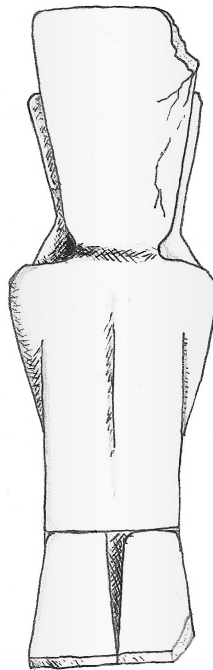


# Ruin of Ancient Powers

A Song for Many Voices

by Anne E.G. Nydam



# Map of the Eastern Dubaad Lands

Border of Yuwara Ul Sahd

The Great Crest

The Ring  
of Gods  
Edah

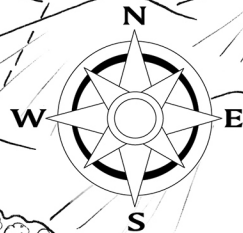
Akuv  
Elna  
Tonan  
Lothvana  
Leva  
Ensemon  
Torvir  
Siyala

Tent  
City  
Sisoo

Shal-Gamaboll

Shal-Rozhahin

Border Plateau



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**I**  
**A DESCRIPTION OF**  
**THE RING OF GODS OF EDAH**

*from An Account of the Many Diverse Strange and Exotic Lands and Peoples Encountered in Sixty-Nine Years of Exploration and Adventure by Yrbal Sin-Azh*

If you leave Sisoa and travel east and north for many days into the desert, traveling past the mesas of the Lierven sky-dwarves until the land begins to rise and you can see the low rusty hills of rock climbing from the desert, and beyond them the mountains, purple after the pale gold of the sand, you may come to the Ring of Gods in the place called Edah. In Sisoa I have heard this place called Esh-Etaal, the Blind Ruins, but its proper name is Edah, though what this name signified to its people and their gods, no one now knows. Old this place is beyond any reckoning, old beyond any song to tell of it, and it stands in the pale gold of the sand, below the rusty gold hills and the purple mountains, and carries still a power in it of gods not yet dead, gods perhaps all the more hungry for having been so long neglected. It is a place no mortal should venture without gods of his own for protection.

The Ring of Gods stands out from the desert, pale yellow stones nearly twenty feet tall, erected in a circle. As you near the circle, up a step that was a wall of crumbling

brick all but devoured by sand, you can feel before you can see, that the great stones of the outer Ring are human figures, human figures facing inward, their backs turned to the traveler. Each figure kneels, its great, flat yellow back to the world, its square knees and triangular feet gradually sinking into the desert. If you walk, slowly, because the silence is disturbing here, between two of these figures and turn to look at their faces, you understand why this place is called Esh-Etaal, the Blind Ruins. Each giant kneels with its great paddle hands raised to cover its face. I do not think they even have faces. Their high yellow foreheads rise up flat against the sky, their square shoulders show below, but between is nothing but the huge, fingerless paddle hands. They kneel in their circle around their gods, but no one may look on the face of a god. So their hands are before their faces.

In the center of the outer circle there is the smaller circle, a ring of five more figures, the same huge pale stones, the same square knees and triangular feet kneeling in the drifting sand, but this is the Ring of Gods. The paddle hands of these figures rest on their flat knees and it takes strength to raise the eyes to the where the faces should be. But no one may look on the face of a god, and so the heads of these figures, too, are covered. One figure has above its shoulders the form of a great yellow toad, its warty back arched over the god's head, its fat limbs draped down to the god's shoulders, its head and webbed feet covering the god's face. This god holds a bowl on its knees between its flat, wide hands. Another god has no face because a long animal, a dunedog, a burrowing desert creature, curls around its head. It lies sideways on the god's shoulders, and where the god's face should be, the dunedog clasps its feet and sleek tail in its arms beneath its chin. This god holds a sphere on its knees between its flat, wide hands. A third god has a spider crouching on its

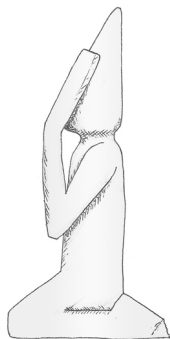
## RUIN OF ANCIENT POWERS

shoulders. The spider's legs are drawn up above its body and it holds them tightly together, shielding the face of the god. This god holds something like a rose on its knees between its flat, wide hands. The next god is more sinister yet, for a long serpent is coiled around its face. The serpent's tail trails over the god's shoulder, and the serpent's flat head rests on the tall top of the god's. Between are only the thick coils of the serpent's body. This god holds a pointed stick on its knees between its fingerless, wide hands. The last god holds a skull on its knees between its paddle hands, and above its shoulders droop the wings of a vulture. The vulture's bald neck is folded in its ruff, and its wings cover the face of the god. These five kneel in their ring, facing, faceless, out at the circle of human figures, who kneel forever unseeing back toward them.

The gods of Edah are nameless as they are faceless. Whether they once had names is forgotten, but beyond forgetting is their image, and beyond forgetting is their power. It is still known by the people of the desert, the nomads who travel between oases and neither stop nor stay near the Ring of Gods, and by the Tiny White Desert People who live where they will, but who do not live near Edah, it is known what these gods signify. The nameless god whose face is covered by a toad is called a god of water. The nameless god whose face is wrapped by a burrowing animal is called a god of earth. The nameless god with a spider shielding its face is a god of fire. The god whose face is hidden by the coiled serpent is a god of magic, a scribe god. When people of the desert see a white serpent, even when the people of Sisoa and the southern cities see a white serpent, they are afraid and pray to their own gods against the magic of the god of Edah. And the nameless god with the vulture brooding over it is called a god of death.

The Ring of Gods of Edah is old, old beyond any song to tell of it, and the stones rise up out of the desert worn by the wind and the wind-blown sand. Some of the figures rise crooked; on the far side of the circle one leans against another. It is long, long since any mortal knew words of praise for these gods, long since any mortal brought meat for these gods. They are ancient gods, and they are not your gods, but they are hungry, and the wise do not try to see their faces, for no one may look on the face of a god.





## II THE POSTPONEMENT OF TWO WEDDINGS

“The wedding is postponed?”

Jiriya nodded, grimacing at Svarnil’s look of disbelief. “Not for long, I hope, but the Empress thinks it’s urgent that Oru deal with this mysterious trouble in the east.”

“What mysterious trouble is that?”

Jiriya spread her hands as if encompassing a whole host of mysterious troubles. “Well, first there were strange reports circulating in the market from nomads. It seems one of the sky-dwarf cliff cities has vanished.”

“Vanished?” echoed Nulif, frowning.

“So they said. They went there to trade for copper and beadwork and all, and found just a blank cliff of rubble where the city had been. The Lierven in the other mesas seemed upset, obviously, but wouldn’t talk about it. Then the next part actually came to me. A group of nine sky-dwarf children showed up at the orphanage about two weeks ago. The oldest is twelve years old, the youngest not yet two. Two are lame, one has a stricken arm, and another’s blind. They said they were from Akuv – the Lierven city that the nomads couldn’t find. Actually, I shouldn’t be calling them Lierven. It turns out they hate that. They call themselves

Lothvana kansama, but I keep forgetting. Apparently Lierven is a Sisoan corruption."

"Lothvana kansama," Svarnil repeated carefully.

"Yes. Or sky-dwarf. Anyway, the traders brought it to Vizier Bedu's attention, and he put it together with reports of tremors and sand demons he's been receiving since some merchants got themselves lost out near Esh-Etaal, and he told Queen Kahan-Atar about the *threat to the stability of the region*, so she ordered him to settle the problem, and he wants Oru to find out what's going on. So the wedding's postponed. And my father's company of guards is standing ready to be posted to the east if necessary."

Oru said, "The expedition is being organized, and we're to leave in four days. How soon we can return, of course, depends on what we discover. If anything."

"Yes, and I'm going, too," Jiriya added, with a firmness that told Svarnil there must have been a battle before she won the right to say it. Jiriya added, "You should come, too. We'll be visiting Lothvana, and maybe Esh-Etaal, as well, and think of all the new legends you'll learn!"

Svarnil glanced at Nulif and found his eyes on her with an anxious expression. Svarnil was a bard, and for the past six years she had walked this corner of the Otherworld learning history and sharing it wherever she went. She had met Jiriya on one of her journeys, and she and Jiriya together had rescued Oru from imprisonment and enchantment. Now Svarnil and her own new husband Nulif were here in Sisoa to take part in Jiriya and Oru's wedding celebration. Their plan, however, had been to stay in Sisoa just until the wedding was over and then travel on to Nulif's home in K'Ten to celebrate their own marriage in the company of his family. If Svarnil said she wanted to join Oru's expedition,

would Nulif feel that she was putting off the trip to K'Ten? It might seem to him that she was less than eager to be with his family again, or that she attached little importance to the ceremony in his temple with his family. Her natural instinct was simply to ask him his thoughts, but then she wondered whether even to ask the question might hurt his feelings.

"I don't know, Jiriya," she said finally, "Of course I'd love to learn about these cultures and their history, but Nulif and I..." Her voice trailed off.

Oru looked back and forth between them and said diplomatically, "If only we could guess how long this was likely to take. It would be a grave disappointment if this postponement meant we would miss your company at our wedding, but of course we understand that you must be eager to return to your own family and complete your own wedding ceremony. It is hard sometimes for us to remember that the entire Otherworld is not balanced on us." He smiled at Jiriya, his quick, rare smile like the brief, radiant flowering of the desert. He continued, "But if you should wish to join the expedition, I'd welcome your involvement. A good historian is always welcome on a diplomatic mission – as is a good friend."

"We... we'll talk about it," Svarnil said. She stroked the short silvery fur of the lyilit who perched on her knee. Fethilis swiveled her round ears and blinked her round emerald eyes at Svarnil, but Svarnil was not thinking about the lyilit. Here she was, married, with another person's wishes to consult, and another person's dreams to share. It should be so easy, when all she and Nulif wanted was to be together, but instead it seemed suddenly terribly difficult to know what to do. She could no longer follow whatever leading came to her, because her life was no longer entirely her own to do with as she wished. But which way was Nulif led? She did

not know, and this time she dared not ask.



When Svarnil went with Jiriya to look at wedding finery, Nulif slipped away to his cot and pulled several papers from his pack. They were letters that had reached Sisoa shortly before his arrival from the North Region and had been delivered to Aunt Batih's house to wait for him. He opened the first and read it through again, shoulders tensed against what he knew it said.

*Nulif Atsu*

*My son, I have been shown the letter your mother received in which you announce your betrothal to an elvishwoman. I must let you know at once that I cannot bestow my permission on such a marriage. A union with such a person is simply unacceptable. I understand that weather conditions may detain you for some time in the north, but I urge you to return home at the soonest possible opportunity before you become any further entangled. In the meantime, my father and I will make inquiries as to a suitable wife for you here in K'Ten, now that you're ready for marriage at last. I shall arrange to remain in K'Ten long enough to see you properly settled, as befits the eldest son of the Family Atsu.*

*As for your trial for criminal blasphemy, I simply don't know what to make of it. That any son of mine should bring such a charge on this family is a disgrace, and yet for every man who calls you a blasphemer it seems there are others who defend your honor as a hero. At least your acquittal by the Merchant's Council cannot be disputed, and I will discuss this matter with you when you return.*

*I am eager to see you, my son. Please waste no time in getting away from the elves and returning to your proper place in Minarian society.*

*Olamachat Atsu*

Once again it made Nulif's stomach sink within him. What was he to do? How could he bring Svarnil home to this? And yet how could he stay away from K'Ten without letting her know why? He almost wished K'Ten would crumble from the face of the Otherworld like the lost Lothvana city Jiriya had mentioned. And yet, he missed his mother, his younger brother and sisters, his friends at the Great Collection and the temple. The thought of his mother made his stomach turn again. It was never easy for her when Nulif's father was at home, and how must it be now with his father's anger at Nulif hanging over the house and probably directed at her?

This postponement of Oru's wedding seemed like an escape route opening before Nulif. Of course it would solve nothing, but at least it would delay the moment when Svarnil would find out what her father-in-law was like. But how could Nulif suggest that they join Oru's expedition without making Svarnil feel that he was reluctant to bring her to K'Ten? He had seen her hesitation when she answered Jiriya's invitation to join their expedition, and knew she would be expecting to be welcomed into his family. He rubbed his face anxiously, and shuffled to another letter, from his colleague Bolekwa.

*Nulif Atsu*

*Nulif, I write on behalf of Sakar Sikwan and myself, which is a strange enough situation in itself! He asks me to send you and Madam Svarnil his congratulations, and of course I send my own. We look forward to seeing you back in K'Ten when you can make the journey. Could any of us have imagined any of this last year when we first set out for the Border Plateau to investigate those documents? And now it sounds like you've become an elvishman and a dragonlord!*

*As for our news, we're making excellent progress on the Jungle Park you suggested, as well as on asking the Merchant's Council to consider restrictions on the destruction of the jungle near N'Juma. Of course, being politicians, all anyone has done so far is consider. They are considering what space to dedicate to the park – although I believe that will soon be settled. There is a square near the Temple Adburuk that already has a well-grown mela vine from the destruction of an elemental, and there seems to be no real impediment to dedicating it as a park, other than some councilmen's determination to oppose whatever some other councilmen support. New laws to protect the real jungle will be harder to win. Sakar Akweka has used the discussion as an opportunity to ingratiate himself with those wealthy men who exploit the jungle, and he's set himself to depose Sakar Sikwan as leader of the Shikat. He hasn't succeeded in deposing Sikwan, who is still Sakar of the Great Nogosh Temple and of course enormously influential, but he has succeeded in dividing the Shikat into two factions. The faction that follows Sakar Sikwan is the larger, but the faction following Sakar Akweka includes some of the richest and most influential men in the Merchant's Council.*

*There's nothing terribly exciting at the Great Collection. Head Librarian Uchama threatened to resign when the others voted to accept our findings and declare the Fulakwe scriptures authentic. (The final vote was 4 yes, 2 abstaining for further evidence, and Uchama no.) But unfortunately he didn't make good on his threat, so he's still here, grumbling bitterly. You will be pleased to hear that they added Jadogwa's name to the tablet on the fountain in the square where they've listed all the librarians who died defending the Great Collection in war. That was Head Librarian Ikwechona's idea, and I was very glad to see it.*

*Give my greetings to Madam Svarnil, of course, as well as her leaf baby and Master Oru of Sisoa.*

*Bolekwa Ekwela*

This was better news, and worth returning to K'Ten to discuss with Bolekwa, but it did not loosen the knot in Nulif's stomach. What was he to do? He took the last letter.

*Nulif Atsu*

*Nula, I don't know if this will get to you. Dad's forbidden Mum to write to you, but I'm going to try slipping this to Baruta (Sakar Sikwan's secretary, remember?) on Temple Day to see if he can find someone to take it to Sisoa. Yes, we've been attending the Great Nogosh Temple with Grandfather and Dad. Dad insists we all go as a proper family, but to tell the truth I've actually been finding Sakar Sikwan's messages very interesting. Grandfather is still awfully dubious about the "new" scripture, but he isn't ready to abandon Sakar Sikwan, and of course Dad just wants to be seen at the Great Nogosh Temple. Sorry, maybe that was unfair. Anyway, I just need to warn you that Grandfather told Dad that all your trouble with the Merchant's Council and Head Librarian Uchama was all Svarnil's fault. Dad's furious at you, and at Mum, too, for letting Svarnil stay in the house and letting you go off with her – and trying to defend her name against Grandfather. As for me, I'm trying hard to learn to keep my mouth shut, because every time I open it I make things worse. We really miss you.*

*Ekibi Atsu*

Of course Ekibi didn't want to give any details, but Nulif wondered how bad it really was at home. His sister sounded discouraged, and Nulif knew it took a lot to discourage her. He ought to be home to defend Mum and the others. He ought to be there to fight for Svarnil's honor. He ought to do something useful or heroic, but all he wanted was to take Svarnil in his arms and run away with her forever.



While Svarnil and Nulif each worried over

what they should do, Oru's organization of the Vizier's expedition continued. He had selected two aides who had experience with the sky-dwarves and nomads of the eastern desert, and he pored over maps and charts with them, planning a route to the mesa where the city had mysteriously disappeared. He consulted with the Vizier about what he was to do when he arrived, what information he was to look for, and whom he was to speak with. He had also engaged three nomads as porters and guides, but when he inspected the provisions they had purchased, the first trouble appeared.

"One of the guides has been stealing from the expedition's supplies," Oru told the others that evening. "Every time he took money for provisions it was something for the expedition and a little something for himself."

"Did you find out which one it was?" asked Jiriya.

"What did you do?" Jiriya's father wanted to know.

"Yes, we discovered which one it was easily enough, and of course he's been arrested for thievery and dismissed as our guide. But that will not be the end of it, I'm sure." Oru turned to Svarnil and Nulif to explain, "The porters we hired are of two tribes, you see, and you know those nomad tribes are constantly feuding. The same tribes have been feuding since before the time of Emperor Re-Madiin. The one from the Blue tribe testified against the thief of the Black tribe. We had to get independent corroboration for every accusation he made, as you can never trust a nomad's statement against a member of another tribe, but at least this time he seemed to be accurate about it. But then the third porter, he's of the Black tribe, the same as the one who was dishonest. We investigated him closely and he seems to have been innocent, but he will surely hold a grudge against the Blue porter. They

always do.”

“Why not hire your porters all from one tribe, then?” asked Nulif.

“We’ll most likely be passing through the territory of two tribes, and if all our guides are of one, when we pass through the others’ territory they’ll take it as an insult.”

“Oh, of course,” Nulif replied with a frown, “But surely there must be some who are reliable.”

“Yes. All three of these men had worked for Vizier Bedu before, and he assured me that they were good. Yet one was not. And to find a third man so quickly may not leave us time for the luxury of satisfying ourselves about his trustworthiness. We shall have to take whomever we can find, and even the two we already have, both of whom seem honest, will probably be at each other’s throats over this incident... or over some other. It seems as if there’s always something with nomads. But we can’t do without them. They are the ones who know the eastern Dubaad. I just hope we don’t have to listen to them squabble through the entire trip, or we’ll all go mad.”

Jiriya said, “Well, Papa and I had to listen to my brothers Kwaysir and Wabanid squabble for years, so at least I know I can handle it.”

Aunt Batih laughed. “You were always a fine one for squabbling, yourself, Jiriya. But at least you and your brothers were never trying to kill each other as these crazy nomads always do.”



The next morning Svarnil and Nulif accompanied Oru and Jiriya to the orphanage to speak again with some of the kansama who had come from the Lothvana city Akuv. They met in the schoolroom, the tutor having not yet arrived to give his lessons for the day, and Svarnil looked curiously at the nine children. The kansama, commonly called

Lierven in Sisoa and sky-dwarves in the Common Speech, were small and slender, with faces flat and round as the moon, and brown skin dappled all over with constellations of darker freckles. With the children were two tall dogs, lithe and silken-haired, their long feathered tails swishing decorously as they surveyed their visitors. They were clearly well-trained, for although they stared intently at the lylit on Svarnil's shoulder, they remained calm. Fethilis shook out her grey-green wings and folded them again neatly, apparently satisfied that the dogs were no threat to her. The two oldest children, the girl who was twelve and her brother two years younger, looked solemn, but the other sky-dwarves smiled at the sight of Jiriya and whispered eagerly to each other in a language Svarnil had never heard before.

Jiriya sat down at a table and gestured for the others to join her. The boy hitched himself over to the bench and laid his crutch beside him, while the girl looked to see that the youngest children were occupied with some building blocks in a corner before she, too, sat at conscientious attention.

Jiriya said, "Hedgehog, Fox, this is Oru, who will be going out to the mesas on behalf of the Vizier, and these are my friends Svarnil and Nulif, who are historians. They need to hear your story. Can you please tell it again for us?"

"What is there to say?" the girl demanded, her accent giving the words a melody in spite of their plaintive tone. "Our entire tuliko is gone and we've come here."

"*Tuliko* means cliff dwelling or city," Jiriya explained to Svarnil and Nulif. To the girl she said, "There should be a lot more to say than that, Hedgehog. What destroyed Akuv? How did you survive? Why didn't you go to another tuliko instead of leaving Lothvana and coming all the way to Sisoa?"

Hedgehog turned her face away and muttered,

“I can’t tell,” but whether she meant she did not know or she would not say, Svarnil was unsure.

The boy, Fox, looked back and forth anxiously between the Sisoans and his sister. Oru raised his eyebrows, an expression that combined a question and an invitation, and Fox blurted, “They wouldn’t take us!”

“Mik!” cried his sister despairingly, followed by a rush of urgent words in their own language. The younger children looked up from their blocks, their large brown eyes beautiful and wary as gazelles’.

Jiriya said sympathetically, “We don’t want to trouble you – you’ve had enough trouble for a lifetime. But whoever is trying to keep this secret, still there must be something you can tell to give us help. We’re going to go out to the Lothvana mesas, and we need to know all we can so we can be prepared.”

Hedgehog turned anguished eyes on Jiriya and said, “Don’t go, Miss Jiriya. Please. You mustn’t go there. It’s bad.”

“But bad in what way?”

Tears welled in the girl’s eyes, but her jaw set stubbornly. “The gods are angry. Not our gods, but the nameless gods. The faceless gods of Edah. There can be no preparation. Their anger is blind.”

Fox added eagerly, “You in Sisoa think they’re buried beneath the sand, forgotten, but they aren’t. Our bards tell us the nameless gods are brooding, waiting, resentful. And now someone has roused them and their anger is blind!”

“That’s enough, Fox,” hissed Hedgehog, “Would you draw their attention even here?”

Jiriya opened her mouth as if she were about to argue, but shut it again, merely shaking her head.

Oru said, “Perhaps we would not need to ask so many questions now if there were someone who could guide us to Lothvana. I know it is much to

ask, but would one of you come with us on our expedition?"

"I know I can't," Fox answered, indicating his crutch.

"No," Hedgehog answered firmly, "I have the little ones to take care of."

Oru nodded. "I understand. We shall have to be content with the nomads to guide us, but they always know so little of the culture and history of others. Your knowledge would have been very welcome." His movement to rise was checked by another voice.

"What about us?" It was another boy. "We're just us. We have no one else to take care for, and we take care for each other so we travel so well as anyone. Right?" He turned to the girl beside him and she nodded.

"He can see for me, and I can reach out for him," she said, and Svarnil realized that the girl's large eyes, though turned toward the people who were talking, were focused on nothing. She must be the blind child Jiriya had mentioned, and her brother was the one with the stricken arm.

Oru was considering the two children carefully. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Nine years. We are born together."

"And what are your names?"

"I am Quail," said the boy.

The girl, however, looked suddenly disconcerted. "What's Tij?" she asked her brother, and when she felt his shrug she said louder, "Rika, what's my name? What do they calling tij in common speech?"

"I don't know," Hedgehog answered, "But you must not go back there."

Oru said, "You are called Tij in your language? Can you describe what you're named after?"

The girl smiled shyly. "Little sand-color animal, jumping very big, digging deep burrow."

Long tail with..." She made a gesture. "Um, fluff on end. Big ears, long legs in back, little arms in front. That one."

"Ah. We call those jumprats."

"I am a rat? My name is Rat?"

Her brother crowed, "Now I call you Rat! Rat, Rat!"

"No, tij is different, more like little funny hare, maybe. Not rat!"

Jiriya said, "We know a jumprat isn't really a rat. That's just what we call it here." When she saw the girl's disappointment, however, she said, "There's no reason we can't call you Tij. You don't have to translate your name into Common Speech, do you?"

"Good. That's right. You can be Quail, Pir, but I am still Tij. Just like the dog."

"A dog is named Tij, too?" asked Nulif curiously, for he had been making friends with the two sight hounds while the others talked. He was rubbing their silky ears while their tongues lolled and their feathered tails swished happily.

Quail laughed. "No, our vikuri is name Wind." He pointed at the dog whose pale creamy fur darkened to charcoal brown along her head and back. "But she still have to be called Abri because she cannot listen in Common Speech." At the sound of her name, Abri looked attentively to the boy. He reached over and rubbed her chin with his good hand.

Now Oru said, "Tij, we appreciate your offer, but how can a blind child be a guide?"

The girl turned her face toward Oru and answered, "I am not blind from end of Akuv, I am always blind. I never needing eyes."

"But," Oru began, but Quail had already jumped in to support his sister.

"Tij guide us away from Akuv when dust cloud making everything dark with it. When

everyone blind, then only Tij can see.”

After a moment Oru nodded slowly. “So, Tij and Quail, you think you can travel with the Vizier’s expedition back to Lothvana, back to the site of Akuv? You can keep up with us and help us understand what we see, even though you are not very old and you’re blind and maimed? Do you understand what you’re offering? It may be upsetting. It will be no easy jaunt.”

“What is jaunt?”

“A trip for amusement.”

“Oh. Yes. We understanding. Right?”

“Right.”

But Hedgehog, who had been looking increasingly upset, did not agree, and there followed a long and urgent conversation in the children’s own language before the older girl turned away, crossing her arms and scowling, and Quail said, “Yes, we agreeing we go now.”

Just then the Sisoan orphans clattered downstairs to join the kansama children for their morning lessons. As the visitors left the orphanage, Jiriya stayed behind. She stood in the doorway and called, “And you, Svarnil? We begin the expedition the day after tomorrow. Are we packing for nine or eleven?”

“We’ll talk about it tonight,” Svarnil promised, stealing a glance at Nulif. He looked unhappy again, and Svarnil thought she must look unhappy, too. If only their path could be made clear. She just needed a chance to think it through.

As soon as they reached Batih’s house, Svarnil went into her room with the excuse of tidying up the things spread around the cot. Automatically she folded the sheets and stacked them on the mattress. She began to gather up Nulif’s notebooks and papers. In the short time they had been in Sisoa he had accumulated several piles of notes and sketches of everything he had learned and taken an interest

in. She smiled fondly as she straightened the papers into a neat bundle and slipped them into his leather folder. The corners of a few more papers stuck out from beneath the edge of his pack and Svarnil pulled them out to add to the pile. She saw the letter from Buruchu that had been waiting for Nulif when they arrived at Jiriya's house. She looked forward to speaking with him and Sakar Sikwan again. And then something else caught her eye.

*Nulif Atsu*

*My son, I have been shown the letter your mother received in which you announce your betrothal to an elvishwoman. I must let you know at once that I cannot bestow my permission on such a marriage. A union with such a person is simply unacceptable.*

Svarnil stopped reading, her heart lurching. So this was the other letter Nulif had received. Now what? Hands shaking slightly, she slipped the letters into the folder before her eyes could read any more. Nulif obviously did not want her to see this, or he would have told her about it immediately. And if he did not want her to know, then she would at least read no further. All the same, her stomach felt hollow at the knowledge that Nulif had not shared this trouble with her. She finished her tidying with a numb ache inside.



Aunt Batih watched the men leave after the noon meal and shut the door behind them. "There," she said, "Now we can talk. Jiriya, even with your wedding postponed, it won't be long now before you're a married woman, and there are certain things you'll need to know."

Jiriya blushed dark and looked to Svarnil with something between hilarity and panic. "I thought that was the job of my wedding sisters, Aunt Batih!"

"But your wedding sisters may not tell you all you need to know, my dear. Meaning no offense, Miss Svarnil. It's a good thing you're here for Jiriya, but yours is hardly a model of a proper Sisoan marriage."

"But what about my sisters-in-law?" the younger woman cried desperately.

"Indeed I will have them speak with you. But we have the opportunity now for a little talk without the men, and I don't want to waste it. The first thing you need to understand, my dear, is that a husband is not the same as a suitor."

"No?" Jiriya said weakly.

"No. A suitor will tolerate much that a husband will soon grow tired of. Your poor housekeeping, for example. Now goodness knows I've always tried to teach you how to run a home, but I'm afraid you'll find it very different when it's your own home and I'm not there to take care of everything for you."

"Yes, I expect I will find that very different," muttered Jiriya with a meaningful glance at Svarnil.

"And your habit of taking part in all of Oru's affairs. Men like to have their own man things to do. Sooner or later the billing and cooing ends and he won't thank you for chasing at his heels. But Jiriya, for you perhaps the most important point is this: men don't like to be told what to do. You have to know how to get your way without being a nagging shrew. For example, suppose you need him to bring in some wood. Ask him sweetly, appeal to his strength, let him see how much you depend on him to take care of you. And then when he drops bits all over the floor on his way to the oven, don't scold him. Don't even point out how he might have done it better. No; simply thank him as your hero, because if you criticize he'll never carry wood for you again. That's the way men are." Aunt Batih

turned to Svarnil and said, "What can you add to start Jiriya on the right foot?"

"Well," said Svarnil slowly, trying to pull her mind back from the letter she had accidentally seen, "Nulif and I have not been married long ourselves, and we've never had any housekeeping, since we have no house. So I'm not sure I'm much help for such things, Batih. But Jiriya, I can only advise you to be honest with each other always, but always be honest with love and gentleness." After a moment she added, "You can hurt each other without even meaning to. So when you are hurt, let him know without bitterness, and when you hurt him, offer your apologies without reservation."

Jiriya raised her eyebrows at the intensity in her friend's tone, but Batih merely nodded.

"Quite right. Never be too proud to apologize. A man will soon tire of an over-proud wife. Just try to remember this, Jiriya. I'm afraid you've always been headstrong." She looked severely at her niece.

"Yes, Aunt Batih," Jiriya answered sweetly, "Is there anything else I should know?"

Batih pursed her lips, looking at Jiriya suspiciously. "Oh, there will be plenty more for you to learn, I'm afraid. But perhaps that's enough for now. I'd better stop distracting you from your sewing or you won't have a thing to wear on your wedding day. But I do hope you take this to heart, my dear. Oru is mild-tempered, but a man's a man, and you wouldn't want to lose him." She disappeared into the kitchen.

"Phew," whispered Jiriya, "I thought at first she was going to talk about... you know... the marriage bed, and I thought I was going to die!"

Svarnil laughed. "I think the marriage bed will take care of itself, as long as you forget the idea that the first night will be the best. Don't expect to know everything all at once and I'm sure your

marriage bed will get better and better.” Svarnil’s lips quirked as Jiriya blushed again.

As always, Jiriya’s embarrassment made her speak more angrily than she intended. “Anyway, what does she know about any of this? She’s not even married! And seriously, Svarnil, is it true, that you can’t ever tell a man that he’s doing anything wrong?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure there must be plenty of men of whom that is true. But I also think that Oru is a better man than that. As I said, I believe it’s better not to play games of dishonesty that way. But at the same time, no criticism hurts like the criticism of someone you love, so you must be very careful.”

“I’m not worried,” Jiriya said, and turned on Svarnil a radiant smile.

Svarnil returned the smile, but as they resumed their sewing, her own smile faded. Jiriya might not be worried, but Svarnil was. She and Nulif were not being honest with each other. She had given Jiriya advice she could not even seem to act on herself. It was time to stop playing games.

She seized her chance that night when they went to their bedroom. For all Aunt Batih’s quirks, it was she who had insisted that Svarnil and Nulif, as newlyweds, must have privacy. She had cleared space in a storeroom and moved in a cot, and Svarnil was grateful for the consideration that gave her the opportunity to speak up in privacy now.

She took a deep breath and said, “I was tidying our things this morning, and I found the letter from your father. I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to read it, but I saw the first few sentences.” She paused, her heart racing with fear for what he might say.

Her fear seemed reflected on his startled face as he looked up abruptly. “Oh no. Svarnil, I’m so sorry. I did not want you to have to know!”

“Why?”

"He has no right to treat you like this! I want everything to be perfect for you! I hoped I might somehow work things out before we arrived in K'Ten, and you might be able to join my family as you should, without any shadow."

"Truly, Nulif, truly, are you troubled by our marriage? Are you uncomfortable about me before your father?"

"No! Never! Svarnil, of course not! I'm ashamed of *him*! I wish he had never come home."

Svarnil reached out for Nulif's hand. "But you need not carry such worries on your own. That's why we have each other. I love you, Nulif. We shall come through this together. Is your father worse than an elemental monster? Worse than an angry dragon?"

Nulif smiled in spite of himself. "I suppose not."

"Then we will find a way. And in the meantime, we need to make a decision about this expedition of Oru and Jiriya's."

He looked shamefaced. "I confess I had thought of it as a possible way to stay away from K'Ten a little longer. Not because I don't want to complete our own ceremony, I mean. I just wanted to delay dealing with Dad."

"But the expedition itself. Are you interested?"

"Well, of course the opportunity to learn Lothvana history is tempting, but..."

"But?" She smiled now, and squeezed his hand.

"But you are more important."

"I am in love with a librarian. It would bring me no happiness to deprive you of research. Besides, the whole subject is fascinating. What legends do you know of Edah?"

"None."

“Exactly! As far as I have learned, no one knows any. There are none. To know that such a land existed, to have a few little proverbs regarding it, and yet to *know* nothing about it... Tell me honestly, would you walk away without regret from the chance to learn something like this?”

This time his smile was stronger. “You’re right. I want to go. And it’s quite clear that you want to go, too. Well, with or without a temple ceremony, with or without Dad’s permission, you are mine and I am yours. A path has opened before us, and as long as we can walk forward together, let us go!”

She nodded, and suddenly he folded her in his arms. “Svarnil,” he murmured into her hair, “My *wife*.” She could hear the exultation in his muffled voice. She held him as tightly as she could, letting her relief flood through her.

After a moment Nulif sat back from Svarnil reluctantly. “But I suppose I really ought to write a letter to my father to warn him. And while I do that, you can read the rest of his letter and Ekibi’s, now that you already know the worst.” He handed Svarnil the letters, then found a blank sheet of paper and trimmed his pen. After a long time, he dipped it in the ink and slowly began to write. When he had finally finished, he held it out to Svarnil, his eyebrows raised in question.

*Olamachat Atsu*

*Dad, I received your letter upon my arrival in Sisoa. Please set your mind at rest regarding my marriage to Svarnil. We were married in Tanoeb in the spring and intend to return to K'Ten to celebrate again with our family there. Our arrival in K'Ten will be delayed by a research expedition to the eastern desert, but after that we plan to travel directly to Minar. If you have any remaining concerns regarding my marriage or the charges of blasphemy of which I*

*was acquitted, please bring them to Sakar Sikwan so that he may advise you.*

*Please assure all my family that Svarnil and I are well and very happy together, as I am sure you all wish us to be.*

*Nulif Atsu*

“What will your father make of it?” Svarnil asked, her smile twitching the corner of her lips.

“He’ll be furious,” Nulif answered flatly. “I only hope his fury will tell the others that we’re still together.” After a moment he sighed and added, “He isn’t a bad man. That’s one reason I had hoped that somehow you wouldn’t have to see this before you met him. He just... It’s just that he doesn’t know us. He’s been away on his ship so much that he simply treats the whole family as if we were characters in a fable. The Dutiful Wife, The Eldest Son, The Beautiful Daughter. He’s always provided for us well, always played his own role diligently: The Respectable Merchant. But whenever any of us doesn’t play our part as he expects, like when I refused to apprentice as a merchant, he thinks the Otherworld is ending.” He sighed. “But he came to terms with that eventually. I’m furious with him myself at the moment, but I don’t want to poison you against him.”

Svarnil put her arm around his shoulder, filled with warmth because she was the one whose arm was around him, and he was the one her arm was around. “I blame him for not trusting your judgment, but I don’t blame him for being suspicious of a stranger, and an elf at that. Don’t worry. We shall catch this wolf when it comes in the door. Until then, we have an adventure to follow.”

He nodded, and his hand moved to the back of her neck. She smiled at the sudden fluttering of her heart, so different from the hollow fear of the afternoon, and he pulled her lips to his.



*You must understand that I loved them. They were magnificent, the people of Edah, the greatest people of their time - greater indeed than any people of any age of the Otherworld. When Edah was reaching toward its height the elves were little more than wild woodland sprites, subsisting on nuts and berries; the dwarves were playing in the mountains with their little mechanical toys; and the humans... They were all mere nomads, wandering across the land like animals. In Edah alone it appeared that the First World would be made manifest in the Otherworld. And they were my people, mine to watch and guide and encourage. From the first mudbrick huts they built, the first copper horns they played, the first irrigation channels they dug, I could see that they were no ordinary mortals. In all they did they were beautiful to me. They were beautiful as an infant is beautiful even as it struggles to stand and falls, even as it cries out at its helplessness, because anyone can see already in the infant that it will in time not merely stand but dance. So it was with my people of Edah. As I watched, they stood and danced. One obstacle after another they conquered and turned to their advantage, until they had built themselves their kingdom Edah, with its fountains and towers, and filled it with art and knowledge, music and law. They were beautiful, the Edahvans, and I loved them.*



### III THE THEFT OF AN AMULET

The Vizier's expedition left, as desert journeys always do, before sunrise, as soon as it was light enough to see dark shapes against the pale sand. It was still cold and Svarnil huddled in her cloak, staying out of the way of the final preparations, and hoping she would not tumble headlong from her high perch between her klaameleh's packs. Fethilis darted and swooped happily, hunting for insects above the heads of people and animals, while the dog Abri sat alertly beside the kansama children. The two aides looked rather bleary, but the nomad porters were bustling with energy. Oru had found a third porter at the last possible moment, some sort of cousin or uncle to one of the others. Now the three of them were busy helping Quail and Tij together onto one klaameleh and fastening its reins to Jiriya's mount, securing the last few packages of supplies to the last klaameleh, and bantering cheerfully with the servants of all the other groups setting off toward their own destinations this morning.

Even though Svarnil had been told that the nomads were of two feuding tribes, all three of them looked nearly the same to her. They all wore the same dusty blue-grey robes with the same sheer scarves wound around their heads and looped

around their shoulders ready to cover their faces when the sun came up. They all had narrow, aquiline faces, with their small, deep eyes set close together. They all had leathery skin and black mustaches that swept to the sides like bird wings. Except that one of the three had grey intermixed with his black beard, and another's beard came to a single point instead of being parted in the middle like the other two, Svarnil could hardly tell them apart.

They were too busy now for her to ask them their names, so she turned to Nulif, waiting on his klaameleh beside hers. "You look as if you were born on a klaameleh," she said. "The first time I rode one I felt as if I were on wobbling stilts. I still can't quite get used to it."

He grinned back at her. "You're going to tell me you're still unsteady on a mere klaameleh after riding dragon-back?"

"I wasn't very brave about that, either," she replied with a laugh.

Then the nomads were swinging themselves up into their own saddles, and Oru called out, "Let's move!"

The eleven klaamelehs started off, loping past other groups, with the tall pale wall of Sisoa to their left. Svarnil could hear the two kansama children chattering together in their own language and the two aides gossiping lazily. Fethilis flew along above them, sending Svarnil her cheerful visions of sun-dappled jungle flowers that seemed so incongruous in contrast with the austere expanse of the pre-dawn desert. Soon they were beyond the crowd of the Tent City and on their own, and Svarnil's thoughts turned from the immediate concerns of the departure to whatever lay ahead.

It was an odd thing, she thought, to be striding toward a quest ahead, and all the while knowing that she and Nulif were running away

from a quest behind. But they would turn around and face that soon enough. And until then...

Oru's mission was to find out what had happened to the Lothvana town Akuv and to investigate the reports of the merchants in order to assess whether there was any danger to Sisoa or the queen's territory. Svarnil and Nulif, of course, were interested in the story of Akuv for its own sake, as well as the opportunity of learning kansama lore and history. And then there was Edah. Silent Edah, the Blind Ruins, Esh-Etaal, the Circle of Gods. There were so many names, so many references to this place, and yet what did anyone know? There was a famous description of the site, written by a traveler some four hundred and fifty years ago, that they had all read. There were the rumors of mysterious curses, and the proverbs about the wealth of the fabled kingdom and its sudden obliteration. But of legends that came from Edah itself, tales of who ruled it, how its people lived, what happened there before its destruction, and how it was destroyed? Of these details there were none. No songs remained, no stories, no lists of kings or battles. Apparently no memory from the people of Edah had survived. And yet the kansama children who had escaped the destruction of their own town believed that the nameless gods of Edah were responsible.

"I wish we could have spoken with the Cumarún," Svarnil said suddenly, "They must know what we mortals have forgotten."

"Oh yes, of course. But how does one contact the Cumarún? Could Fethilis show us Hrefengierd like she did that other time?"

"I think that worked only because Hrefengierd was looking into the Oracle's eyes at the time. I don't know any way to call them. One can only hope that they know when they're needed and contact us."



Just before midday the group stopped, erected a shade shelter, ate, stretched already-weary muscles, and rested through the most intense heat of the day. Fethilis crawled into Svarnil's pack and curled there like a bundle of wilted leaves. Oru's leopard Nimasah licked himself lazily and napped. But Abri the sight hound seemed unaffected by the bright heat. When Quail reached into his pocket with his good hand and held up a smooth length of stick, she scrambled to her feet eagerly, tail swishing. Soon everyone was watching their game of fetch. Abri's speed and agility were astonishing. When she dodged around boulders and shrubs she looked like water flowing, and when she sprinted full out, her body lengthened and became wind. No matter where or how far Quail threw the stick, Abri had reached it in an instant, sometimes even snatching it out of the air before it landed. Each time she returned with it, she tapped her nose once against Tij's hand as if to assure the blind girl that she had returned, and then she dropped the stick at Quail's feet and sat at attention, waiting for the next throw.

"That's a good hound," remarked one of the nomads, pulling his scarf down from his face. He was the one with the straight beard.

"Yes," Quail replied simply.

"Is she trained to hunt?"

"Of course."

After a pause the grey-bearded one said, "I don't suppose you'd sell? A genuine kansama hound like that would be worth good gold."

"No."

"Ah well, I don't blame you. But it was worth asking."

Nulif asked, "Are kansama hounds special?"

"All the sight hounds of the Dubaad lands are descended from kansama hounds, but the finest are

the true vikuris, those still bred in Lothvana. Don't you have them in Minar?"

"No, we have terriers. I've never seen dogs like this." He held out his hand as Quail finally returned the stick to his pocket, and Abri gave Nulif's fingers a gracious lick before settling herself at Tij's feet with a sigh, tongue lolling.

"Many klaamelehs make wealth," the oldest guide continued, "But a good hound is something to be proud of. Among our people puppies are given as tribute to the chieftains, and given back as symbols of favor. I've seen some fine hounds, but that boy's... She makes other dogs look like jackals." He moved over to the children, introduced himself as Laal-Black, and began to ask Quail about Abri. It was not long before they were chattering eagerly about the dog competition held in Lothvana every winter. Apparently the competition was closed to outsiders so that the nomads had never seen the famous contests of hunting, racing, and agility that brought kansama of all the mesas together for feasting, sharing, boasting, and celebration.

Soon everyone joined in the conversation, and introduced themselves to each other, and Svarnil tried to fix each name and person in her mind. There were herself and Nulif, Jiriya, and Oru, of course. Oru's two aides were Yunib and Dalaan, both young Sisoan men. Yunib had a deep voice and a loud easy laugh, while Dalaan had a precise, fastidious manner. Of the porters, Laal-Black was the oldest, the one who had replaced the thief, and Svarnil thought that when he looked at her there was disapproval in his deep-set eyes. The younger nomad with the parted beard was Imruk-Black, and the other, with the straight beard, called himself Lubun-Blue. There were the two young kansama, Tij and Quail, and then there were Nimasah the leopard, Fethilis the lyilit, and Abri the hound. And finally, or perhaps firstly, there were eleven tall,

long-necked klaamelehs, supremely indifferent to everyone else.

So the expedition rested and talked pleasantly enough until the sun dropped slightly down the sky, and they rode again until darkness fell, and continued again the next day. This part of the desert was different from what Svarnil and Nulif had seen before. Here they were not in the vast empty plain of sand, but followed the spur of low, stony hills that reached out from the eastern mountains as far as Sisoa itself. The ground was rocky, and every different kind of plant or shrub looked armed for combat with thorns and spines, or tough, sharp-edged leaves. The klaamelehs seemed undaunted by the inhospitable landscape, but strode along untiringly, and when they were tethered in the heat of midday, they browsed delicately at plants that looked utterly inedible. The nomads, too, showed themselves unintimidated, for this was, after all, their home. They collected all manner of food that Svarnil would never have known to look for or dared to try, and every day Lubun-Blue could find a spring or tiny rivulet among the rocks. Abri, too, contributed to the table. Quail sent her hunting in the late afternoons and she never failed to bring back at least a couple of marmots or dunedogs to be stewed or roasted. Indeed, they ate better than Svarnil ever had before on a journey through the wilderness.

“We’ll be spoiled,” she said with a smile.

Nulif muttered in Svarnil’s native language, “Well, we would be if we weren’t served so much of that slimy stuff from the inside of those fat, prickly leaf things.”

Svarnil laughed. “They aren’t my favorite, either.”

It was also true that there was a good deal more sand in every meal than Svarnil would have liked. The wind was strong and gusty, and it was

not long before the nomads were teaching all the others to wrap their faces in long sheer scarves as they rode. Sand constantly scoured at their skin and drifted over their mats, worked its way through their hair and under their clothes, and of course sifted into their meals where the sudden crunch of grit made Svarnil cringe as she chewed.

“Wind’s worse than usual this year,” remarked Laal-Black. “Either it’s sweeping together extra rain for us, or the toad god is restless.”

Svarnil saw Tij and Quail stiffen at this comment. “What was that?” she asked the older man.

As usual when she spoke his mouth tightened in disapproval and he did not look directly at the elf, but he answered, “About the toad god? It’s nothing. Just a saying. People say anything strange in the weather must be due to the nameless gods, but of course that’s just superstition.”

“The toad god is one of the gods of Edah?”

“That’s right. God of water, so they say.” Laal-Black shrugged. “Stupid to believe those things, but I didn’t think what I was saying. Didn’t mean to scare the young ones. The weather’s been strange for the past couple months.”

So he had noticed their startled looks, too, thought Svarnil. She knew that the children believed the lost gods of Edah had had something to do with the destruction of their home, so it was natural that they should be afraid. But what power did these ancient gods really have? Was it pure superstition? Or was there truly some mysterious curse still lurking in Edah? Although Laal-Black had dismissed the idea as foolish, Svarnil noticed that he stared uneasily across the landscape, scowling at the gusts of gritty wind and the sand imps skittering across the desert in the distance in their clouds of swirling sand. Fethilis, too, who usually loved to ride the wind, seemed ill at ease. But of course

Fethilis disliked the desert altogether, so perhaps there was no special meaning in the dullness of the small creature's wings or the uneasiness in her round green eyes.



No one stayed awake very long in the evenings. By the time they stopped riding and ate it was always fully dark and getting rapidly colder. They rolled themselves in blankets, pulled the edges of their shelters low against the wind-borne sand, and dropped into exhausted sleep. But for all the rigors of the journey, Svarnil always found a few minutes of deep contentment as she and Nulif lay pressed together in one small shelter before they fell asleep. Even when they said not a word, they shared the knowledge that they were together, doing what they had chosen to do together.

It was during the midday rest, however, that the travelers talked and grew to know each other. Often they shared songs and stories. Nulif took notes, and Svarnil played her harp, while Yunib and Imruk-Black discovered that they could harmonize wonderfully on several folk songs that both knew. Whenever they sang, Fethilis came out of Svarnil's pack and sat on her shoulder jiggling in time to the music. When Svarnil sang, however, Laal-Black always looked away.

On the second day she asked him, "Are you married, Laal-Black?"

For once he looked fully back at the elf, a challenge in his close-set eyes. "Yes. And I honor my wives well enough to let them stay at home instead of parading themselves across the desert."

"Wives? How many wives have you?"

"Two, of course."

"Forgive me, but it is not *of course* to me. I do not know your customs. And it is improper for them to travel?"

"Of course," Laal-Black said again, but then smiled grudgingly. "I mean, yes. My wives would feel they had lost my respect if I dragged them along with me on an expedition. As if I was unable to care for myself or did not care for their comfort or privacy."

Svarnil nodded. "Well, I am glad to know that they have not lost your respect."

Laal-Black frowned, speaking as if the words came out of their own will, "It is the way of honor, which other peoples try to infringe at their peril."

Svarnil raised an eyebrow. "Does someone try to infringe your honor or that of your wives?"

"Sisoa has never understood our ways."

Svarnil looked thoughtful, and finally replied with the slightest twitch of a smile, "But perhaps you do not understand their ways? For those of us wives who do parade ourselves across the desert, I hope that you will not hold us in contempt. Please remember that for Jiriya and me it is not disrespectful in our husbands to travel together with their wives... although it would be disrespectful of them to marry additional women."

Laal-Black grunted and squinted away over the sand, watching the watchful vultures circle slowly on the winds high above.

On the third day there was an even more awkward incident.

Imruk-Black had begun to sing a heart-felt hymn about a brave warrior who sacrificed everything for his people. Nulif, who was seated beside Lubun-Blue, noticed him stiffen, and glanced at him. His hands had clenched into fists, and his dark eyebrows were pulled into a ferocious scowl. Oru, too, was looking warily between the three nomads. Although Nulif had no idea what was happening, it was clear that something was wrong. But as Imruk-Black's song finished in a beautiful

lament for the martyr, Lubun-Blue suddenly declared harshly, "That's a stupid song, full of lies!"

In an instant Imruk-Black was on his feet, a bare knife in one hand and the other gripping the small bundle of black fabric he always wore at his waist. Oru, too, leapt up, and interposed himself between the two men.

"No!" he ordered, "There will be no tribal fighting on the Vizier's expedition! If you cannot put your feuds aside, you can leave this group now."

Everyone's attention was fixed on the three young men. Imruk-Black lowered his dagger, but did not sit back down. He still fingered the black scraps that hung from his belt.

Lubun-Blue snarled, "He dares to sing of that villain here in Blue tribe territory. He praises a viper who slaughtered my people."

"I praise a hero who put down jackals who preyed on innocents."

Oru said firmly, "I do not care who killed whom. But there will be no killing now, in this expedition. Is that understood? Answer me!" After a long pause, the two nomads gave grudging nods, their black eyes still fixed on each other. "Good. Now we've heard a song of the Black tribe. If the Blue tribe would like a turn, we would be pleased to hear a song from your people, Lubun-Blue."

"I would not sully our history by laying it before swine."

Nulif said quickly, "Then perhaps we should leave the history of nomads for the moment, and I can ask something I've been wondering about. Does anyone know anything about Edah? I know nothing, but surely you of the desert must have something you could teach me."

There was no reply at first, although Imruk-Black, still scowling, settled himself on his mat again. It was Tij who began to sing. Her face was turned down as if she were intent on the dog whose

head lay in her lap, and her voice was soft, but the wistful notes were pure.

*"The dust of decaying decades lies heavy on the floor,  
The drowsy sunlight filters through the shadow of a door.  
Only the brittle spider, spinning her milky thread,  
Has seen the treasure left there when despairing Lothvan  
fled.*

*Only the lonely lizard, lying on golden sand,  
Knows what the Lothvan left there when they went to  
another land.*

*Only the whispering breezes tell the traveler where to  
find*

*The silently sleeping treasure the Lothvana left behind."*

When the short song finished there was a silence, until Svarnil said softly, "That is beautiful, Tij. How does it come from the history of Edah?"

Tij's face was still turned down. "When Edah was destroyed." She paused. "Our bards say when Edah was destroyed, the Lothvana kansama who survive run from the mountains for escape and come to the tulis, the mesas. They never go back to mountains. All spoiled from Edah. They forgetting everything except that once they lived there and they have to leave." Her voice grew still softer and the next words were hardly a whisper. "Just like us."

Lubun-Blue's face twisted, and he reached out and laid his hand lightly on the girl's back. "Your home is with you in your heart no matter where you go," he said gently. Then, his voice more concentrated, "Your home is your true father, whose name you bear and whose honor is in your hands." He glared at Imruk-Black. But Tij, who did not see that look, nodded solemnly.

That night lying in their shelter, Svarnil mused, "I wonder what the truth of that story is."

"What story?" asked Nulif, trying to tuck the edges of the shelter down more firmly against the restless sand.

"Imruk-Black's story. His hero, Lubun-Blue's villain."

"Ah." Nulif considered the question. "I doubt there is any truth left to be found."

"But *something* must be true."

"The only truth we can be sure of is that enemies will always find whatever reasons for enmity they can."

Svarnil sighed. She hoped that the trouble between the porters might be set down, but early in the morning two days later it flared again. Svarnil woke to the sound of an argument.

"Give me back my amulet!" demanded Lubun-Blue.

"I would never touch any foul thing of yours!" retorted Imruk-Black.

Once again Oru got to his feet and stood between the two nomads. "Explain yourselves," he ordered, as everyone watched apprehensively.

Lubun-Blue said, "I have an amulet, copper with a sacred pattern inlaid in opal scarab shell. This swine has stolen it!"

"Why do you think Imruk-Black has stolen it?" asked Oru, before the other nomad could retort again.

"Aren't all his tribe thieving jackals, just like the one who was stealing this expedition's supplies? And isn't my amulet gone? Or perhaps it was this other Black villain. They're all the same."

Oru looked at Imruk-Black and Laal-Black. "Did either of you take his amulet? Or do you know anything about its disappearance?"

They protested angrily that they knew nothing of it.

"Do you swear on your ancestors that you speak the truth?" Oru persisted, his voice stern.

This made the guides more solemn, yet their answers remained the same. They denied any

knowledge of the disappearance of the other man's amulet.

Oru sighed and said, "Well, let us break our fast and see what we can discover. Time to rise, everyone."

When everyone was settled with their rounds of flatbread, Oru turned again to Lubun-Blue and said, "Now, tell me where you left your amulet, and how you discovered its disappearance."

"I keep the amulet on my belt, tied on with a leather thong. At night I lay my belt beside me. This morning when I rose and put on my belt, I found the thong ripped and my amulet gone. Everyone knows that to sit down with a Black is to rise robbed."

Lubun-Blue scowled at Imruk-Black meaningfully.

"And are these childish lies the sort of witless evidence you brought against our kinsman in Sisoa?" shouted Laal-Black, his hands straying to the knife and black fabric in his belt.

Oru interrupted forcefully, "Enough of that; I asked what happened. Let me see the thong."

Lubun-Blue returned to his rolled blankets and after a brief search picked up a short length of thin leather, which he handed to Oru. Oru looked at it carefully and held it out toward the others. "Does anyone make anything of this?" he asked, his voice puzzled.

They all leaned forward to look, except Lubun-Blue who sat with his arms folded, still scowling, and Imruk-Black who continued to eat his breakfast with a show of utter indifference.

Nulif said, "It was certainly not cut clean with a blade."

"But nor does it really look torn," said Svarnil.

"Jumprat!" exclaimed Laal-Black suddenly.

Tij froze, wary as her namesake at the sound of the hawk's cry. Quail stared back and forth in dismay between his sister and the porter.

“You accuse Tij of stealing the amulet?” demanded Jiriya.

Laal-Black looked scornful. “No, a jumprat. An actual jumprat. This leather looks gnawed apart. Perhaps a jumprat took the amulet back to its burrow. Everyone knows they collect shiny things.”

All around the circle faces cleared in understanding, and the aide Yunib’s laugh rang out loudly. But Lubun-Blue said sourly, “How convenient that when one Black thief is accused, a second Black thief is there to throw down another scent. And how convenient that his explanation can never be proven or disproven.”

Oru sighed again.

Then Quail spoke up in a very small voice. “We maybe can prove it.”

“How?” asked Oru, “How can we hope to find a jumprat’s burrow?”

“But Abri can find jumprat burrow,” Quail said, more confidently, and at the sound of her name the dog stood at attention.

“Can she? She is no scent hound. And even if she finds us a jumprat’s burrow, how can we hope to see what treasure it keeps there?”

Quail frowned, but Svarnil looked at Fethilis and met her eyes. As soon as Oru had asked his question, Svarnil had felt an answer in the lyli’s mind.

“Fethilis will crawl into the burrow to search,” she said.

So Quail spoke to Abri, and the hound began to circle the camp site, poking her nose curiously in each tumble of rocks, cocking her ears alertly, her light eyebrows raised. Fethilis sprang from Svarnil’s shoulder and circled above the hound. They did not have long to wait before Abri stiffened and gave one quick yip. Fethilis dove to the ground and disappeared between the rocks. When she emerged, she laid five objects on the sand. There were four

small flakes of stone with a gleam of silver, and one Sisoan penny.

"No amulet," Lubun-Blue growled, "What a surprise."

"But I doubt this is the only jumprat here," replied Laal-Black.

As for Imruk-Black, he had become curious about the search in spite of himself and came to join the others.

Quail spoke to Abri again, praising her and then setting her to try further, while Fethilis dusted herself before taking flight. Sure enough, it was not long before the dog found another burrow, and Fethilis crawled inside. Everyone waited in silence until the round grey head reappeared. When she laid out her finds, Lubun-Blue gave such a shout of triumph that the lylit took to the air with a flutter. He strode forward and seized the copper object from the sand with a grin. Then he frowned and turned to Imruk-Black.

"Imruk-Black," he said solemnly, "I apologize for my accusation." Then he turned to Quail. "And I thank you. You have done me a service this morning with wisdom and skill." Quail gazed at the nomad, and Lubun-Blue's face broke into a sweet smile. "You make your land proud, children of Lothvana, both of you. Akuv will not be forgotten with you to carry on his name."

Svarnil watched Imruk-Black's reaction to this apology, for he had not replied. But when Lubun-Blue thanked Quail, Imruk-Black's scowl lifted and he said rather wryly, Svarnil thought, "You have done me a service, too, Quail, and I will remember it."

From that time it seemed that Quail admired Lubun-Blue more than any of the other men. Together they invented a game in which Lubun-Blue would throw out his weapon, a cord with three weights, and Abri retrieved it. Soon the nomad was

teaching the young sky-dwarf how to throw the “flying serpent” himself. With only one good arm, Quail could not use the proper technique, but Lubun-Blue was clever, patient, and gentle as he came up with a new way for the boy to swing the weapon and release it with one hand.

Oru joined in the game with his bow, and shot arrows for the sight hound to fetch. Oru said he was out of practice, with the ghost of a wink for Jiriya and Svarnil, who knew that it was two hundred years ago that Oru had received the archery training of an emperor’s son. Out of practice or not, it was clear from the admiring looks his aides gave him that Oru was an excellent archer even now. The aide Dalaan turned out to be good with a bow himself, Laal-Black had a flying serpent of his own, and Imruk-Black used a sling.

One day Imruk-Black challenged Dalaan to a target competition, sling against bow, and it wasn’t long before all the other men were joining in, even Nulif and Yunib, who had never learned to use any ranged weapons and whose attempts with the bow and sling were cheerfully mocked by the others. As for the feud between the tribes, that seemed to have been set aside, for all three of the nomads were working together smoothly. Svarnil watched them carefully at first, but they seemed not merely to tolerate each other, but even to talk and joke as if they enjoyed one another’s company. As long as they could stay away from reminders of their history of enmity, Svarnil felt that they might become true friends.

Of course, a bard and a librarian could not stay away from history altogether. They asked again about Edah, but there was little more they learned.

Laal-Black said, “As everyone knows, they were richer than the djinni, and prouder than leopards.” At this the leopard Nimasah swung his

head around to stare at the man as if he understood the words, and Imruk-Black laughed.

"What would your mother say if she heard you? I happen to know she taught you *Never insult a leopard*, because she told me that one, too!"

Laal-Black ignored the comment and continued as if he had not been interrupted. "The richest and proudest people in the Otherworld, but neither wealth nor pride could save them."

"But what was it that destroyed Edah?" Nulif asked.

"An earthquake," said Laal-Black.

Lubun-Blue answered, "The mountains swallowed them."

"No, a sandstorm," said Quail.

Jiriya added, "I thought people always say there was a great wind that blew them away."

"So we don't know, then," concluded Svarnil, "Like everything else about Edah."

"It always amazes me to hear that there's anything you don't know," teased Jiriya.

But Svarnil merely replied with her wry smile, "Then we need to spend more time together until the novelty wears off."

By now it was the sixth day since the expedition had left Sisoa, and they turned north down the low, rocky slopes toward the mesas that were visible like flat-topped islands in the sea of sand. Although they had been in Blue territory, they had seen no encampments, and Lubun-Blue explained that the people of his tribe usually stayed deeper in the sand-plain until later in the year.

They were now coming closer to Lothvana, and the sky-dwarves grew quieter as they rode toward the mesas. Tij's speckled face was turned down and Quail's brown eyes were wary as he stared ahead. That evening Jiriya sat beside them and asked, "We will soon be in Lothvana. What

should we do? Where should we go, or whom should we speak with?"

"The king's tuliko is Ensemon," said Quail. "You should go past the smaller tulikos until you reach Ensemon, then call out to the sentries." He glanced at his sister, who was nodding.

"Very good. And what about you? Is there anything you need? Hedgehog implied that you may not be welcome in Ensemon. What should we do for you?"

Tij's anxious face lit with a sudden mischievous smile as she said, "They say we cannot live there on any of the tulikos. Yes, but we living on Sisoa now. We just Sisoan expeditioners for Master Vizier, right?"

Quail grinned.

"Yes," Jiriya said, "You belong with us."

Imruk-Black looked up from his dish and stared hard at the two children. His face was unreadable. Then he declared impulsively, "Sky-dwarf children, I swear on my name that my life will stand between you and all harm."

Laal-Black's head jerked around at the other's words, and their eyes met in the flickering light of the fire. The older nomad said grimly, "I am witness to this oath, cousin."

"I know it," Imruk-Black replied, "It is not a light oath."

Lubun-Blue exclaimed, "I shall not be outdone in service. I too shall swear it. I swear it on the honor of the Blue tribe, I will stand by you as by my own family."

Quail wiped his eyes hastily and muttered, "Thank you." Tij reached out toward the voices and unerringly found the hands of the two guides. She squeezed, and Svarnil thought, "They're connected, now. The two tribes are connected through these children." She reached out her own hand to find Nulif's.



Two more days brought the travelers among the mesas. Quail pointed at the cliff wall on their left and said, "There's Sivala, see?"

At first Svarnil saw nothing, until she realized that Quail's eyes were looking not at the base of the cliff, where Svarnil had expected to see a town, but far up, more than halfway to the flat mesa top. And there in a wide hollow in the rock face she saw a cluster of buildings perched like swallows' nests. Some windows and doorways were carved directly into the stone, while other buildings were built of bricks the same color as the stone, and were stacked side by side and one atop another like children's blocks in a basket.

There were no people visible, and at first Svarnil heard no sounds from far above, except the cry of hawks. Finally in the silence she could make out faint distant voices, and she asked, "How do you get up there?"

Quail laughed. "There are ladders, of course. Some carved in stone, some made in wood and rope. And there are baskets for kansama that can't climbing any more, and for vikuris and supplies and things. But we don't putting them for everyone to see."

"Like climbing the rigging of a ship," mused Nulif, "Except it must be twice as high or more."

As the children had recommended, the expedition did not stop at the small cliff city Sivala, but rode on through what felt like a wide canyon between the vertical walls of the mesas on either side. Here and there they caught a glimpse of another dark rectangle in the cliffs – a door or window of some room in the stone far above the desert floor. Once they saw silhouetted figures looking down from a platform far above them, but no one called out.

The dark fell quickly in the shadow of the mesas, but the travelers were now somewhat sheltered from the uncanny wind. As they sat together around their fire that evening, Imruk-Black and Yunib began a song together, and for that night the anxious cloud seemed to lift. Quail leaned against Lubun-Blue, and Tij was curled against Jiriya. Oru's arm was around Jiriya's shoulder, and beside him Nimasah vibrated with his soundless purr, while the dog Abri put her head in Quail's lap as her tail thumped softly in Nulif's, and Fethilis flitted like a spark above the fire. For a little while it was easy to forget that they were here to learn about the destruction of a city, that the children with them had lost their home and family, that the nomads among them belonged to tribes that hated each other enough to kill, and that far away in K'Ten waited the trouble with Nulif's father. Here the klaamelehs mumbled placidly to each other, and the children's eyes drooped in the flickering firelight, and Svarnil played her harp with Nulif beside her, and sang.

*All shall be well, for the high moon glows,  
 And all shall be well tonight.  
 Bright fire yet burns, sweet water yet flows,  
 And all shall be well tonight.  
 The dusk-winged bats dance under the stars  
 And all shall be well tonight,  
 While the worn day wraps the night to its scars,  
 And all shall be well tonight.  
 What tomorrow holds shall come in its time,  
 And all shall be well tonight,  
 Until out of its darkness the dawn shall climb,  
 Fresh from the healing night,  
 And all shall be well tonight.*



It was after noon the next day when they rounded the largest mesa and came under the face of Ensemon, the chief tuliko of Lothvana.

Oru looked up at the cliff, with its walls and windows scattered across the face of the mesa beneath the wide overhanging stone above.

"Greetings, Ensemon!" he called up. "We come from Sisoa on behalf of Vizier Bedu and Empress Kahan-Atar. May we speak with you?"

"State your names and business," replied a voice that sounded closer than they had expected. The travelers looked to locate it, and saw a man standing in a sort of pocket in the cliff halfway down from the main part of the city. Like Tij and Quail, his face was round and speckled as a wildcat's, and silky black hair curled out from beneath his gleaming round helmet.

When he saw the kansama guard, Oru bowed his head politely and answered, "I am Oru, secretary to the Vizier Bedu of Yuwara Ul Sahd. Empress Kahan-Atar has sent this expedition to investigate strange reports from the eastern Dubaad so that we may judge whether there is any danger to Sisoa. These are my aides, Dalaan and Yunib. These are our guides and porters, Laal-Black, Imruk-Black, and Lubun-Blue. These are our historians, Nulif of the Great Collection in K'Ten, and Svarnil of the Fellowship of Bards. And these are also guides, Quail and Tij of Akuv, and finally Jiriya, head of the home where they now live in Sisoa. Those are our names and business. Now please tell us to whom we can speak to learn the information we seek."

"I am Cornstalk," the guard replied politely. "I will relay this information to King Hawk and return with an answer."

Jiriya turned around in her saddle to look at the children on their klaameleh behind her. "Don't worry," she said softly, "You're not on your own."

It was not long before they heard the guard's voice again, this time farther up. "You may enter!" he called, "We'll come down to you!" Then a large basket appeared, a man climbed into it, and someone lowered him down the cliff face to the ground. At the same time two more men began to climb down the rock. Svarnil thought they looked like spiders inching steadily down the wall and she watched them, fascinated, as they found their invisible hand and footholds without hesitation.

When the kansama in the basket reached the ground and stepped out, he said, "Others are coming to house your klaamelehs. You please come with me. Just one thing. King's rule is that all nomads must put away emblems before you may enter our tuliko."

The nomads looked affronted but Oru raised an eyebrow sternly. "Put away the emblems, please."

The kansama guard waited patiently while Laal-Black and Imruk-Black pulled the scraps of black fabric from their belts. When the two nomads had placed the emblems in their packs he smiled courteously and gestured to the basket in which he had been lowered from the city of Ensemon.



*The face of the Otherworld was very different then, milder and lusher. The Northmountains were not so cold, and the Dubaad lands were not desert. Where the sand reigns now, in the time of Edah were plains sweeping from the mountains to ocean, rich with rivers and lakes and creatures the like of which the Otherworld no longer knows. And near the Great Crest of the continent, where Edah grew like a pearl, there were forests sweet with fruit and fields heavy with grain. And all these gifts the*

## RUIN OF ANCIENT POWERS

*Edahvans used and transformed into bounty yet more magnificent, bounty worthy of their own magnificence. They had skin like pure dark gold, and hair of lighter gold, curling and clustering like acacia flowers, and their eyes were dark blue clear and bright as glass. While the poor humans on the plains were scrabbling to fill their stomachs, the Edahvans loved music, and beauty, and looked to the stars for knowledge. From the grandfather singing to the infant in his arms to the young girl whistling to the flocks on the hillside, they overflowed with music. Music my people composed for entire orchestras of harps, lutes, flutes of wood and brass, timpani, bowed strings, and the trumpets crowning them all. Even the sweet music of the elves seemed but a poor twanging in comparison with the glorious tone of those horns. Where others toot and blare to signal battle, the instruments of Edah celebrated pure music. The trumpets of Edah were not the least of the treasures that were lost, for nothing in the Otherworld now can carry the soul to the sun as did the triumphant sound of those trumpets vaulting above the symphony. When that music played it was as if the people of Edah had translated the perfect pattern of the First World into pure sound. Who could hear it and not love them?*



