddy legs, her stained skin bare of any decoration, then out at the empty sea and sky. And wonder briefly at her circumstance. Was this the totality of existence? What was happening to her? These flitting moments of concern never lasted long. The sun shone warmly and the numbness in her skull was far better than the screaming agony she had felt when first she came here.

There was water to drink, always something to eat when she grew hungry, nothing to disturb her in this place. Nor were there any of the dark thoughts that had so obsessed her when she had been abandoned on this inhospitable shore.

No thoughts at all. She dragged one foot slowly after another along the shore and her path in the mud was twisted and scuffed. The marks of her passage soon filled with stagnant water.

CHAPTER THREE

*Bruka assi stakkiz tina faralda — den ey gestarmal faralda markiz.
Enjoy this summer of your life — for life's winter always follows.
Tanu proverb*

Nadaske stood waist deep in the lake, splashing water on his body, scrubbing away the blood that streaked his skin. Bending to plunge his head under the surface to suck water in and out of his mouth. When he had spat out the last of the blood and flesh and cleansed himself completely, he waded ashore and pointed all four thumbs at Imehei who sat in slumped despair. It was a gesture of darkness, of loss of hope.

“What do you mean?” Kerrick asked, stunned by the terrible events he had just witnessed.

Nadaske writhed but did not speak. Nor did Imehei, not for a long while. Then he stirred and rubbed at the bruises on his arms and thighs, finally climbed slowly to his feet and turned wide and vacant eyes to Nadaske.

“How long?” Nadaske asked.

“With the two of them, I think long enough.”

“You could be wrong.”

“We will know soon enough. We must return at once to place of resting.”

“We leave.”

Imehei swayed but did not move. Nadaske went to him at once and put a strong arm across his shoulders. Helped him forward, one shuffling step after another. Together they went along the lakeside and vanished among the trees. They did not look back nor speak to Kerrick and seemed oblivious to his presence.

There were questions he wanted to ask but he did not. He sensed that he was in the presence of great tragedy, yet one that he could not quite understand. He remembered the songs the males used to sing in the hanalè, songs filled with grim references to their great fear of the beaches.

“Enough!”

He said it aloud, looking about him at the torn, dead bodies. He wanted to know what would happen to Imehei — but it would have to wait. There would be time enough later to find out the meaning of the horrifying events that he had witnessed. For the moment they would have to take care of themselves. Right now he had the rest of his sammad to consider. What of the future? What of the corpses and the supplies?

Three Yilanè in this hunting party. Now all dead. How long before they were missed? There was no way of telling, no way to know if others would come looking for them. Yet he had to act as though this was a certainty. He must see to it that there were no traces of the crimes committed here. The corpses first. Should he bury them? Unwise. The carrion eaters would smell them out, dig them up and leave the bones as witness. They had to disappear without trace. The lake, that was the only answer.

One by one he dragged the dead Yilanè through the reeds and shallows to the edge of the deep part of the lake. They floated there, the water pink about them. Not good enough. Disgustedly he splashed ashore and looked through their packs. They contained some newly skinned furs, a few other items, but mostly bladders of meat. With his knife he slashed open the tough coverings and threw the meat far out into the lake: the fish would take care of that. Then he filled the packs with gravel and pebbles from the lakeshore. It was hard, disgusting work but in the end it was done. When the packs were strapped to the bodies he pushed out into deep water, sunk them there out of sight. Insects and

rain would take care of the blood that had soaked into the ground. If searchers should ever pass the way there would be nothing at all for them to see. Let the disappearance of the hunters remain a mystery.

Kerrick shook his head in disbelief when he saw that Nadaske had forgotten his hèsotsan. The weapons were essential for survival — and he had forgotten his, simply walked away from it. A sure measure of his grief than anything that he might have said. Kerrick used twisted grass to lash it into a loose bundle with the three other weapons that the hunters had brought. The extra hèsotsan would be needed: at least this much good had come out of this terrible encounter. He seized up his own weapons, took a slow look around in case he had missed anything, then started back along the shore.

Now that he had time to think one fact became painfully clear. They must get away from this lake, all of them. If Yilanè hunters could come here, as these indeed had, then the sammad was too close to the city. Others might come looking for these three. Even if they did not come the camp was still too close. One day it would be discovered and then it would be too late. They must go north. But they would have to wait until the baby was born. Armun was in no state to travel now. After the birth, when Armun had recovered, then they would leave. It would not be easy. He had been right to kill the mastodon that had brought them here; it would have been impossible to hide and would have been seen by the flying creatures that sought them out. But he missed it now. Never mind. They would take only what they could carry. He would make a travois and pull it himself. Harl was big enough and strong enough now to pull one as well. All Ortnar had to do was move himself along. He did it, not well, but at least he did it.

Something dark moved under the trees ahead. Kerrick bent double and ran quickly to shelter among the shrubs. There were murgu concealed there, silent killers. He slipped forward with his weapon raised and ready.

Until he realized that he was looking at the two male Yilanè. One of them stretched out and resting, the other sitting up at his side.

“Attention to presence,” he called out, stood and strode forward.

Nadaske just turned one eye enough to look at Kerrick, then slowly away again. Otherwise he did not speak or move. Imehei lay at his side, eyes closed, immobile.

“What is it?” Kerrick asked.

Nadaske replied with an effort, and when he did his meaning was muffled with palpable sadness.

“He has gone to the beach. The eggs are in his pouch.”

“I do not understand.”

“That is because although you are male you are not Yilanè male. You ustuzou order things differently. You have told me that your females carry the eggs, though I do not really understand how this can be possible. But you saw what happened to him this day. They did it to him. Now the eggs are in his pouch and his eyes are closed in the sleep that is not sleep. He will be like that until the eggs hatch and the young go into the water.”

“Is there anything we can do to stop this?”

“Nothing. Once it begins it must go to the end. He will remain like this until the hatching.”

“Will he... die?”

“Probably yes, probably no. Some die, some live. We can only wait. He must be taken back and cared for, fed and watched over. I must do that for him.”

“Do we carry him?”

“No. The water. He must be in the water, the warm water of the birth beach. That is so the eggs will mature and hatch. If they die now he dies as well. This thing must run its course. Help me take him into the lake.”

Imehei was unconscious, heavy, hard to move. Working together they struggled with his torpid

body to the shore and dragged it through the reeds. Once in the water he would be easier to pull along. Kerrick helped until the lake deepened enough so that Nadaske was able to swim. He grasped Imehei under the shoulders and kicked with his stout legs, making slow but steady progress. Kerrick waded ashore, seized up the hèsotsan and moved quickly off. It was late and he wanted to get back to their camp before dark.

They were waiting for his return. Armun looked down the path behind him and saw it empty. Shnodded approval.

“Good. You have killed the murgu. It was time.”

“No, they are still alive. At least for the present.” How could he explain to them what had happened — when he was not sure about it himself? “There were murgu hunters from the city of there, three of them. I killed one, Nadaske killed the other two. Imehei is — hurt, unconscious. Nadaske is bringing him back.”

“No!” Armun screamed. “I hate them, hate them here, don’t want them here again.”

“There are more important things for us to talk of and we need not concern ourselves with the now. What is important is that we are no longer safe in this place. If hunters from the city could come this far they are sure to be followed by others. One day they will come.”

“They came because of those two, their own kind, you must kill them quickly...”

Kerrick’s temper rose to meet hers, but he controlled it because he knew why she was so disturbed. The baby was late, she was sick, worried. He had to understand. She needed reassuring.

“It will be all right. We must wait until the baby is born, until you feel better. Then we will leave here, go north, we cannot stay if the hunters are this close.”

“And what of these two murgu you care so much for?”

“They stay here. We go without them. That is enough now. I am hungry and want food. And look at this — we have three more death-sticks. It will be all right.”

All right for them, he thought as he chewed the cold meat. But what about the males? They must stay here. With Imehei immobile in the lake it would be impossible for them to leave. Yet the rest of his sammad must go as soon as possible. That was all there was to it. There was no choice.

It was late in the afternoon of the next day before Nadaske finally appeared with Imehei in tow. He was exhausted and moved one slow stroke at a time, floating and resting often. Kerrick took up Nadaske’s hèsotsan and went to help him, stopping Arnwheet when he tried to follow. The boy did as he had been ordered, stood and gnawed his knuckles, worried and insecure, knowing only that something bad had happened to his friends. He watched in unhappy silence as the unconscious Imehei was dragged up onto the shore, until his head rested on the sand with the lower part of his body still in the water.

Kerrick thought that he was unconscious until his lips moved and he said something with languid motions of his arms. It was as though he were talking in his sleep for his eyes never opened.

“Food... desire to eat... hunger.”

Nadaske went to fetch fresh fish from the little holding pond that they had dug with such great effort. He tore pieces from the fish and pressed them into Imehei’s gaping mouth. Who slowly closed his jaws and chewed placidly.

“How long will he be like this?” Kerrick asked.

“A long time. There is no count to the days that I know. Others may know, it is no knowledge that I have.”

“And at the end of that time?”

Nadaske made a shrugging motion of hope/fear, knowledge/ignorance. “The eggs break, the elininyil feed, they enter the lake. Imehei lives or dies. Only then will we know.”

“I am going to have to leave with the others, as soon as Armun can travel, to go north. It will be

dangerous to remain here.”

Nadaske rolled one eye in his direction and signed suspected knowledge. “It was my consideration you would do that. Others are sure to follow those who were killed. They may hunt in this direction, but they cannot come with you.”

“I know that. But I will come back for you, for both of you, as soon as we have found a safe place.”

“I believe you Kerrick Yilanè/ustuzou. I have learned how you feel about these things and I know that you must consider your own ustuzou efenburu first. Take them to safety.”

“We will talk of this again. It will be some days yet before we can leave.”

When Kerrick started back he found that Ortnar had stumbled down to the beach and was waiting for him.

“The baby is coming soon. She told me to tell you that. I know nothing of these things and cannot help you.”

“Guard us from harm, Ortnar, that is what a strong hunter can do. I know as little as you do of these matters, but I must try to help her.”

He turned and hurried away. This was a day of many events. One who was perhaps moving toward death, one surely coming into life.

Darras looked up when he came in but never let go of Armun’s hand. Armun smiled wearily, her hair soaked and perspiration beading her face.

“Do not look so worried, my hunter. It is a late baby but a strong one. Do not worry.”

He was the one who should be comforting her, he realized, not the other way around. But the matter was beyond his knowledge. It was the women who always took care of it themselves.

“We should never have left the other sammads,” he said. “You should not be here on your own.”

“I do what many women have done before. My own mother, our sammad was small, no other women. This is the way things are, have always been. You must go, eat and rest. I will send Darras for you when it is time.”

Kerrick could say nothing, do nothing. He went out to the fire where Orhiar was cooking meat. Harl looked up, then hacked off a piece and gave it to Kerrick who chewed it in silence. Harl and Arnwheel had their faces well smeared with grease, sat across from him finishing their meal. Ortnar stared out at the gathering darkness, then signalled to Harl who rose and kicked sand over the fire. They must stay on their guard, particularly now.

The moon was out, the night warm, marsh birds calling quietly to each other as they settled down. Kerrick could just make out the dark form of Imehei where he rested half in and half out of the water at the lake’s edge. He knew that there was nothing he could do now for the males, nothing.

He heard a murmur of voices behind him in the tent and turned to look. But there was darkness, only darkness. Kerrick threw the unfinished meat away; he suddenly had no appetite. He blamed himself for what was happening now. The baby might die, worse, he dared not think about it, Armun might die, because of him. If he had returned to the sammads with the others they would all still be together. The other women knew how to take care of things like this. It was all his fault.

He climbed to his feet, unable to sit still, torn by fear and worry, walked under the tree to stare out at the lake in the moonlight. He looked but did not see it, saw only his inner fears. They should not be here. They should have been with the sammads now, safe in the valley of the Sasku, all safe.

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