

The Hunters in New Atlantis

Dedication

This book, inspired by the Allan Quatermain series by H. Rider Haggard, is dedicated to my son, Dylan and to my wife, Elise, who helped role-play the characters and develop the plot.

- Patrick Westfall
July, 2014

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CHAPTER 1 - THE GREAT TREK

It was a chilly morning when Allan Hunter awoke, according to his custom, in the calm hour before dawn. *Today is finally the day we begin our great trek!* he thought excitedly. He and his family had employed the past several weeks procuring and packing provisions of all kinds, for it was their goal to seek new lands in the wild interior of Africa.

The Hunters are a family of seasoned adventurers; a mother, son and father. Elise, the mother, is a scientist as well as a walking encyclopedia, dictionary, psychologist and engineer; in short, a genius on virtually all matters. She is an expert shot with a rifle and an excellent cook as well.

Phoenix is a young, robust teenager with many skills. He often induced those he met to employ the word *charmed* to describe him so numerous and varied were his gifts. The boy earned a well advanced knowledge of both household medicine and field surgery, the result of long study under the mentorship of his mother. He is an affable, sanguine Leo who is eager to help anyone at any time.

Allan Hunter, though a loyal husband and father, is but an amateur at nearly everything else. He failed to receive the gifts of supreme talent that his wife and son possessed, yet he periodically found ways to make himself useful. If he is to be called a Jack of all trades but master of none, at least let it be said that he was a passing student of them all.

To round out the introductions, the family also has a border collie named California, called Cali for short. That she has proven to be a favorite member of the family is of little wonder, for she is loyal and adventuresome but also makes for a warm pillow.

Also in their party, but not officially in the family, are five stout mules that had already been salted for travel in the wilds of Africa. Salting is a process where the dangerous bacteria are introduced to the animal while it is still young. If the animal recovered from the subsequent illness, which most of them do, then they are believed to be impervious to such dangers as the tsetse fly, ticks, poisonous thorns or impurities in water which would sicken or destroy any non-salted beast of burden in Africa.

For their part, the family had also endured a cadre of needles upon their person, filled with what chemicals only God, or possibly Elyse, knew. In the end, they, too, were considered immune to most biological dangers that they were likely to face in the wilds of that untamed land. They have, over the years, proven to be a hearty lot and do not fear sickness overmuch.

Perhaps the reader of this journal, if such there ever be, may wish to know what manner of provisions they carried with them at the start of their trek. In addition to the mule laden with their veritable stockpile of medicine, there was another bearing Elyse's chemistry equipment which was a rather large and elaborate setup.

Another mule was entrusted with their tent and sleeping rolls, which were of high quality and served them well. Another carried their general tools, of which they had one of each that they were likely to require, whether they endeavored to build a house or to farm the land. They also had the forethought to include such sundry items as screws, nails, hinges and latches. The last pack animal carried their weapons and food stores.

As their weapons were most unusual, they should be described in detail. Each one of the explorers had trained long and hard using several different weapons, which were chosen based upon their foe or quarry, and they wore no less than a sword and long knife at most times. Most fortuitous of all is the result of the joint-work of the family named, appropriately if not uniquely, the *boom stick*.

This was an entirely new approach to the projectile weapon that permitted virtually any object to be shot from its barrel at high velocity. This was accomplished by using any of several methods for achieving the chemical combustion to supply the necessary propulsion. These had only recently finished at great labor and expense. Of these *boom sticks*, they carried eight rifles and six pistols and many rounds of preformed lead bullets and chemical combustibles.

Their food supply was to be very simple, for they carried 100 pounds of jerked beef in every flavor, plain, salted, peppered, etc. This, they planned to supplement by hunting, fishing and foraging for roughage. As to water, once again the genius of the family rose to suit their need, for entirely without Allan's consent (that is, his knowledge) his wife and son contrived a carbon filter system that will to allow them to safely drink from virtually any source of water they might find. As these were of a generous but finite character, they brought four cases of twenty-four each.

Many final details have been addressed and finally the loads were fully packed. They posed for their family portrait at the onset of their journey. Despite their success taking rare and amazing portraits of nature, their own self-portraits were always marked with closed eyes, a turned head or generally something to make them laugh afterwards. The family shared a strong, mutual affinity for the camera and their primary goals for undertaking the trek were largely photographic in nature. Accordingly, many bodies and lenses were packed upon the five beasts of burden. So it was that finally, after months of preparation and under a clear morning sky, they took the first steps toward the great unknown.

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Nearly a week passed with much adventure but little worthy of recording. There were laughs to be had at an early stage provided by Phoenix. Having grown bored at the monotonous hiking, he

set off on one of his many photo safaris just after noon one day. They had been traveling through mild country, with low bushes and rare groves of fruit trees with no danger in sight.

Allan happened to catch a glimpse of light, reflected from what he guessed to be the lens from Phoenix's camera and quickly watched him with his binoculars. Phoenix's attention was sharply focused in front of him, though to Allan, he appeared to be focusing on nothing but a copse of trees. He moved forward with his practiced, silent step and was holding the camera before him as if he was navigating through its small viewfinder so intent was he upon his shot.

Suddenly, he leaped into the air and performed an about-face before landing. Then he scrambled up a nearby tree. Allan heard a great cracking sound and beheld a large grey beast startle from his hiding place. The young photographer and the rhinoceros had startled each other and reacted with a similar vehemence, save that where Phoenix flew up for safety, the rhinoceros charged boldly forward.

Oh what a charge it was! He brushed aside all manner of bush and even uprooted a young tree whose trunk was thick but whose roots were shallow. This he tore from the ground with a sharp upward yank of his lowered horn. The trunk and most of the roots floated over his long body as he charged underneath them. Fortunately for the explorers, he continued on his way and they saw no more of him.

The hills that had once appeared as vague, shifty outlines grew steadily larger with each passing day. At a watering hole they encountered a rarity indeed in the form of two travelers from the White Kendah people, who were traversing a route that bisected their own.

When the Hunter's arrived, they seemed to occasion substantial mirth from the usually grave Kendah. So it was that before long, the Hunter's had communicated to them, with gestures and pictures drawn crudely in the soil, of their intention to visit the distant range of mountains and, if possible, traverse it to the unknown land beyond.

This was the moment where it grew queer with them, for they ceased smiling and grew exceedingly grave. They commenced to draw hideous pictures upon the ground which must have been warnings of the beasts that they were likely to face should they attempt their stated goal.

This little drama of theirs found a rapt audience in Elyse and Phoenix, for they began to inquire about scientific and zoological specifics; were they mammalian, reptilian or avian in nature? Were they nocturnal, diurnal or both? Such questions and many more were asked through pictures and pantomime of the two noble Kendahs.

When all questions seemed to be answered, the tall Kendah stood and the elder announced in his own language, which sounded more Arabic than African in its origins, some words that sounded like those portentous English words, "You die!"

As he spoke, he shook the handle of his sword then pointed to the western mountains, which were the Hunters' destination. Then he pointed to his friend and himself and seemed to suggest that they should all accompany them east.

Allan sought to change the subject and to lighten the hearts of those around the campfire. He quickly taught them to throw a stick for the dog, Cali, who would retrieve it for them endlessly. This kept the two men entertained while the Hunters deliberated about the Kendah's ominous words among themselves.

"They seem to want us to travel east with them." Elyse said.
"Do they really believe that we'll be killed by monsters?" Phoenix asked with a shudder.

"Yes, son, they do believe that." Allan answered gravely.

"You don't believe them, do you?" Phoenix asked his parents.

"I believe that there are monsters of some kind in the mountains, but I don't think we would be in any real danger." Elyse answered.

"Nothing worse than what we face every day here." Allan agreed.

"Well, I think they're a couple of 'fraidy cats and I don't want to go with them." Phoenix stated firmly.

"I don't want to travel with them either." Elyse agreed.

"Besides, we're looking for rare animals and we won't find them near a large settlement of man." Allan stated simply.

Allan, however, secretly longed to accompany the Kendah, for some of the pictures they had drawn in the sand depicted that small portion of their lore with which he was acquainted.

He knew, for instance, of their belief that the Devil, when he was still known throughout the land as Set, embodied a giant, rogue elephant. The eternal god served their opposing order, the Black Kendah, who dwell south of themselves. The enormous elephant-god had tormented the White Kendah for centuries by destroying crops and even whole villages. It had been wounded many times but never mortally.

Through his long studies, Allan knew also of the patron god of the White Kendah, which possibly had ancient roots in a form of

Isis/Horus worship, who was embodied in an ivory statue of a child. This ivory child was paired with a mortal but nearly catatonic oracle, chosen for the birthmark of a half-moon upon her breast, which served her as Horus' mother. Together, they formed the whole of religion and spirituality for the people of the White Kendah. They believed that one day, their ivory child would overthrow the terrible elephant-god, Set.

The direction the Kendah were traveling was east, and there were civilized lands in all directions save west, the Hunters' intended goal of the tall mountains. It should be said that, despite the harbingers of doom who warned them against it, there was never talk of the Hunters turning their direction. They were experienced enough to come to the conclusion, however, that they must beware new and sudden dangers in those mountains that were regarded as so villainous to the Kendah.

As they gazed up at the mesmerizing night sky in a land without light, Phoenix uttered the ponderance, "I'll bet there's life on other planets."

They discussed a few theories before retiring but came only to the conclusion that they might never know the answer for certain. As they conversed between themselves, the Kendah retired to their tent and departed before the Hunters arose the next day, and were seen no more.

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So it was that they found themselves alone upon the following morning and, after coffee, they set themselves to the sundry tasks of breaking camp. As they neared completion, they all noted an odd change in the weather. It was subtle, to be sure, yet there was an unmistakable hint of something that shouldn't be there. What this esoteric element might have been, however, no one could guess.

As they began their trek toward the western range, which they hoped would be a hike of no more than a day, Allan watched with melancholy as an ominous cloud formed around the peaks of the dark hills before them.

As they traveled that day, Elyse and Phoenix thought that the wildlife sounded a trifle odd too, as if they sang in their usual voices, but different songs. There, it seemed, were the throats of the frogs and crickets, but they sang with the chilling cadences of owls and wolves.

Allan noticed the change as well but steadied his nerves against the impostors. He watched his family closely at all times, remembering that the Kendah knew some terrible secrets that he did not and it wasn't all legend and superstition.

As they traveled many long miles, eventually reaching the foothills of the great range, they began to discern caves among the face of the mountain. Kendah legend spoke also of a serpent of immense proportions, the like of which was never reproduced in nature. For centuries untold, this snake was the guardian of a secret cave and Allan could not help but wonder if these were perhaps the very caves of legend.

The travelers were in good spirits but were bodily tired from the day's long trek. During an unpleasant river-crossing, several mules had fallen into a bog and were still wet and miserable. After unloading and tethering them, Phoenix and his father began to explore the perimeter of their camp and to gather firewood, while Elyse laid out the bedrolls and fed the animals.

The mountain sloped steeply and was inlaid with the most ancient and marvelous petrified trees that they had ever seen. Even from a distance, Allan could discern many hundreds of rings in the thick stone that was in no instance less than six feet in diameter. Many of these trees had fallen and had apparently been hewn into chunks of what appeared to be identical dimensions. The resulting effect

was that they resembled building blocks of ample size for the child of a Titan.

There were many caves of interest, though most of them proved inaccessible to the party, yet to the largest cave there seemed to be a true path. There were stones placed at intervals to serve as stairs and the trail itself had been fashioned into convenient switchbacks to aid travelers on its ascent. Allan and Phoenix turned back toward the camp and enjoyed Elyse's company until the night grew late.

Allan arose in the early dawn and was immediately stricken by the unsettling feeling that something had changed. Light was still only a vague hint upon the horizon so he busied himself with building a fire and setting the coffee on. He had the peculiar sense that he was being observed, or perhaps studied is the better word.

Though he did not sense overt hostility, he did seem to note a vast, unearthly power behind the feeling. Standing at the foothill of the mountain, he felt insignificant to a degree that he had only experienced when gazing at the heavens as a young boy.

As the sky lightened, the family awoke and set about their tasks when Phoenix stopped dead in his tracks. He looked at his father quizzically and said, "I'm sure the trail we observed the day before had led to the largest of the caves, yet now it clearly terminates in an entirely different one altogether. Look, it's jagged and much smaller!"

Allan frowned and began to study the range and to compare its present image against his recollection in the fading light of the evening before. His frown deepened because he did not enjoy being utterly confounded. He now perceived a near mirror-image of the mountain's visage from the night before!

He began talking, "There is the trail with the switchbacks and crude stairs, but it's originating from and terminating at different points of the compass!"

"Dad, is this some kind of joke? Did you move the camp around or something?" Phoenix asked his father.

Elyse quickly reasoned, "The orientation of the paths and caves wouldn't have changed. Unless my husband can move mountains." She smiled wryly, not wholly certain herself that Allan hadn't managed to disorient them somehow.

They pondered the marvel over coffee and breakfast but came to no other conclusion than they had all been mistaken as to the original orientation and destination of the trail. Though they would all have offered sworn testimony otherwise, the proof seemed to loom before them as if to mock their doubts.

"Well," Allan stated finally, "whatever we might have believed yesterday, it is the mountain that stands before us that we must climb."

The dark cloud did not blow by in the night as Allan had hoped, but rather had grown now to cover them in its gloom entirely. It was their intention to follow the path up the mountain to the cave and hoped to accomplish the task in three or four hours' time. They hoped to reach it before the rain that was portended in the dark sky fell upon them in full fury.

CHAPTER 2 - THE CAVE OF SECRETS

Oh miracle of the ages! The pen trembles as it writes, for if ever this account is read by civilized man, he will certainly doubt its accuracy and authenticity. Yet it is true and the following is

written without embellishment, for truly their story does not require it.

The trail up the mountain proved largely uneventful although they did have a terrible scare when their lead mule dislodged a stone and nearly fell down the face of the slope. Had she fallen, she would have taken most of the party with her, for ironically, they had tethered themselves to the sure-footed mules for safety.

Yet, through sweat and perseverance, they reached the cave. They had ascended nearly one-thousand feet and were only just over halfway to the mountain's summit. As the trail appeared to continue into the cave and possibly through the mountain, they hoped that they would not have to ascend the full height of the mountain.

They congregated upon a flat landing and stood before the cave's maw from which enormous elephant tusks of apparently ancient origin were embedded into its edges like teeth. This tapering maw stretched thirty feet wide and had a relatively low ceiling of thirteen feet measured between the center tusks. The ivory was knurled and yellowed, and the immense size of those that served as the longer canine teeth seemed wholly incapable of being harvested from any modern elephant.

No sound or sight reached their ears as they peered into the cave that opened into a narrow tunnel. Warm, soft wind blew upon them and they detected a mild odor, perhaps of fungi or strange herbs, wafting toward them on the tunnel's breath.

They took such precautions as they felt were prudent inside the dark, unknown corridor with the dog out front with Allan, the mules following next and Elyse and Phoenix bringing up the rear of the ragtag column. They each carried a lantern, cleverly pre-charged by the rays of the sun, and were pleased to find the floor very smooth and navigable. Indeed, they seemed to tread upon

antediluvian tiles that appeared to have been remarkably unworn by age.

Elyse, whose attention was momentarily upon the last of the mules and was therefore looking behind them, suddenly cried out in alarm. There, silhouetted in the jaws of the cavern behind them, stood an extremely tall, human figure. Perhaps it was but a trick of light or perspective but the figure's head appeared to reach within a foot of the upper jaw!

Allan thought, *that's impossible, since I have noted the height of the jaw to be thirteen feet!* He began to feel certain that his measurements had been mistaken. Still, the apparent giant stood perfectly motionless for a few moments, then performed a gesture that could only be interpreted as a reluctant wave of farewell.

At this point, their tale may begin to appear fanciful or outlandish, for they all watched in mute horror as the giant maw with the ivory teeth closed themselves upon the hapless giant who crumpled helplessly beneath them.

The same instant brought the eruption of a growl or roar from the cave's depths and they felt hot, sulfuric air blow upon them from the bowels of the mountain.

They held each other tightly and watched in horror as the jaws closed repeatedly upon the giant who had sadly waved goodbye to them only moments before. Finally, the great jaws through which they had all entered remained closed so tightly that no natural light from without penetrated within the cave.

They moved back toward the jaws and inspected them very carefully but could see no sign of blood or other remains of the tall human. Nor did it appear that they could raise the terrible jaws by their own power. Their path, however regrettable it seemed to them, now lay further into the cave for the entrance had been irrevocably closed to them.

California stayed very near to Phoenix as they warily slunk deeper into the mountain, speaking only in hushed tones about the phantasmagoric scene at the entrance. The family was greatly relieved to find that everyone's details and impressions matched, proving to some degree that their minds were not at fault. Still, it played upon their intellect most unpleasantly as they stepped ever closer down what seemed to be the very throat of some monster from prehistory.

On they walked until Elyse guessed the time to be eight o'clock in the evening. They chose to stop and make a very meagre camp for the night. The Hunters required only their bedrolls and cold food, though the mules ate poorly because there was no vegetation at all growing upon the ancient tiles that had probably never seen the sun or felt the rain.

The family spoke encouraging words to each other and even found themselves laughing at Phoenix's youthful hijinks. Yet, Allan remained awake all night, as did the mules and the dog, for they did not trust the darkness.

The night passed quietly save for one instance, whereupon Allan most distinctly heard - *something*. It sounded like a low, short grunt that could have arisen from the breast of nearly any large mammal and it sounded close.

Though the sound reverberated in the cave, it also decayed quickly and left him with the implication that he, or they, had disturbed it, though what *it* might be he could not guess. Its resentment of them seemed to fill the tunnel like a noxious vapor which slowly stole oxygen from the air.

As nothing further occurred, Allan began to suspect that his nerves were not as calm as they should have been. *I'm sure it was merely a groaning whisper of the wind*, he thought.

The morning arose, or so they imagined that it still did for families who dwelt not within the bellies of ancient ones. With her strong form of optimism, Elyse lit their path and gave them courage. Allan then led the party onward, followed by Phoenix and Elyse. Their emergency response strategy was to maintain physical contact with one another and to move forward or hold their position together so as to avoid becoming separated in the darkness.

So they passed what they believed to be another earthly day and gloomily set their bedrolls again on the cold tile floor. They spoke of their love for each other and all of them made their peace with God. *Who knew where they were destined or how their tale would end?*

That night, too, Allan stood guard until, several hours later, his son came up and demanded that he relieve his father so he could sleep. To this, Allan finally conceded and was endeavoring to warn his son of the importance of vigilance and responsibility, as well as other virtues which Phoenix already knew full well, when Allan fell asleep mid-lecture.

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They awoke at some unknown hour, for they had lost all semblance of time as it had once seemed. Now, time seemed to stand utterly still, which perhaps it had for ages in the forgotten cave. Two more days and nights passed during which they trekked on until Elyse marveled that they must have traveled more than a hundred miles, yet no range in the whole of Africa is so wide.

"Therefore," Elyse reasoned, "we must not be traveling perpendicularly through the mountain as we had thought, but along its length."

Allan thought about it. Though he had not perceived any turn or variation in the long tunnel, perhaps they *had* veered north or south by slight degrees.

On what they guessed to be the morning of the fifth day in the cave, their plight changed. No longer did they feel alone in the dark tunnel for they now chanced brief glimpses of hunched bipeds that seemed to flit from sight before their eyes could focus on them.

They began to hear the same guttural growl or moan of the hidden entity more frequently and it began to play upon the nerves of the mules. One reared and kicked another with shocking violence, which drew all of the panicked beasts into committing horrible felonies upon one another in their blind terror.

This did nothing to assuage the unsettled nerves of the Hunters. Their senses were strained as they recollected the hideous hieroglyphics that the Kendah had drawn in the sand, and they grew increasingly uncertain of their own sanity. Yet, on they walked, through the eternal night, lit only by the last feeble lantern whose solar batteries had not seen the sun in a week.

Suddenly, Cali's happy bark sounded from far ahead. They rushed forward and observed a change in the tunnel. *Perhaps it was light?* The next few hours the subterranean explorers wearied much but were heartened by the clear evidence of growing light from what could only be the end of the tunnel!

They rejoiced inwardly but checked their advance as they neared what appeared to be an identical set of immense ivory teeth embedded into the mouth of the cave. Elyse thought, *Could the whole of our journey through the cave have been merely an enormous loop?*

The gaping maw weighed heavily upon them as they considered their plan for egress, but they quickly arrived at one that involved sending the mules ahead of the family. They reasoned that this was to prevent the mules from getting lost, but it must be admitted that no one coveted their position at the fore.

Allan drew the lead mule closer, a young male, and urged him forward. When he slapped his withers, the mule trotted rather effortlessly through the jaws to arrive unhurt upon the sunlit ground on the other side; the *outside!*

So it was that each animal fairly bounded through those terrible jaws of death without incident. Those who had witnessed the terrible chewing of the ivories, however, were still largely unconvinced of their safety. Yet, in a final, synchronized leap, they hurled themselves through the maw as one.

The physical pain they felt upon landing paled in respect to that of another sort. Their pride was hurt, for of course a mountain cannot close a cave like a mouth. Yet, they had seemed to observe one do just that little more than a week before.

So it was that they found themselves out in the relative open, though they were still at the substantial elevation of approximately one thousand feet. They looked upon the broad valley below them and were not altogether surprised to find a path down the mountain that closely resembled the one that had begun their adventure.

The view beyond was striking and seemed to embody their most idyllic image of pristine, ancient Africa. Many aspects of the land were unchanged from those they had left on the other side of the tunnel, but every tree and bush looked to be far larger in size. *This could be a mere trick of the eye after such a long period in the dark*, Elyse reasoned to herself.

Rain fell abundantly there, for every inch of earth appeared to be exceedingly fertile and wonderfully verdant. The fragrances wafting upon the breezes were sweet and luxuriant and the travelers marveled at the utopia that seemed to be their reward for having survived the long, fearful tunnel.

They found themselves remarking upon the many similarities and contrasts of the strange, new land to that which they had known upon the other side of the mountain. The trees seemed to be relatives to many species that they were acquainted with, although their coloring and textures were sometimes radically altered.

With their minds brimming with ideas and possibilities, they began to look even closer and found wondrous changes everywhere. The soil was springy and soft, almost like loam, and there grew what appeared to be immense strawberries over much of the valley.

They observed no animals at first, save for the vague *M* shapes of the classic bird-in-flight far off in the distance. They began their descent and were very nearly at the foot of the trail when Phoenix inexplicably hopped off the trail and slid fifteen feet down the slope to land in a narrow gully.

"Phoenix!" Allan cried out.

"Where are you going?" His mother questioned in a worried tone that sounded like anger.

"I saw something down here, I think it's an animal!" Phoenix replied as he slid down the hillside. He bent over and his worried parents lost sight of him, but in a moment, he returned to their view holding the strangest bird any of them had ever seen. Allan and Elyse quickly lowered a rope which he caught and attached to the sturdy carabiner on his belt. Together, the husband and wife pulled Phoenix up with the remarkable bird cradled in his arms.

After a short time, the bird began to exhibit a bold and inquisitive personality. Its body was rather like that of a dove, though not quite as large. From its fluffy breast grew the ridiculously long neck of a goose and its head resembled a reptilian-ostrich, or a dinosaur. Its legs were very short so that it waddled unsteadily while it poked its beak into unimaginable locations.

When it truly desired to assert itself, it revealed a dazzling display of wings. There were four of these, arrayed in an *X* formation. The interior wings and breast were the living blue of rippling water, yet the wingtips were painted the vivid, dancing reds and orange hues of fire itself.

The idiosyncratic bird soon became his savior's new best friend and sat upon Phoenix's right shoulder at most times. California, far from jealous, seemed to take particular interest in one poor wing, which appeared to be weaker than the others for it sagged a little. Phoenix named this strange avian *X-Bird* because of its four beautiful wings and it quickly became one of the family.

The day advanced and they were loath to leave the valley; the one small section they had seen of what they began calling New Africa. They were certainly not so arrogant as to suppose the land to be truly unknown, and fully expected to learn its true name from the indigenous citizens once they could be found. If they even existed.

They made a thorough camp upon a rise near a stream but not close enough to scare away any game that came to drink. They were growing tired of beef jerky and would all welcome a fresh kill.

The two brilliant minds went to work immediately collecting samples and inspecting, categorizing and testing them on her gas-chromatograph while Allan collected heavy logs for firewood from the ample supply lying about the area.

Nor did he require as much as he collected for, though they appeared to burn normally in all other respects, no wood seemed to be consumed by the fire. They enjoyed their first night in New Africa and celebrated late into the night with their never-ending blaze.

CHAPTER 3 - THE VALLEY OF EDEN

The family rose early the following morning as excited as children on Christmas Day. There was wonder in their minds and gratitude in their hearts. They felt as if they never wanted to leave, which of course, prompted the question of what they should do next.

"I'd like to stay here for at least a month." Elyse asserted. "I'll need that much time to figure out what's going on."

"Sounds good to me!" Phoenix agreed.

"You're right, there's something different about this part of Africa that is uncanny and needs to be studied. Understood, if possible, before I'll feel safe traveling any further." Allan stated.

"Good, so it's settled. I'm going to get started." Phoenix said as he jumped up and began selecting equipment for the task.

Elyse and Phoenix were soon fully immersed in their scientific activities while Allan found a small pasture hemmed in by trees which were tall and resembled pines, and there he fashioned a corral for the mules.

Several hours later, Elyse was bubbling over with excitement. "Let's get together and share what we've learned!"

"Can I have another couple of hours, Mom?" Phoenix asked. He had a few more theories that he wanted to test so they agreed to meet later in the day.

Allan applied himself then to a thorough investigation of their perimeter. He brought his cartographic tools and was dismayed, but astounded, to find that his compass failed to find magnetic north! It spun very fast in a clockwise motion as if it were the hand of a clock that had been accelerated.

He looked up at the sky, which was abundantly clear, for the gloom he had observed on the other side of the mountain did not follow them into New Africa.

After noting the path of the sun, he began to draw a map using its ancient trajectory for his bearing. This placed the mountain due south. To the north, the valley sides tapered forming a narrow, nearly parallel gorge. The valley walls to the east and west were three-hundred paces, or about nine-hundred feet apart from each other.

He saw no scat or spoor upon the ground or birds in the sky, save those who could be seen far away above the vast grasslands beyond the narrow gorge. Nor did he see any animal approach the creek nearby, which he thought was odd. *Yet, maybe not so odd,* he considered, *Perhaps our smells would be so foreign to a native beast that they would seek refreshment elsewhere.*

His map now showed the camp in the south, the corral to the northwest and a stream on the east, which flowed from the mountain to the land below. It appeared to originate not many feet below the great maw through which they had entered. As he performed his calculations, he did not trust to turn his back on the mountain for long, which failed however, to produce an encore of its strange behavior.

In fact, its apparent lack thereof caused Allan to question his prior reasoning in an appalling manner. *Had we merely experienced a collective dream or vision? Had no giant truly sacrificed himself to the ivory teeth? Did the mountain not transpose itself so that what was left is now right, like a reflection on the water?*

Never once, however, did any of the brave party venture back up the mountain path to inspect the cave. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement that nothing would induce them back into that hole.

Allan ventured a mile down the canyon whose walls rose sheerly to a height that appeared to be roughly equal to that of the cave one-thousand feet above them. There seemed to be no boulders in the mountainside, but there were a great many trees half-buried in the loamy soil.

Allan thought, *Truly this land has been undisturbed for millennia!* Still, it was truly strange to find no spoor of any kind about the place. *Are we then the sole living creatures in this fertile valley?*

Allan returned to camp to find Elyse and Phoenix nearly bursting with enthusiasm as they shared what they had learned that day. Most of their talk was scientific in nature and specialized to a degree that frustrated Allan's uneducated mind.

As he lay down Allan said, "How about you two write extensive notes in your journals and I'll study them later." Then he fell asleep.

Elyse was excited that Rebecca, her test-mule, seemed to be doing quite well on her diet of the ferns. *Yet, Elyse worried, it is very strange that she no longer drinks water or appears to urinate or defecate. Truly these ferns are a very remarkable plant, maybe we'll end up eating them ourselves.*

Shortly after dawn, they all marched through the narrow gorge, save for the mules which remained in their corral. They guessed the distance through the gorge to be about ten or twelve miles, which proved to be fairly accurate, for after two hours' march, they were only three or four miles away. They could now see a broad, flat expanse of land, rolling in long, green waves of grass. As they drew closer, they saw movement upon the plain below. Great herds of beasts roamed lazily, intermingling freely with beasts from other herds. What bizarre beasts they appeared to be!

One such breed appeared to harken from the genes of an elephant and a buffalo, but was also tainted with the less dominant characteristics of other species. At their distance it was difficult to gauge the relative size of the animals, but the elephants or mastodons, were clearly the largest breed to be seen.

They were closely followed in height by an animal that looked something like an antelope with short legs, yet whose neck would have made any giraffe proud. Its small birdlike head moved on the neck of a brontosaurus, appearing impossibly long even at a great distance.

There were other, smaller and less plentiful breeds among them which no one could clearly discern. These seemed to crouch upon the fringes of the herds and Allan suspected them to be predators but said nothing for fear of alarming his family.

I must confess, he thought, that I don't know quite what to make of it all now. Discovering new species of plants and compounds was wonderful but the sight of all these new animals thrills me with terror. How am I to guarantee my family's safety amongst such as these?

A new and unpleasant perspective of their adventure occurred to him; that they were tiny and insignificant creatures immersed in the circle of life in a strange, new land.

How long will we last? Allan knew that they could not assume to possess the advantage that is usually enjoyed by mankind during most African safaris. *With ours*, Allan thought, *it seem like anything is possible.*

He resolved to return the party back to the safe little valley and reside there until they understood more about their incongruous surroundings. His eyes were set upon the gaping maw of the tunnel, as they often were, when suddenly a man ran out of them!

"Look!" Allan cried out, "up on the path by the cave!"

The Hunters watched in mute awe as they watched a man running away from a giant that instantly reminded them of the tall one who had fallen beneath the ivory teeth. Yet, the resemblance applied to stature and build only, for while they had sensed a peaceful, even sacrificial benevolence in the former giant, this latter appeared to exude the violence of a soldier.

The size of the first man to come through the cave demonstrated that he was essentially a man, not a giant, and he appeared to be fleeing for his life. He began down the same path the Hunters had used and would be upon them soon.

Phoenix rushed to the ammo box and met his mother and father at the foot of the trail. They began to climb the trail to rescue the man for they were certain that no human could outrace the giant downhill, but they lost sight of both hunter and quarry in the trail's sharp switchbacks.

The fleeing man soon proved that their assumption had been wrong, for he bounded down the trail with the agility of a cat. When they were convinced of his safety, the Hunters retraced their steps and were greatly relieved at not having to face the giant on the steep slopes of the trail. They retreated to their camp and discussed a plan of action.

Elyse said, "I'll stay in the middle and target the giant with my rifle as soon as he comes back into view. Perhaps I can slow him down or even slay him before he reaches the bottom of the hill." Then she shuddered at the thought of killing someone.

"I'll cover the right side!" Phoenix announced and moved thirty yards east. Allan moved off westward with the idea that, thusly arranged, one of them should have sight of the huge villain at almost every stage of the trail.

The men moved into position and waited for Elyse to begin the attack because she was the best shot. Just as Allan lost sight of the brute around a bend, he heard Elyse's rifle fire from the center near the camp. A moment later he heard the sharp reports from Phoenix's pistols, then suddenly heard his own rifle as he fired reflexively at the giant, striking it solidly in the chest.

The enormous being was now bleeding but continued his frenzied chase. He appeared once more from around a switchback on the trail before Elise, who fired again. Shortly afterward, Phoenix fired his two pistols and realized that their tactics were laudable but had a gruesome effect upon the enemy.

Suddenly, the peculiar-looking quarry bounded down the trail and tumbled into Allan who had been so intent upon his adversary that he had nearly forgotten the man he had wished to save.

Once the man had reached them, their plan was to reform at the camp and fight from the copse of trees and, if necessary, from behind the mules themselves.

"Okay, let's get back to camp!" Allan shouted to his family, who heard him and began their retreat.

They could hear the bellowing of the giant who would be upon them momentarily and took refuge in the trees, waiting for him to round the final bend and appear in their sightline.

The stranger, Allan noticed, did not continue to flee as he might easily have done. Indeed, the initial shock expressed on the visage of the stranger was instantly replaced with something akin to euphoric gratitude.

He armed himself with a stout staff from the camp and fell in next to Allan. He swung the blunt weapon quite ably, although Allan was unsure of its effectiveness upon the brute who pursued him down the mountain.

The giant lumbered into view at about forty yards and was observed to be badly wounded. Phoenix quickly took up a white cloth and tied it to the end of a long stick. "We should see if it will accept our parley." he said.

They looked again at the immense giant, who was bent low and appeared to be rather feeble after catching so many of their projectiles. Even at the distance, they could see the heavy labor of his barrel chest as it heaved like a bellows.

Realizing that the big fellow appeared to be done for, Allan acquiesced to Phoenix's mission of peace and they walked slowly up to him. Elyse kept the giant in her sights as they approached.

At first, the strange native man used strange words, frantic gestures and pantomime to attempt to dissuade Allan and Phoenix from their pacifistic foolishness, but then he resigned himself to his fate. He bowed low to Elyse as if in parting, joined them with his own weapon lowered under the white flag of truce.

Suddenly, the native man began trilling toward the trees with a strange burst of notes from his throat and tongue. Five small birds flew out and landed upon the left shoulder of each player in the sad drama. The Hunters were enchanted as the birds settled onto their

shoulders while the last one alighted upon the gory shoulder of the defeated giant.

The magical birds had the most amazing effect upon the three who were unacquainted with them, for when it turned its gentle beak to their ear, they found the giant's grumbling words, which they had hitherto *heard* but not understood, now reaching their ears in a passing English!

"I am Kairn, one of the eternal Thandor, gatekeepers of the great doorway. I have died in the line of duty and am at peace." He pointed to the native man and scowled.

"You are a criminal, Hjaka the hunted. If these strange warriors you have brought knew you as well as I, they would have slain you instead of me."

Allan felt a dire need to understand the roles of the two men who had entered his life so suddenly and violently. He asked the giant curtly, "What crime has been committed by this man?"

The giant replied, "He used the *doorway* without a sacrifice!" He looked at them as if he expected them to share his own horror of the deed but the Hunters merely looked at him in confusion.

They turned to the man they had saved who smiled eerily, bowed low and then spoke in a low voice, "I have much to explain to you, but yes, I admit that I am guilty of the crime as accused."

Elyse thought about it, "Well, then, so is my family! What did we know of a sacrificial toll?"

"We didn't even know it was a doorway!" Phoenix cried out.

The giant shook his head and said, "Your toll was paid. It was offered willingly at the onset of your journey here."

Phoenix was quick-tongued enough to be the next to speak, for he wished to defend the strange fugitive. "Who paid the toll and why?"

The giant refused to answer his son's question, so Allan asked another. "What law punishes trespassing with death?"

The giant answered, "By his trespass, the criminal you have defended has awoken one of the Ancient Ones." The camp grew very quiet for several moments.

The Thandor was a mighty soldier and stood several inches over twelve feet tall. He was dressed in something like a tunic that was encrusted with what appeared to be an armor made from a hard tortoise shell. His weapon, a massive warhammer, was stained with blood from ancient battles and lay several feet away from the fallen warrior.

From his apparent demeanor, the giant warrior could not sooner have wielded the heavy weapon than Elyse. Yet, at this he almost succeeded, for he suddenly lunged toward the hammer and with one hand threw it in the direction of the native man who dodged it nimbly.

An instant later, they saw the flash and heard the report of Phoenix's two pistols and the giant lived no more. Upon the death of the Thandor, the bird that had performed the miraculous translation of his words flew away toward the gorge.

Phoenix said quietly, "I thought he was going to kill somebody." "You did the right thing, son." Elyse said.

"Yes, he was still extremely dangerous and might easily have killed somebody. I was getting my own rifle to do the same thing but you were faster. That's all." Allan affirmed softly.

"We have killed this man *together*," Elyse stated firmly, "and we shall not question our behavior."

Allan asked the native man his name, who was nuzzling the bird on his shoulder as a mother will her newborn puppy. "I am Hjaka," he answered with pride and accenting the *H* heavily.

Names, it became readily apparent to the travelers, were *not* translated in any way by the unaccountable birds. They soon learned from Hjaka that the birds, at the request of his magic, have committed their lives to them.

"They perform their magical translations by pairing the emotional and intellectual intent of the speaker with the individual knowledge and experiences of the listener. The result is a pairing of that which was intended by one with comprehension of its meaning expressed in the native language of the listener."

The Hunters asked him to stay for dinner, for which he only ate some of the fern leaves. Afterward, Allan asked him draw to draw a map of the land, which he directed himself to do upon the ground.

Elyse handed him a pen and paper and he learned to use them quickly, though they were clearly foreign to him. As he drew, it became apparent that it was indeed a vast land and they were located in the center of its absolute south.

My tribe lives far away but I cannot show you precisely where on the map." Hjaka followed his enigmatic words with more. "I am a holy man of my tribe." He showed them the many scars upon his arms, legs and back that apparently were signs of great pride and achievement.

"My task had been undertaken as a last resort born of dire necessity. A minority of my people sent me through the gateway.

The Thandor did not approve and failed to produce a sacrifice, which is the price of admission through the fateful cave."

He smiled plaintively before continuing, "Therefore, my party of twelve went through the gate without paying its terrible toll. This was more than ten years ago. Only through long, perilous toil did we arrive home as you have just witnessed."

"We?" asked Phoenix.

The holy man looked down in shame and sorrow. "My party was cut down, one by one, as we explored your world. The Thandor are efficient hunters and executioners, for I am the last." The Hunters were respectfully silent.

"Until the moment I saw you, Allan, I believed myself to have failed at my long quest." Now he smiled with the satisfaction only found when one's long toil finally achieves its object, for there they stood, the very saviors he sought.

Allan assumed that Hjaka had heard someone use his name but was still impressed. "How did you know my name?"

"I know very little about you, Allan, but I once received a holy vision. It was many years ago. In the vision, I was there with you when you were born. Then I observed the whole of your experience as the babe flew through life before my sleeping eyes and aged rapidly as I observed your life." The family said nothing, preferring to give the outlandish stranger his say.

"When the vision passed and I recovered from its trauma, I sought for you here in my world. I wandered the land making inquiries under the guidance of my guru, the ancient Chakali. Though I learned many secrets, I succeeded in learned nothing of you through these channels."

Phoenix and Elyse looked toward Allan to gauge his nerve but he seemed unmoved by the tale. *Isn't Dad kind of worried about all this being focused on him?* Phoenix thought protectively.

"My second vision," Hjaka continued, "occurred scarcely more than a decade ago, when I saw the birth of your son, Phoenix." He smiled at the growing boy who was clearly startled.

"This vision revealed to me that the three of us are entwined in life. I believe that you are the saviors of my people."

Allan asked him, "Have you had no visions of my wife, then?"

Hjaka shook his head and said with a smile, "Even through meditation, fasting and magic, men cannot see within a woman's mind."

Allan ruminated on the stranger's somnambulant gallantry and realized the potential for indiscretion. He looked toward his wife and observed a reddening flush in her cheek as she guessed his thoughts. Elyse then began asking Hjaka questions as to the nature of the problems within his tribe and in the land itself.

"My people have worshipped too many gods for too many eons. The various rites that each religion requires, and the ensuing blood-feuds, has torn asunder an otherwise good people."

Allan asserted that this seemed to have occurred upon his own homeland as well. The stranger frowned deeply, but then he recovered the faithful smile of one who knows many secrets and said, "Along with your wisdom, you possess great humility as well."

Here, for the first time, he included Elyse as one of his *great saviors* with an inclusive sweeping gesture of his hand. The news

that Hjaka was unable to dream of Elyse or see into her heart, saddened the potentially jealous husband not at all.

Overall, the stranger seemed to be sane and appeared to believe everything he said, so that their overall impression of his character was highly favorable in spite of his bizarre words and appearance.

Now that Hjaka's apparent character has been vouched for, his physical appearance can be revealed without fear of misleading or prejudicing the reader against the merits the man's character. He towered over them all at well over six feet tall. He had taut, sinewy muscles that had been clearly developed through many hard labors. His skin seemed to be painted in long, triangular stripes of orange and brown; precisely as one would observe on a Bengal Tiger.

The effect was truly a wonder to behold! Although he possessed little more body hair than Allan, his skin ran a gamut of color when viewed up close, yet from a distance, his camouflage most closely resembled the deep reds, blacks, oranges and yellows of that wondrous tiger.

His face looked perfectly human in all respects, save when he smiled and revealed the powerful jaw of his inexplicable ancestry and their frightful teeth. He possessed a uniform set of gleaming incisors, bordered on each side by very large canines. These were clearly intended by nature to kill and rend prey and Allan shuddered at the thought of their touch upon any living creature. Later, the family privately remarked how similar Hjaka's teeth were to the ivory teeth in the cave.

Yet, the strange tiger-man conducted himself with the comportment of a gentleman of high nobility. Further, he sought to please everyone and was willing to perform any helpful task before seeking to satiate his own needs.

His voice was deep at most times, such as when he spoke of his tribe, yet it could also reach an impossibly high pitch when he grew excited, which often happened when he spoke of his lifelong quest to save his people.

"My people's clans are at war with no other race, only between themselves." Hjaka said.

Allan began to understand that he expected them to give their *great wisdom* to his people and to revolutionize their ancient culture by instilling them with his own, American moral code of ethics. He shuddered visibly as if a cold wind blew through him.

Allan asked Hjaka repeatedly, "What makes you believe that we possess such great wisdom, for to speak candidly, I do not feel myself equal to the appellation."

"My holy vision has brought us together. I am certain that the wisdom is within all of you." Then he closed by saying, "After all, you have passed safely through the dark, serpentine throat of the god in the mountain, did you not?" Their mere presence in his strange land was proof enough for him.

He spoke more about the doorway with the jaw-like appearance at the cave's entrance. His people believe that it is one of a small number of such portals that were once used by the gods of the world.

Now there were guardians around the gates known as *Thandor*, who were largely comprised of the ancient clan known as *Neptalim*. These giant Neptalim, who rose to their own power after the death or abandonment of the gods now many generations passed, believed themselves to be ageless and superior to all races.

Yet there was hope to be had from them, for there existed a monastery far to the north and there, it was believed, dwelt the

great minds of their race. They were not the militaristic Thandor, but philosophers and artisans.

"Among them," Hjaka said, "we will find refinement of character in virtually all respects. These wise, immortal monks do not worship superstition."

The loving parents looked at their son and marked the peculiar intensity shining in the eyes and knew that they must embrace this adventure. The only alternative was the horror of the tunnel. The displaced family felt it would be impossible for them to return through the long, sinister cave that was only slightly less terrifying to them now that they were privy to some of its secrets.

Elyse asked Hjaka what the land was named and was expecting to hear a strange, untranslatable word. She doubted that the matchless bird on her shoulder would find an equivalent match from within her experience to translate into English.

Yet, the name Hjaka spoke was not so foreign sounding to her ears, for it seemed to be either a corruption of Swahili and Congolese, or perhaps their original linguistic parent.

"My homeland is called, *Entsha Atlanticas!*" Hjaka cried proudly.

Allan translated the name into Zulu, then said in an awed voice, "He called this land *New Atlantis!*" They were all too tired to learn more that night but their minds dreamt grandly of the fabled city Allan thought lay swallowed by the Atlantic Ocean between western Africa and South America.

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The travelers arose late the following morning, including Hjaka, who seemed to appreciate his new sleeping roll more than anything he had ever possessed.

He actually cried when Phoenix had given it to him and he quickly offered a gift in return, though none had been asked of him. It was a large, peculiar tooth which they had all observed hanging next to another upon a leather string around Hjaka's neck.

He presented one of these to Phoenix grandly and said, "This, the tooth of my father, is for you." The tooth was far longer and sharper than his own and measured just over 5" along its inner arc.

"The other," Hjaka assured Phoenix when he protested, "I will never part with, but this one I offer, the young master must accept." When Phoenix began to place the treasure in the family safe, Hjaka asked shyly but emphatically that he wear it around his neck.

"Otherwise," he said solemnly, "its magic will feel thwarted and angered from the boredom." They all wondered at the ominous portent of Hjaka's enigmatic words but no one could form a clear question for a time.

Allan finally asked him, as tactfully as he could manage, "How did you come to be born of man and tiger?"

Hjaka smiled his carnivorous smile and asked, "Why, Allan, are you only man with no tiger?"

The camp laughed at the apt reciprocation of perspectives, which served to fully divert Allan's question. They were all inclined to like the man and hoped to help him aid his clan in any way possible.

Before anyone could get fully packed up, Elyse gathered them all together. "I will not go any further until Hjaka shares more of his story and the knowledge he possesses." She wanted him to share the history and customs of his land before they left the safety of the valley.

Hjaka looked at Allan pleadingly as if he held the power to unseat her will. Hjaka claimed that there wasn't sufficient time to discuss all these issues but Elyse held her position, firmly supported by her men.

Hjaka partially relented, "Will you would be satisfied with one question at sunrise and another at sunset?" This proposition sounded rather fair to the boys but Elyse realized that it would take months to slake their thirst for facts at two questions per day.

"Hjaka," she spoke firmly, "I *will* turn the men to my will and take us all back through the cave."

Her threat carried its share of bravado for many reasons that were lost on Hjaka. He shrivelled at the thought of his *saviors* leaving his side and also of their fate at the jaws. He glanced up at the cave in fear. Then he moved from the mule he had been packing and sat down, resigned now to his fate. Elyse and Phoenix commenced to beleaguer the tiger-man with questions while Allan tried to keep up.

So they passed an entire day, and if Hjaka behaved like a gentleman, it was as one who was losing money by the minute and wished, perhaps, to steal away to place or rescind a wager. They learned very much from the seemingly-candid tiger-man and the tired travelers in Atlantis fell asleep with wild visions and unformed questions in their fantasy.

CHAPTER 4 - THE JOURNEY NORTH

The Hunters agreed to journey with the noble Hjaka of the mighty Tigris race, but upon their own terms and at their own pace. They set out, not directly for his homeland, but for the friendly and wise monks of the Neptalim.

With the race of giants that were said to have coexisted with mankind long ago and which the bible calls Nephilim, Hjaka hoped first to form an alliance and then, perhaps, a plan to save the people from their religious disharmony. The family were all thirsty for more information but tried to be content for the moment with Hjaka's words of the day before.

They moved confidently through the valley in much less time than before, coming to stand at the foot of the strange mountain. There was a very wide expanse of tall grassland before them representing every conceivable color of stalk and stem.

They could scarcely believe the variation in the animals, for each species, in its own way, had its equal in the world back home, but it was the *differences* that stunned their minds and excited their imaginations.

There was a herd of over three hundred mastodonian creatures that looked more like a moose in the leg but were far taller and bulky like an elephant. The head resembled that of a ram or buffalo, but in place of horns, the unlikely fellows had a pair of trunks like an elephant.

"I could study this *one* animal forever!" Phoenix said in awe.

One large group that moved in a herd, appeared to be reptilian birds that resembled nothing so much as ostriches, notwithstanding their four legs and the fact that their long necks split midway and terminated in *two* heads.

One of these heads was again very similar to that of an ostrich, but the other looked far more reptilian; like a dinosaur in fact. The sight of the bizarre animal suggested to Elyse that evolution was currently at war within its genes. They had long legs terminating in cloven feet but with a fluffy body and cotton-ball tail.

Above them, the explorers were amazed to learn that what had looked like birds from a great distance were, in actuality, nothing other than a form of humanoid-pterodactyl hybrid! They possessed long, thin wings of great wingspan but they were fortunate enough to have been endowed with four arms as well, which terminated in a pair each of hands and claws.

That the former were prehensile there was no doubt for in the hands of each creature was a mighty trident. Hjaka explained that these were simple shepherds and did not expect any problems with them unless their herds were disturbed. These flying men, he named *Mtu Kwa Mbawa*, meaning “men with wings.”

They also beheld the terrible predators that Allan had seen stalking the fringes of the herds. These were called *Kivuli Mnyama*, or shadow beasts. The formidable aberrations were nearly invisible when even partially standing in shadow.

Allan observed one beast become half-invisible within the shadow of its own quarry. When the *Kivuli* ventured into the sunlight, however, they appeared even to the camera lenses to lack definition and clarity. The blurry silhouettes reminded him of immense black panthers that had been birthed in dark and evil magic.

"Yet, they are not comprised entirely of smoke," Hjaka stated, and then he threw a rock from his bag at one, which caught the skulking beast in its hindquarters. It shot forward in great bounds while hissing venomously at him.

Phoenix was not happy that it was one of his own party who had cast the first stone and thus precipitated hatred between their species but he was also greatly relieved to find the Kivuli to be mortal after all.

They proved to be the only predators in the area and, due to their large size, focused their attention on the herd animals, making several kills before night fell. The travelers were overjoyed to find that the Kivuli were diurnal, for their camouflage that was so effective in the shade, glowed dully at night making them too vulnerable to leave their dens without extreme disadvantage.

The caravan passed through the great herds, navigating the worried mules carefully. They were thoroughly surrounded and, at times, quite unable to see anything but *animal* in any direction, for all of the herd animals were far taller than themselves. They found it to be rather unnerving, but they collected hundreds of photographs that they hoped would render valuable credence to their record of discoveries.

The day passed without mishap or incident, save for the myriad annoyances that all safaris must endure. They came to a sort of glade in the meandering forest of the herds where, it seemed, no animal would enter. The ground itself appeared to be no different than the land around it, but if an animal approached the area, it would retreat violently as if repulsed by a shock.

Hjaka said in hushed tones, "It is clear to me. A Neptalim has bled and died upon this soil. The animals could sense it instinctively although we men could not."

Allan was pleased to hear that Hjaka considered himself to be a man and, hopefully, also felt the requisite loyalty to his race, though his appearance was wildly different than Allan's own.

Strangely, it was the holy acre that Hjaka proposed to occupy that night.

"We will be safe from the animals themselves because they will not trod here. Also, their near proximity will serve to warn us of danger should predators arise."

Allan asked Hjaka, "What do you think our greatest danger is?"

Hjaka laughed and answered, "Ourselves."

The anxious party arose early and traveled all day but there was no holy site to use as a camp at the end of their tiresome march. Therefore, as evening fell, they encircled their camp with many small fires. This attracted the dark shapes of the *men with wings*, who flew closer but were content to watch them from the sky.

Phoenix began to wonder whether they threw their great tridents like javelins or if they only used them for prodding their flock ever onward. From their vantage high above, a spear could travel very far indeed. *I hope we do not come to battle these strange men*, he thought sadly, remembering the giant he had helped to slay.

They crossed more than thirty miles, moving north as the herds grazed west. Hjaka was, therefore, not surprised when they finally reached the outer fringes of the herd. Here, the Kivuli lurked in larger numbers due to the cover afforded by the nearby forest that marked the northern end of the plain.

The caravan stopped as an illusory form was seen springing from underneath one of the great beast's own shadow. Its claws extended for the attack but suddenly the *shadow beast* was speared from above. A three-pronged lance pinned it to the soft ground.

In another moment, the winged shepherd had flown down to retrieve his weapon and then turned to face a pack of five more Kivuli which threatened him. He blew a black horn which

produced a long, mournful wail, such as would be appropriate to herald the death of beloved kin. Phoenix inferred that he must be calling for help.

The beasts attacked him all at once while the party rushed to his aid as quickly as they were able. They felt certain that he would be done for when next the huge animals parted enough to allow them another brief glimpse him.

Yet, when Allan reached the fallen shepherd, he was on his feet and facing off against two more of the shadowy blurs. He was bleeding heavily from his torso and legs, which had evidently been raked very deeply by the four-legged attack style of the abhorrent assassins.

Allan aimed and fired at one and was pleased to watch the beast fall dead without a twitch. He was horrified, however, when its carcass seemed to form into a cloud and dissipate on the wind. He held his breath as he was downwind of it and did not wish to breathe the Kivuli's death essence.

The other shadow beast leaped toward the man with wings but was stopped bodily by the force of Phoenix's pistols, for he had not trailed his father but a moment. The second creature, too, seemed to return to that from which it had been formed and blew away on the breeze like a noxious vapor.

Allan and Phoenix turned their attention to the ravaged winged man, who stooped on one knee. He croaked some words that sounded very solemn but were not translated by the babelbirds. Hjaka told the group that the birds will not speak with the Mtu Kwa Mbawa but he did not know why.

Two comrade shepherds had arrived in time to witness Phoenix's devastating entrance and had been hovering above them, waiting respectfully while the fallen one had spoken his words to the

would-be saviors. They then alighted softly on the ground beside him. Though they carried their lances in a harness upon their back, no one feared them.

Allan's keen eyes watched as Hjaka kept himself virtually hidden and wondered why. At moments such as those, when faced with Hjaka's inexplicable conduct, Allan felt the recurring fear that he may have led his family into league with a felon. He resolved to ask Hjaka about his behavior at the fire that night.

Then Phoenix stood over the dying man and, with his chest sticking out proudly, slammed his right fist across his own chest in an ageless, solemn salute. The dying man drew his arm over his bloody heart but succumbed to his injuries with a smile a bare moment thereafter.

Regardless of his faith, the dead warrior-shepherd had been judged worthy by the noble-hearted youth and they all hoped that he would be accorded the highest realms of his heaven.

The other two bowed, as did the Hunters, including Hjaka though he was hidden from all but Allan's view. Then one of them hoisted their valiant comrade by his shoulder harness and they flew off westward where they disappeared from sight.

Elise ran up and hugged her son with tears of relief but also of pride, for truly Phoenix was a son to be proud of. Then he, too, burst into tears and Allan soon ordered the caravan to resume their march.

Once news of the valiant but failed rescue and of Phoenix's solemn exchange with the fallen shepherd reached the clan of the Mtu Kwa Mbawa, Allan thought with pride, I believe that we will never have cause to fear their mighty tridents.

Due to their wise fear of the shadow beasts, the entire party remained alert until the last of the day's shadows had passed into dusk, whereafter they made a somber camp. Elyse thought of the terrible Kivuli claws and marveled at their method of attack, springing at their victim with all four paws raking through the air and trading their own defense for extra attacks. Their instinct for teamwork was highly developed, too, for they tended to spring in unison.

Allan posted himself at first watch and asked Hjaka to relieve him in four hours. They were all desperately tired but he wanted his wife and son to get sufficient rest for whatever adventures tomorrow would bring. He worried about their safety as he sat awake through the long night.

Allan woke Hjaka sometime after midnight then retired to his bedroll between his wife and son. He slept readily, trusting that nothing of notice would stir him that night.

Hjaka seemed to be on edge as they marched through a murky forest that day but he showed a marked improvement as the daylight began to fade. At the campfire that night, he cheerfully conceded that he had been very afraid for their lives.

"We have just passed through Ihlathi Ingozi, which is haunted by many evils. We owe our lives this day to the enormous presence of Tana whose presence has warded off the evil."

"Why didn't you tell us about these dangers beforehand?" Allan inquired testily. "I would prefer to know about dangers before they are upon us."

"Why is that, Allan?"

"I would like to prepare for them."

Hjaka smiled condescendingly and asked, "What preparations would you have made to battle a spirit?" Allan had to admit that his enigmatic ally had a strong point and they had a good laugh upon it.

Phoenix rode Five Hearts all day. Allan had installed a rope around Tana's thick neck so that Phoenix could get up and down easily, which Phoenix insisted that he didn't need but his father thought he did. The wonderful animal did seem to prefer lifting Phoenix onto his back with his great trunks, but the prudent father could envision a time when his son might need to get up or down while the animal was busy doing something else.

"What if Tana's too busy fighting to lift you up?" Allan asked his son who had no ready explanation. "This way, you can save yourself."

Phoenix finally agreed to it though never found occasion to use the rope.

They rotated watches again, slept well and rose early to begin the third day away from the old valley where no animal tread, save for those who emerge from the cave. The sinister cave did have a name, Hjaka told them one day, although it was rarely spoken aloud.

"Its name," he whispered, "is Pango ya Siri, or *Cave of Secrets*."

After a short morning march, they came to a river. It was not terribly wide, but significant enough for Allan to ask Hjaka why such an important feature wasn't on the map he had drawn.

"It is very strange for the river to run so high at this time of the year. It is unnatural. A bad omen." He then led them into a narrow canyon where he knew of a bridge.

When they approached the spot where the bridge should have been, Hjaka grew highly vexed. It became clear that it had been washed away almost entirely in some vast flood. *Ten years is a long time in Africa*, Elise thought, *but it's also just a drop in the bucket to the old continent.*

Yet the distance across was considerably less than anywhere else they had seen. Perhaps a leap of but twelve feet would carry one to the other side safely but they were not such good jumpers as that, nor were the mules.

The determined travelers attempted to cut down a tree so as to fashion a bridge but their saws would not cut the living wood, so they had to give up the idea in frustration.

As Phoenix and Allan stared across the short expanse, Phoenix mentioned, "The other side is several feet lower than the side we're on. Couldn't we tie a rope to the trees and, with the help of a few pulleys, zip to the other side?"

His father looked at him, then at the sixty foot drop and then shook his head. *Sometimes I must disappoint him*, Allan thought sadly.

They walked back to the flatland and up and down the coastline until Hjaka found the most favorable place to attempt a river crossing. Their plan, such as it was, required tethering the mules to Five Hearts while the rest rode upon his mighty back. The mules would have to swim for their lives or be dragged across. Phoenix suspected that Tana would carry them all across easily, even if she had to drag the five mules behind her.

Their plan was carried out perfectly except for the big, swimming leeches that Hjaka called leechfish. When the caravan entered the water, the mighty Tana made no complaint but the instant the mules entered they began thrashing and braying as if they were being flayed alive. There was no turning the immense Tana in

midstream, so they rushed for the far bank dragging the screeching mules behind them.

They employed the afternoon by sedating the mules so they could remove the leechfish and clean their wounds. The hideous creatures were each nearly a foot long and had the tails and fins of a fish but the long ovoid body and sightless eyes of the leech. These they had to burn by heating their knives in the fire and cutting them off. It was an exceedingly bloody task for their teeth were deeply embedded in the flesh of the unlucky mules.

Allan was very angry at the oversight and yelled at Hjaka. "Why didn't you warn us of the leechfish?" he demanded angrily.

His words appeared to hurt Hjaka's pride and he retorted, "I have never known them to behave as they did, for usually they do not accost man or beast at all." To prove his point honorably, Hjaka boldly dove into the water.

Allan and Phoenix jumped to their feet and prepared to rescue him but a crucial moment passed illustrating that Hjaka was in no need of rescue. He swam about as if to gloat and when he stepped out of the water he carried no leeches on his skin.

Amazed, Allan asked apologetically, "Do you think that we, as outsiders, would be safe, too?"

Hjaka looked away shamefully, "I believe so, but I must now admit to the possibility that perhaps creatures from other lands, such as yourselves and your mules, are not subject to the same dangers as I am." Their guide's uncertain words weighed heavily upon their minds.

The wounds on the mules' legs were numerous and painful for them, but were largely superficial. Elyse and Phoenix were required to nurse them carefully for three days before the last one began to recover. Rebecca, Elyse found, recovered nearly twice

as fast as the others which suggested to her that the fern may increase one's hardiness when consumed over time. She began serving them to the family that very day.

They passed the time scouting, collecting specimens and countless extraordinary photographs. The scientists didn't analyze anything, however, for their equipment was densely packed. Their hearts, too, were with the poor mules whom they had dragged through torture without protection.

They waited two more days for the mules to convalesce before resuming their journey. They were very near to the land of the wise Neptalim, so near in fact, that Hjaka hoped to reach their village by dusk. On the morrow, they would begin the final phase of the journey to the land of the good giants, as Phoenix aptly phrased it. Allan hoped that they *were* good and wise and that they did not meet upon the end of their prodigious warhammers! *Yet, Allan thought, I have known many who were called wise but did not deserve the title and reserve judgement upon this matter until we have met them ourselves.*

Hjaka insisted that only through an alliance with the Neptalim could they hope to calm his warlike people. When Allan asked him why the Neptalim made for such important allies, he merely smiled in that peculiar manner of his that Allan found particularly infuriating. *Perhaps I will find out firsthand if the next poor Neptalim we meet doesn't get chewed up by great ivory teeth or shot to ribbons by our party,* he thought.

CHAPTER 5 - THE LAND OF THE GIANTS

They took to the road early and walked only ten miles when they came to a settled farm with irrigation flowing through an open aqueduct that ran parallel to the path. There was a tall woman in a vegetable patch performing the timeless labors of the farmer.

With his binoculars, Allan descried a small house with a large man upon the porch reading from a book. The picture looked like a slice of normalcy in a land of madness and gave them pangs of homesickness. They did not meet the farmers, however, for the trail which was quickly becoming a cobblestone road, bore them far around the farm and out of sight.

Hjaka was all smiles then and the family's mood largely reflected his own, although he alone seemed to hold the clues as to what adventures might befall them next.

After another mile, they saw another enormous couple, only these two were scrawling in a vast grimoire so furiously that they never once looked up as the caravan passed by them on the road.

I have observed students of chess play with a similar degree of fixation but had never witnessed such from the wielders of words, Elise thought with wonder.

Soon the occasional farms grew into clusters and finally into a town. There were no stores, nothing to buy or sell, but notwithstanding this, the area looked precisely like a marketplace or a town square. As they suspected, when the first of the Neptalim perceived them, they created no small spectacle.

The first to step forward as their spokesman was the now-charismatic Hjaka. He was greeted with a homecoming fit for a war hero who returned with his prize in hand. The Hunters were the prize and object of his lifelong quest and recent absence of over ten years.

While Hjaka was being fawned upon, Allan found ample opportunity to observe the giants and to glean something of their character. They looked and behaved much like humans, and indeed they may have been their very forebears if the legends were to be trusted. Their comportment struck Allan as nothing short of

chivalrous. There was not a man among them who would interrupt another and they all seemed to listen acutely when another was speaking.

There appeared to be no servants of any kind, for if one was thirsty he drew himself a drink from a well or the aqueduct, or from what he carried on his person. If one was hungry, he drew from his sack that which he had provided for himself, or else foraged the forest for the life-giving ferns. In short, Allan observed that each individual appeared to meet his own needs without requiring assistance from anyone else. If someone needed an item, they practiced its manufacture until they mastered the art and made the item themselves. They lived simply, performed their own toils. Most of them also carried handwritten tomes and self-bound notebooks which they were frequently scrawling in or reading from.

Their village was a testament to a people who value cleanliness, order and virtue. A thrill shook Allan as he imagined the tall beings to be the architects of human history, an ancient line who had once ruled over the affairs of men.

The family did not have cause to feel ignored very long, for soon Hjaka began the grand introductions. The first of the giants to be brought to speak with the travelers, Hjaka said, was his close friend and brother, Dhalin Yaro. He made no motion to shake Allan's outstretched hand, pitifully small as it no doubt seemed to him, yet he was nothing but cordial and they all liked him right away.

"You are welcome in our land. Spread your tents anywhere and live as you please." he said. Then his voice spoke the lowest note that ever reached their ears, lower in fact than Elyse had believed she could hear. Their bones vibrated in accordance with its frequency for but a moment before Dhalin grew mute, turned and walked away.

Hjaka gave them a moment to talk among ourselves before bringing another tall Neptalim before them. The woman, who stood at only ten feet, was named *Dayax Ubax*, which meant *Moonflower*. She was the sister of Dhalin Yaro and Elyse got along exceedingly well with her from the start.

In a tender voice, she said, "I am drawn to you, Elyse, as the moon is drawn to earth, for I have watched you always and I love you." This had the effect of opening the female emotional floodgates and Elyse burst into tears at the extraordinary words.

Elyse wept without compunction and asked to be brought nearer to the large, doe-like eyes of Dayax. This seemed inexplicable but Elyse was easily borne up to caress the cheek of the tender woman with whom she must have shared a psychological bond that transcended the peculiar circumstance of their meeting. They looked like mother and child.

Dhalin approached Allan, encumbered with a great shell, fully fourteen feet long and tubular like a hermit crab's shell. It was very beautiful with speckled and symmetrical designs; those glorious spirals which contain the mathematical secrets of the universe.

He motioned for Allan to stand at one end and gaze into it. Allan did as he was told and within that seemingly organic shell saw what seemed to be the entire universe itself. It was a marvelous spectacle that almost unsettled him to his core, as if he had seen a secret mankind was not destined to know.

Dhalin said, "This shell is the only one of its kind that has ever existed. It was a gift from First God, which he pronounced *Marka Hore Ilaah*, to help His people understand the true nature of creation."

"Our land is called Min, which means womb. We operate largely on a scholarly level, for what better way to spend a long life of immortality than reading and writing?" he laughed. "There are few laws as everyone provides for themselves." Allan understood that a high form of common sense pervaded the tall people.

Allan asked, "Do you have no thieves or murderers among you?" Dhalin Yaro bowed his head and said, "There have been such, but retribution was swift because there are no laws prohibiting it. The shame that it would bring upon one's character would be unbearable for eons."

Dhalin Yaro continued, "My people practice tolerance above all else in our dealings with each other. We refrain from employing hard words or sarcasm, nor do we mask our harsh words with complimentary tones."

"We do not speak one way yet behave in another as many other races do. We are all on our own eternal quest for truth and very few wish to become an obstacle to another for the shame it would bring. In the land of Min, honor is paramount."

While openly warm and generous, the Neptalim did not talk long on light matters. Their great minds thrived on wisdom and it pervaded everything they did.

Allan asked Dhalin, "Why doesn't your mighty and noble clan erect great temples and palaces?"

Dhalin replied, "We once raised crystal palaces and cities of gold, but the path of pomp and over-plenty led us to corruption and ruin. Of these, we have drunk our fill."

Tana and Phoenix were very popular with the Neptallic children of Min while Elyse was inseparable from Dyax during this time and was hesitant to leave her side even long enough to help make

camp. Allan turned to seek Hjaka and found him deep in grave conversation with Dhalin and other Neptalim.

When they were finished talking, all who had heard his words moved away and Hjaka told Allan, "They go now to scribe my tale, for I have just completed the story of how it came to pass that we have slain one of their race. Kairn, the Thandor who had pursued me through the gate was their brother."

Allan was proud of Hjaka's character for being so forthright as to inform the deceased's kin and also to detail his own responsibility in the misadventure. Any other course of action would fester into a lie through its concealment or nondisclosure. Yet, Allan hoped that his family's actions with regard to the fallen Thandor would not come between them and the Neptalim, for he did not want to lose their friendship.

Hjaka explained that the Neptalim were greatly saddened by the tale but they had already lost touch with their brother long ago when he joined the Thandor. He had been already removed from their hearts for millennia. The giants, Allan noticed, did not speak of time in the same way that he and his family did, and he believed them when they said that they were immortal.

Toward evening, Dhalin Yaro walked up to the Hunters' camp. "I would like to invite you to embark upon a *Spirit Journey*, or what we call a *Ruuxa Safar*. You will learn many secrets that usually remained hidden to your race and even more about yourselves."

All of the travelers, including Hjaka, agreed at once to the undertaking though they knew precious little about what it entailed. They followed the mellow giant and reached the point of embarkation shortly after dusk.

They were shown the ancient family home of the eternal giants, which had been carved into an abutment that began some seven

hundred feet above the plains where they stood. "The palace is a rare relic of architecture that will never fall." Dhalin said proudly.

Dhalin Yaro brought them to a broad flatland with chasms on all sides, save for the narrow path that he had used to guide the apprehensive party.

He told them, "Within lay the Great Stairs that you all must climb. I warn you that, as with everything in life, the stairs will not prove easily mastered."

The travelers entrusted their mules to some other Neptalim and resolved to follow Dhalin and to undertake the Ruuxa Safar with strong faith. Allan was morally shocked when, at the cliff's edge, he descried broad steps *descending* into the clouds some two thousand feet below them.

A preclusion should now be offered for the tale becomes surreal and the pen is hardly up to the challenge of its portrayal. They felt each stone step wobble uncertainly as they stepped on it, though not as in response to their weight. Elyse thought they moved in a slightly antagonistic manner which, like life, meant that they were never truly safe at any time. Their legs eventually learned to accommodate the sudden changes of pitch with some degree of improvement.

Yet this was not the only hazard they faced upon those unprotected steps, for they were within the dense, dark clouds and found themselves increasingly at the mercy of touch for navigation.

The frightened family held hands and harnessed themselves together so that no one, or all of them, would be lost if someone fell. Lightning split the sky around them, blinding their eyes with bolt after bolt of yellow light which refracted brilliantly upon the dense cloud.

They kept their heads down and walked on, focusing all of their mortal efforts upon what lay before them rather than the dangers around them. One thousand such stairs availed no change to their perilous condition, but with the next they were able to see light shining up from far below them. The sight of hope helped to bolster the waning resolve of the haggard party but they knew that they still had a long way to travel.

On and on they stepped through the ceaseless cracking of lightning and deafening thunder that rolled through the caverns both above and below them. Suddenly, the clouds parted and they stepped off the stairs into a lush paradise. Here grew a colossal tree beyond accurate portrayal. Its immensity was unmatched in the entire history of the world and Dhalin Yaro gave its name as *Nooleeyey*, the *Giver of Life*.

Its dimensions were truly inconceivable, for as they stood one hundred feet in front of it, they could only barely discern the slightest curvature of its vast trunk far off in the distance. It rose up forever, still without visible branches, and was lost in the clouds.

Dhalin Yaro led them on a path that grew very dark due to the density of foliage from the great tree that hindered the light far above. After a long march, they came to a gloomy swamp where Dhalin Yaro and Dayax said they must leave them for a time.

"But if your faith is strong, we will meet you again soon." Dayax promised.

"I warn you not to heed the snake, nor to forsake the woman." Enigmatic words, to be sure, but before anyone could formulate a clear comprehension of them, both Dhalin Yaro and Dayax Ubax cleared their minds of any further thought.

Suddenly, a magnificent pair of wings unfolded behind each of them! The wings were very large with hundreds of long rows of pure white feathers. The angelic Neptalim flapped their grand wings but once and were gone from sight.

The instant their guides were gone, the travelers were horrified to observe something sinister deep within the smaller bushes that managed to grow in the eternal gloom. They saw what seemed to their heightened senses to be an enormous snake traveling in the gloom parallel to them. They could not see its tail for it trailed out of sight but its great head glared at them with penetrating red eyes that wholly transfixed the nerve-wracked travelers.

The family was now terribly afraid and would surely have been lost but for the boy, who alone among them, had been wise enough to look away from the great serpent before he, too, lost himself in the mystifying allure of the sinister eyes.

So it was that Allan was startled to his senses by the ceaseless pounding of Phoenix's fists, as he had found it to be the only way to awaken his father from the awful reverie.

Once awakened, Allan arrived at a far gentler method to help wake his wife. They coaxed her softly to the floor and covered her eyes so that she could no longer gaze into the eyes of the serpentine hypnotist. Once she was coherent, they turned their attention to Hjaka who was babbling upon his knees as though refusing to believe in the phantasm at all.

In the end, even those who had to be torn away from the liar's gaze passed the trial, thanks largely to Phoenix. The harrowed travelers pushed further through the dim path and beheld the devil no more. They would never forget the sin they had perceived in the ancient eyes, which had reached inside them deep enough to reach primal roots of which they were hitherto unaware.

Soon they came to a firm island within the swamp and from the place grew dense clusters of dark, leafless trees, which appeared to have been planted strategically in order to prohibit travel. Yet, on they trudged, feeling weary and forlorn, for even their trusted guides had left them.

The next step in the adventure would surely be recorded differently by each member of the family, for they all seemed to fall victim to disparate nightmares or illusions.

Allan beheld a woman as only a husband or doctor should see her, and he instinctively averted his eyes. She babbled for a time and he was sure that the woman was terribly pretty, but he only had eyes for Elyse and was not sorely tempted.

He focused on his wife's image with closed eyes and so passed his test rather easily. He was pleased at his clean conscience when it was she who woke him from his reverie at last.

In her vision, Elyse beheld not a would-be seductress, but a baby in the arms of its wicked mother. It seemed that the witch would trade the infant's life for Elyse's own. She passed her test rather easily by submitting her wrists for the witch to cut.

Elyse awakened gasping for air, bearing the distinct impression that the witch had killed them both anyway. Yet, it mattered little because First God, who saw all, appreciated and rewarded such examples of *ghande*, or noble sacrifice.

Phoenix beheld the apparition of a girl who was about his own age. She was crying pitifully and, when he approached her, he saw that she had been horribly disfigured.

"Not like a monster," he tried to explain to them later, "but more as one who was born with defects sufficient to cast her apart from the rest of mankind."

Phoenix's noble heart did not shy away from her disfigurement, instead he reached out with an empathetic embrace, during which they both cried tears from deep life-wounds in their breasts. Phoenix knew that he had passed the trial because he had not withheld the gift of simple humanity to the poor waif.

Once the mesmerized party recovered from their visions, they began to march onward. The trail took them through more dark terrain but eventually led to a great river that was as expansive as a lake for they could not even discern the far bank. The trees were sickly and scarce as the light from the heavens was unable to penetrate the area.

The air grew as rank and cold as death as they stood upon the bank, waiting for what they knew not. They began to talk of their adventures in hushed tones and even spoke of their lives as a whole. They were all quite full of gratitude for the lives they had shared and felt very lucky to have had one another. They felt certain that it was the end.

Presently they heard a soft, rhythmic splashing and several minutes later espied a small craft approaching them. There was a tall, dark shape standing erect who was slowly poling the craft toward shore.

Intuitively, Elyse reached into her pocket and withdrew four strange coins that had been a gift from Dayax. She wasn't sure what they were, exactly, but handed one to each of her family. Hjaka refused his coin at first and, indeed, almost cast it into the river before he thought better of it.

Soon the ghastly wraith succeeded in bringing the small raft close enough to the shore for them to board it. As each member of the party stepped onto the primitive craft, the hooded one extended a bony hand and unfurled its palm. Elyse laid her coin upon his open palm and was allowed to board. The rest followed her example wordlessly and when Hjaka was seated, the gloomy figure

pushed off the shore and they slowly traveled toward the other bank.

Low mist hung above the water, lighted by the heavens above but diffused within the cloudy wisps and shrouded the worried countenances of the family as they crossed the river. They were also crossing, it seemed, from life into death. Allan pondered the gift of the coins and wondered what would have happened to his family if they not carried the correct apocalyptic fare.

Hours seemed to pass with no sound save for that of the gentle lapping of the pole in the black water. Hjaka stared down into it then shrieked in terror and would have fallen over the side had he not been caught by Phoenix, who helped steady him. Hjaka's terrified eyes never left the water again and when Allan's own gaze turned to the water, he too, nearly fell overboard.

Allan's head swam and his equilibrium would not balance his legs, but Elyse held his hand and reassured him, whereafter he looked no more into the water but into the green panacea of her eyes.

That it was impossible proved to be no serious impediment to their tale, for was not the bulk of their adventure equally so? The water held ghastly, unholy fish who were luminescent under the spare moonlight. They rolled as they bobbed less than a meter below the surface.

The vexed travelers beheld human faces upon each fish, though their eyes were closed in death. The fish wore the features and lifeless faces of their own party, cruelly affixed to the large bilious bodies of the porpoise-like dead fish. Allan reeled in horror was steadied as the four mortals held hands for comfort.

The mute, shadowy boatman brought them to the far shore where the travelers wordlessly left him and hurried up the bank. They

grew chill as he uttered a low moan and pushed off into the lake and out of sight.

They saw nothing before them but a great expanse of moorland but could hear growling and rustling from within the low bushes around them. Allan endeavored to light a fire but the perennial mist would not suffer even a match to be lit.

Phoenix and Elyse fell asleep on either side of Allan while he and Hjaka kept a watch. After a long, long time; much longer than any night-watch he had ever suffered, Hjaka fell asleep.

Allan could feel his own lids closing and he seemed to see the Neptalim named Dayax smiling down on him. She took his slumbering wife by the hand and, though his love slept on, Dayax carried her aloft with a beat from her beautiful wings.

Soon, another angelic form, with whom Allan was unacquainted, bore the inert body of his son while yet another lifted Hjaka. Suddenly, Allan felt the presence of Dhalin Yaro who took his hand and led him aloft. The last vision Allan had was that of the black river of death, which seemed to burn in places, as if great funeral pyres were adrift upon its unholy waters. Of these there were four and he remembered mourning them as they receded from view.

Allan was the last to awaken, for when he did, Elyse and Phoenix were swimming happily in fresh, steaming water. They were now in what appeared to be an ancient bathhouse, fed by hot springs which bubbled up here and there like jets from a modern jacuzzi.

They swam over to greet Allan where he lay upon soft bedding near the edge of the water. He asked them, "Is this heaven?"

They both laughed and Phoenix answered, "As a matter of fact, the angels said that it is!"

"Well, they said that it was *part* of it." Elyse corrected.

There was leafy food and vegetables on a tray beside Allan and while he ate, they shared what had transpired during his slumber. They, too, had dreamed that angels had carried them far away from the stygian river. Dayax was waiting for Elyse when she awoke and assuaged her fears with information.

"She told me that this place is indeed within the gates of heaven but that we were still alive! She told me to rest and recover my mind, for there remained only one further trial before us. We will all soon go to meet the great judgement."

Perhaps it is needless to say that their spirits were greatly improved with the knowledge and they splashed and played like children in the warm pool.

At length, Dhalin Yaro entered with a cheery smile and asked if they were ready to continue. They dressed in white robes that he brought for them, which seemed to have been woven from some unknown cloth of exceeding softness. They followed him through many corridors but stopped before a large blue door that had a moon and sun beautifully etched into its thick stone face.

Whatever they had expected to see, however strange, could not have compared with what met their eyes. There before them was the ancient judge of men, a very tall Neptalim who appeared to be very old but who still wore a kindly look upon his face.

He announced them by name and bowed. *Imagine*, Elyse thought, *the penultimate judge of men bowing to such mortals as us!*

"Before you are the gates of judgement. They do not lead to heaven or to hell, but rather, to the truth within yourselves. If you pass, then you will each be presented with a gift according to your

virtue." Hjaka noticed that the judge did not say what would happen if someone didn't pass.

The ancient Neptalim began with Phoenix, to his parents' surprise, who he asked to step forward and disrobe. Phoenix complied immediately to their further amazement for he was typically very shy about such things. The angel rose and touched Phoenix's forehead with his own.

Then Allan observed his son's head to shake in a most unnatural way so that it soon became a blur. He started to intervene but his wife stayed his hand. They stood thusly for another few moments, their heads as one, when Phoenix began to sink to the floor as if his legs had given out, but was easily caught by the reverent judge who then carried him to a soft bed nearby.

A noble attendant materialized and to this the judge spoke a word, upon which Phoenix was brought such a robe as no mortal had seen for several millennia. When it was put around Phoenix's inert shoulders, it became as a vacuum of space; as if the galaxy or universe itself could be entered through it.

Elyse was called next and Allan grit his teeth while she underwent the identical method of judgement, resulting in the same swoon, and subsequent placement on a bed with a robe being brought out to her.

The robe that was put upon Elyse's body became a picture into nature herself and in her most beautiful forms. The beholder's vantage was like that of a bird who flew speedily across the surface of the earth; through grasslands and jungles teeming with life, through mountains, forests and icelands all achingly beautiful to behold.

Next he called Allan by name who followed the brave examples of those who had come before him as he, too, submitted to the

subliminal examination. When Dhalin Yaro touched his head to Allan's, he found that the inscrutable giant seemed to live Allan's entire life, moment by moment but in fast-forward.

Allan found that he could not maintain consciousness long, but was aware that the wise giant had already seen the whole of Allan's childhood and was moving on to view his adult life.

Allan awoke wearing a robe that did not seem to merely cover his mortal body, but seemed to be a window into another dimension entirely. Displayed there in kaleidoscopic fashion, were wonderful yet chaotic scenes of men. They altered every few moments and revealed scenes of tenderness between men, women and children, so that one would weep for joy when gazing upon his magnificent cloak.

Thus it was that Allan was reluctant to remove his gaze but finally did so, that he might look into the eyes of his wife and son instead. Truly their garments mystified him, for the beauty of the night sky in its ever-changing zodiacal patterns was seen within the robes of his son.

His wife, he thought amusedly, must have already learned how to control the scenes depicted within her own robe, for there were the living images of babies, puppies, kittens, rabbits and more; anything that could lay claim to being cute and cuddly. Interspersed with these were scenes of majestic mountains with tall waterfalls and simple visions of rare and delicate flowers.

They looked to Hjaka who seemed to be resisting the process, which alarmed them all greatly. They were horrified when they beheld, for the first time in any Tigris, the long claws extend from their hiding place within his palms and rake mercilessly at his judging angel. This violence, however, had no apparent effect upon the person of the angel, who only appeared to be saddened by

it. Hjaka swooned and was carried to a bed near his companions but no robe was brought to him.

He awoke weeping and the concerned family consoled him as well as they could, but they were as ineffectual as the well-fed consoling the hungry with words, or the sighted and healthy preaching to the blind and lame. He wept on pitifully as he looked at the beauty that was within the three Hunters and their glorious robes.

"I refused the judgement," he began through the sobs, "because I am guilty, and therefore, unworthy."

His friends tried to interrupt him with well-meant contradictions, but he continued, "I know that, had I consented to the trial, I would have died only to be reborn and forced to begin anew. I know that I can yet prepare my soul to pass the judgement if I could first accomplish this great quest, in which you all are destined to play such important roles."

Soon Hjaka grew content once more, firm in the belief that he could achieve the great goal of his lifetime and one day consider himself worthy of the great judgement. They all rejoiced as born again unto the world.

They were ushered by their guardian angels, or so they came to call them, into a vast room, although here Hjaka was asked to remain behind. The family was then blindfolded, which suited Allan not at all for he wondered what it was they wished to conceal from him.

Dhalin Yaro explained, "That is not the purpose of the blindfold. We do not wish to disguise the image of First God, but to protect you from His brightness. He is as brilliant as the sun itself and without the blindfold, your eyes would wither before the sight. This is according to the principles of creation-science whose laws even He must obey."

Dhalin Yaro also said that they were to be shown only a mere trifling embodiment of all that is First God, just a minute portion of a single eye. The eye was created to watch over the world and all its life forms as it has since the earth was first willed into existence many eons ago by its Creator.

"So First God is not the creator of the universe?"

"No, but He was the first to receive the gift of life by the Creator."

"So First God is kind of like a first in command?" Phoenix asked.

Dhalin Yaro smiled, "Yes. Something like that, but His duty is to watch over all life on earth."

So Allan relented and caught the excited eyes of his family as he donned the blindfold. In utter darkness they heard their guardians begin to pray and presently lost consciousness.

One cannot describe in words a meeting with First God. They seemed to float in space before a galactic cloud which cracked and sizzled from an enormous ball of lightning that burned within it. The electricity, they felt instinctively, had provided the impetus for all life that has ever occurred on planet earth.

This was the entity that the God of Creation, *Kuundwa Kwa*, had left in charge of all life on earth. It was sentient, they were certain, though it spoke not with words but with the instinct of feeling and emotion that is common to all living creatures. He spoke not specific words but impressed generalities that were sufficient to effect the instant comprehension of vast secrets.

They remained awe-stricken for an unknown length of time before finally awaking. Allan stumbled around a small, neat camp for a score of minutes before he understood who or where he was.

Once coherency returned, he immediately looked for Elyse and Phoenix and found them sleeping in their rolls near the warmth of a never-ending campfire.

Fearing that he would lose memory of the dreamlike vision, he sat down and began a journal entry immediately. He mused upon the incident and marveled at the strange land they had foolishly named New Africa. He seemed to find a new empathy with all that lived around him. A harmonious peace resided within his soul, one that resembled love but so heightened in effect that he could almost perceive the very thoughts of the trees and beasts themselves.

He seemed to understand that God, the Creator, had left the solar system to the charge of a mute general known among the Neptalim as First God. It was He who had reared the first generation of Neptalim, who were called Min.

These nearly immaculate life forms lived for all time and had themselves sired Man. Among these men, the Neptalim were as gods. The Neptalim attempted to educate mankind but found them to be base in nature, lower even than their own kind, which was still viewed inadequate by First God.

The Min, or angels, giants or gods among men, had governed the earth for many long millennia and had slowly taught the mortals many secrets. Yet with the passage of eons, for time must pass even for the immortal, the corruption of the snake had reached up through mankind and corrupted even the fair Neptalim.

They grew wantonly cruel and warred amongst themselves using mankind as their pawns. So it came to pass that First God sent a great flood upon the earth and wiped clean all but one family of man, from which all further human life forms were to spring.

The land known as Inkosikas Atlanticas was not drowned with the world, but was saved and set apart from it; banished by First God

to another plane of existence, and with it the disgraced Neptalim who had once been revered as gods themselves.

The family now understood that, throughout human history, a very few number of humans had been allowed to make the journey to this land. They had also walked the awful stairway and crossed the river of death to meet First God. Some of these rare travelers had been sent back by the Neptalim to effect great change upon the lands of man. Allan and his family felt that they were to become similar figures if they ever returned home. Although, they confessed inwardly, to complete ignorance as to what wisdom they could bring with them that would be heeded by their mortal brethren back home.

They dwelt again among the Neptalim but were once more in the rustic town center dressed in mortal clothes, their robes were gone. Hjaka, California, Tana and the mules were present and the family greeted them affectionately. There was much hilarity from the giant Min as they now prepared for a great feast.

Some arrived with lutes, viols, drums and harps and when they played, everyone danced, laughed and wept at the beauty of their music.

The revelry continued all day and well into the night. The three Hunters found themselves bestowed with much honor by the ancient and noble Min. The mortals now loved the Min, themselves and all living creatures with an illimitable empathy that could only be perceived as a gift from First God.

Hjaka was melancholy, however, so Allan made a point to speak with him at length.

Hjaka said, "I hope that you and your family are now fully prepared to help me calm the violence that threatens my people

from within their own hearts. Now you know why I brought you first to the wise Neptalim."

Allan affirmed that he did and thanked Hjaka for his wisdom in doing so. "The gift of knowledge and peace that now resides within my family has rendered us far more likely to successfully reason with your people."

Hjaka then talked of his land and of the toils and dangers they were likely to encounter along the way. He drew another map, detailed with all known habitats, as well as rivers, bridges and settlements.

It became apparent that they still had a great distance to travel in the strange land, for Hjaka's people dwelt far to the west. Not once did Hjaka inquire about the family's experiences with First God, which greatly relieved them. It must have been rather bitter for Hjaka, who had denied himself what now visibly issued from the Hunters to overflowing.

They said many heartfelt goodbyes, none more bittersweet than that between Elyse and her beloved Moonflower, Dayax Ubax. Yet they parted with the full faith of certainty that they would be reunited someday.

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Their trek was an easy one that day, traveling with the sun on their backs until noon when they rested near a stream. Tana, to Phoenix's relief, had remained near the Neptalim farms and the two related much to one another as the former walked and the latter rode.

As the heat of the sun passed, they trekked on through the flatland with the goal of reaching the edge of a great forest by morning. They all felt very strong, both within their minds and bodies, and felt very capable of hiking through the long night.

Nor did they sense danger in the wide expanse around them, though they seemed to be as insignificant as so many ants marching upon the plain, their purpose known only to themselves.

They reached the forest which started in earnest only long after they reached the first of the tall, noble pines at its fringe. Phoenix was the first to notice the moving shadows. There were many species of Kivuli there, not just the panther beasts they had encountered before.

They observed vague, shadowy forms flitting amongst the trees, which they took for Kivuli primates. There were also long, narrow shapes whose serpentine movements were unmistakable even while shrouded in shadowy visage. Allan saw little light within the forest and was loathe to take his family inside it.

Hjaka smiled and said, "You have nothing more to fear from the Kivuli Mnyama. I am the only one they could attack now that you all possess the light."

His assertion, as wild as it may have appeared, rang with an element of truth so that Allan felt bold enough to put it to the test. He drew his sword and gave firm instructions to his family that he was not to be followed within. At their protests, he promised not to venture any great distance from Hjaka, who was to remain at the entrance of the dismal forest.

Allan's stout heart beat quickly as he charged in, for his goal was to be attacked as quickly as possible. Instead, his eyes saw the creatures who were closest to him veritably glow, reflecting the light that seemed to emit from Allan's own presence. The Kivuli withdrew faster than he could give chase and he returned to the others to report the astounding news.

The family encircled Hjaka and the mules for protection and pushed their way into the forest. Tana had a rough time of it for

she was far too large for the path. She was forced to fell great branches of what resembled maple or sycamore trees. Phoenix was forced to walk, which put him in a rather frustrated mood.

As gloomy as it was, Elyse virtually shone with radiance and spoke to her husband privately of her seemingly instant bond with Moonflower.

Elyse said, "I recognized Dayax as the unseen force that I pray to at night. Moonflower is to me that part of God that still dwells in us all, but much greater in the eternal and original Min."

"All my life, it has been Moonflower I have felt watching me, loving and accepting me and imparting to my soul some of her own magic."

To his credit, Allan said nothing to interrupt her, so she continued, "We talked of occasions, very private ones, where I had sensed her presence. Allan, she was actually there! She said that she had heard every prayer I have ever uttered and has grown to love the soul within me for its wholesomeness."

After a respectful silence, Allan asked a little jealously, "Does she love only you?"

"Oh no! The Neptalim have many mortals they protect and share a bond with."

"Does that make you jealous?"

Elyse thought about it for just a moment, then answered, "No. Our bond is no different from the empathetic bond that she shares with many others, but through her agelessness and prescience, she has time for us all. Every mortal soul under her care is very dear to her."

As dense and forbidding as the forest was, it was not terribly vast. Therefore, they chose to trek forward through the long night.

There was little difference between day and night in that place of shadows and they would prefer to be clear of it quickly.

When she at last broke through the final tree limb that had stood before her, Tana roared triumphantly. The forest had clearly been very difficult for her. Her proud sound startled everything in the plain for a mile around them, most importantly, a spine-tingling behemoth ancestor to the rhinoceros, who became enraged at their explosive entrance. She reacted instinctively so that as the last of Tana's voice decayed away the beast was already in full charge toward it.

The alarmed travelers retreated to the tree-line and readied their weapons, though they held little hope of successfully thwarting the rhino's furious charge. As the huge beast advanced, Tana at last beheld the animal that she had heard and smelled, but had not yet seen. She reacted by rearing her immense bulk onto her hind legs before breaking into a ferocious attack charge which was made all the more alarming for its incredible speed.

The rhino drew swiftly closer and they could see that she was fully eighteen feet high at the shoulder and weighed a great many tons, yet Tana stood nearly thirty feet and weighed many times more. The fierce rhino lowered her head and exposed her colossal horn while Tana maintained her lofty advantage as they drew within paces of each other.

Tana performed a vertical leap into the air at the moment before impact and slammed all four feet down upon the rhino, who had run almost underneath her. The resulting impact of the two massive creatures was like thunder during an earthquake and when the dust settled, the great rhino lived no more. Observing her tremendous power applied in combat was truly a wonder to behold, and they all respected her feelings on matters thereafter and hoped not to annoy her with any more dense forests.

The animals returned to their grazing, the dead beast being mourned apparently by no mate or offspring. The caravan moved westward all that day taking many photographs and samples of soil and plant life along the way.

Elyse devoted much of her free time, such as a mother ever has, in labeling the samples. Allan shook his head in admiration of her diligence. *Tonight*, he thought, *I will play my instrument and she will sing and dance.*

The morning that followed found Hjaka and Allan awake and discussing the next leg of their journey, which was to carry them for several days through endless plains that were home to many animals both dangerous and marvelous in description. Yet, Hjaka was most unconcerned with the lot of them.

"There are," he said, "a race of very old yet still extremely primitive ones who were their likeliest and most formidable enemies. Their race is called Watu Chini Ya, or *Men from Under*. They are nearly extinct and rarely encountered during the day because they are albinic and extremely sensitive to light."

"Where do they live?" Allan asked.

"They dwell," he answered, "in vast labyrinths deep within the earth. They only visit the land above at night, under whose cover they execute their vile kidnappings. They are hungry for little food can be found within the bowels of ancient earth."

So it was that, when full daylight arose, they formed a plan to trek through the country during the light of day and to post a watch at night. The day passed pleasantly and the adventurers saw a great many beasts that were entirely new to them, many of whom grazed while some flew and others hunted.

Allan asked Hjaka if he could point out the recesses of soil and sand that he said marked the place of ingress and egress to the dark land of the Watu Chini Ya. It was several hours before he bade Allan to follow him some distance away to show him what looked to be nothing more than a hastily filled rabbit hole, though slightly larger.

Allan said, "These men from under must be very small indeed."

Hjaka replied gravely, "They are narrow but very long of body. Do not underestimate them." Later, Allan showed everyone the sight so that they might acquaint themselves with its appearance.

Two days had passed upon the great plain with the party marching ever-westward. That night, Phoenix relieved his father of his sentry duty after which Allan ate and promptly slept. At some point, their entire camp was roused by a strange chittering and squealing sound accompanied by Phoenix's panicked voice and California's most urgent bark.

Allan sprung from bed with his rifle and flashlight in time to see his boy apparently reaching into a hole in the ground. Then he was pulled headlong into the earth by unseen hands.

Within an instant, Allan arrived at the place where he had seen his son but he was gone. The ground had the appearance of being closed up from the nether side, precisely as Hjaka had shown them. He clawed at the soil until Elyse brought a shovel and they dug out the hole. It widened at a depth of ten feet to sufficiently accommodate the girth of their bodies.

With the intention of climbing into the pit, Allan instructed his wife to remain above with Hjaka to protect the camp, but she would have none of it.

"We will descend together. Hjaka can remain with the supplies and animals." They hastily donned their swords, stuffed ammunition in their pouches and descended into the tunnel.

Even in a state of near-panic, Elyse had the presence of mind to begin mapping their path on a small tablet of graph paper. They could hear nothing but their flashlights illuminated a complex network of tunnels that offered so many paths that they nearly despaired.

Then Allan remembered Phoenix's X-Bird, who had been taught to deliver messages by scent. They called for Hjaka to send the bird down to them along with a shirt of Phoenix's for scenting. The bird, unaccustomed as he was to being handled by anyone except Phoenix, squawked and fluttered his wings reproachfully but Hjaka succeeded in thrusting him down the hole.

They pressed Phoenix's old shirt into the bird's beak then spoke the command of *seek* that they had heard their son use. The bird looked confused for just a moment then waddled down the tunnel with the forlorn parents following impatiently behind. The bird led them for perhaps an hour, during which time there were many wrong turns when, having lost the scent, he turned and led their retreat.

Once or twice they heard California bark but could not follow the direction of the sound in the dark labyrinth. Allan began to wonder at the circumstances that had led to finding himself following a bird through a tunnel in search of his boy who had been kidnapped by the lizard or mole-like *Men from Under*.

At length the bird chirped loudly and flew down the path much faster than they could follow. Presently, they could hear barking, then the sound of their beloved boy speaking to the bird who had finally found him, and which was cooing back to him affectionately.

They also heard the odd chittering sound grow louder when Phoenix's voice suddenly rose with anger and terror. "Keep your hands off my dog!"

His parents heard a yelp of pain from Cali and then rounded the corner to behold the nightmare scene. The room was very large, perhaps fifty feet square, and occupied by twelve large creatures who resembled a hideous discombobulation of man, lizard and mole. Phoenix was hanging by his wrists at the far end of the room and California was lying unconscious upon what could only have been their dinner table!

Without a word, the enraged parents set upon the scoundrels with their swords. Two fell before the monsters even knew of their presence and two more as they arose from the table, but the remaining eight positioned themselves between them and their son.

"Allan, shoot the one by Phoenix's rope!" Elyse yelled.

Sidestepping a swing from hoary claws, Allan fired and saw his lead pierce the skull of the intended victim. The barest instant later, Elyse fired and they saw their boy drop to the ground behind the remaining six combatants. *Had she missed?*

The very next instant, Elyse was swiped across the legs by the hideous moles, then Allan was raked across the cheek and neck by another. Yet, they were still enraged parents in the act of rescuing their son, so they rebounded like young athletes full of adrenaline.

Allan kicked a large, blind eye then placed his dagger into its head from underneath the jaw. He was then swiped cruelly upon his back but spun viciously and severed the forearms of one of the vile creatures, who slunk away to die alone.

Allan looked up to see Elyse's sword as it remained in the body of one while she grappled unarmed with another. Phoenix rose, still bound by the hands, and threw his weight against his mother's adversary. They both fell to the ground. Another instant passed

and Elyse retrieved her blade from the creature's kin and slew it as it struggled to rise.

Allan fell on the other two with wide-arcing swings designed to force their retreat. Phoenix had evidently recovered his pistols for he strode up beside his father and said to them, "You were going to eat my dog?" Then to each he gave an ounce of lead.

The room grew quiet as the victors stood alone while the blood of their enemies mingled with their own upon the gory floor. They followed Elyse's map and soon made their way back to the surface. They felt momentarily blinded for it was early afternoon and their eyes had grown accustomed to the subterranean gloom.

Hjaka rejoiced to see them and brought Elyse's medicine kit, fresh towels and clean water. She instructed him well as he cleaned and dressed their many wounds while they related to him the story.

Phoenix said that he had seen long, inhuman arms grab Cali as she stood sniffing around the hole that Allan had foolishly shown to everyone. He had lunged after her and succeeded in grabbing her left-hind leg. As the despicable villains pulled on the poor dog's front legs, a terrible tug-of-war ensued.

As they yanked viciously, Phoenix felt a tendon snap or a bone break in Cali's leg and sadly released her but immediately hurled himself after her where the strength of their numbers easily overwhelmed him. He was then brought to the chamber where his parents found him.

While relating his perilous adventure, he was holding Cali and X-Bird proudly and his parents could have burst with their love for him. He would bear scars from that night, as indeed they all would, but he had saved that which was dear to him as the parents had saved that which was dear to them. The painful wounds were

as nothing for their souls were content simply to have each other safe once more.

California had a very sore leg, which she avoided using, and elicited much sympathy as she hobbled about. They remained where they were but now tethered themselves at night, although they saw no more of the *Men from Under*.

Hjaka, who had been very surprised at the number of Lizard-men they had encountered and killed, believed that the species might now be ended forever, for their number was believed to be less than ten in existence. Loathsome as they were, the Hunters hoped that was not the case. They did not wish extinction on any species and were certainly fain to be its cause.

They began to trek westward on the third day after the kidnapping, feeling very strong indeed. For his part, Allan felt a resurgence of his primal instinct, of survival itself. *Perhaps there is a protein in the blood of man that improves a species during times of dire action?*

Throughout the day, they saw shadowy forms slinking in the grass which caused them to encircle the mules. Hjaka remained close to Allan at the fore of the party.

Allan asked Hjaka, "What do you know about the Kivuli Mnyama?"

"They are the children of the great snake with the red eyes. It was he, not First God, who breathed life into them. That is why they can no longer harm you or your family. You are now *of the light*."

Allan then spoke to him of ancient Egypt where humans had worshipped a lion-headed goddess named Bast. Hjaka seemed unacquainted with the history but guessed that legends must have

grown around the Tigris and Canid tribes after their land had been set apart from the rest of the world.

CHAPTER 6 - THE LAND OF THE TIGRIS

Two more days passed and the party grew stronger. Hjaka said that they were now on the border of his land and disclosed that he did not know how they would receive him, nor indeed, how they would accept the strange travelers.

"It is my hope to obtain an audience with a congress of powerful families so that I may introduce you formally. You are, if you please, to forge such friendships as you can from among the nobles whose character you deem creditable."

Allan shuddered at the thought of mingling, although he understood the value of being respected rather than loathed. He agreed to be as sociable as he was able.

Hjaka made a point of telling them, "If you find yourselves set upon by the Tigris, whether alone or together, you must fight to kill or you will surely die yourselves. My folk will not show mercy, or respect, to those who fight poorly."

With a warning that clear, they armed themselves accordingly. Phoenix now wore four pistols on a bandolier across his chest in addition to the faithful pair on his belt. Elyse and Allan now wore the other two pistols opposite their swords in addition to the rifles on their backs. *If these folk respect only mortal combat, Allan thought, we shall sell ourselves dearly.*

As they drew warily westward, the plains gave way to sparsely wooded hills with thick underbrush. Here they were told to concentrate their attention among the trees for that was where the Tigris would be found.

They walked for several more tense hours before Hjaka stopped them again. They stood very quietly but their mammoth chose that moment to speak to Phoenix. Her great trumpet resounded in clear stereo up the hill which served as an amphitheater and magnified the sound eerily.

Allan was slowly able to discern the eyes and vague shapes among the branches, much higher than he had expected to find them. There, unblinking in the boughs, were dozens of the Tigris watching them in silence. Hjaka stepped forward and bowed as if he were the quadruped he resembled.

Soundlessly, one of them leaped from an impossible height, alighting only a few feet before the prostrated Hjaka. Their emissary was long and lithe with a golden mane and tawny skin. They both stood erect and the illusion of having four legs was dispelled, for they had human arms once more.

To Allan's delight, the lion man moved to embrace Hjaka like a brother. They tumbled on the ground for a moment, giving Allan the picture of the young, playful cubs they must once have been.

Others dropped or pounced to the ground behind their leader and once they recognized Hjaka, they reacted in a less-hostile, if not overtly friendly manner. Elyse understood that everyone in the land had taken Hjaka for dead many years ago. Legends and tall-tales of him and his adventures had sprung up, which news seemed to please him greatly.

Hjaka was a very popular fellow indeed, so that Allan found himself wondering why he had cautioned them. *Perhaps it had been merely a jest, for the welcome he receives is that of a true hero.*

Allan remarked that Hjaka's welcome among his own people was even more joyous than that of the Neptalim, to which he replied ominously, "You must remember that I did not give you warning then, but I do so now. Remain alert."

Allan had a strong recollection of petting his Aunt's Persian cat for a long afternoon, when it had suddenly attacked him without provocation. *Perhaps the same treacherous instinct exists in these, too, who must admit to feline heritage.* he thought.

As before, the Hunters were ignored entirely until Hjaka's homecoming welcome was complete. Hjaka then brought forth the handsome lion man who bowed before them. As Allan bowed in response, the lion man suddenly hurled himself at Allan in a nimble roll.

Allan's reflexes, however, were taut and he jumped aside. As the lion-man whirled to face his elusive quarry, Allan slapped his jaw hard with the flat of his blade. Though he remembered Hjaka's warning to strike mortally, he was hesitant to do so, surrounded as they were by dozens of his kin.

The lion-man arose and shook his jaw, then laughed heartily. He approached Allan once more and bowed low.

"I am Jasiri", he said. Allan translated the word as *brave*. Allan bowed once more without fear, for he felt that he had won the contest and with it, the Tigris' respect.

Jasiri surprised Allan once more and succeeded in raking his bowed head with terrible claws, which sent him reeling backward. Allan raised his sword as Jasiri lunged at him. Cold steel connected with his paw, which flew off in the direction opposite the arc of the sword. Jasiri snarled and lunged at him again but missed as Allan threw a vicious thrust into his chest. This ended him quickly.

Elyse and Phoenix ran toward Allan while the crowd performed its purr of applause. Hjaka laid his hands upon Allan's shoulders and said that he had done well.

"We will have no further trouble with these kinsmen. Yet, there are more clans to win over before we can begin to unite them."

Allan asked Hjaka, "What they will do with Jasiri's body?"

"They will likely leave it where it fell as a gift for the wild ones." He waved his arm to indicate the wilderness around them.

Allan asked permission and was granted the opportunity to bury the brave but fool of a lion. This task he undertook with a heavy heart and was met with mixed approval by the observing Tigris.

While he was thus engaged, for it was a solitary duty meant for him alone, Elyse and Phoenix entertained a vast party of Tigris, whose beautiful skin looked as different from one another as from their own. There was a calico and another all black with white socks and breast. Another thin female was clearly the ancestor of a cheetah. Every feline variation seemed to have its representative among the uncanny people and truly they were magnificent and splendid to behold, yet Allan could not prevent thinking of the throng turning upon his trusting family as his Aunt's Persian cat had to him.

Perhaps Phoenix recognized the potential for danger too, for he soon bade his mother to withdraw from them and return to where his father toiled so that they could talk amongst themselves. They related many strange tales of the Tigris, whom they both liked very much.

Allan wondered how much the Tigris could like *them* after he had slain their handsome captain upon their arrival. *Still*, he reasoned, *they seem generous and amiable*. Although he didn't enjoy being

at the mercy of his hosts, he decided to try to integrate with them and seek the alliances that Hjaka had requested.

Yet, though they remained with the Tigris for three days, they found only two individuals whose comportment satisfied the group, for all the others seemed fickle and aloof once the *newness* of the strangers had worn off. One of the pair were a wise and gentle white female, beautifully speckled with black. Her name was *Thelugia*, which translated into *Snow*.

The other was an ancient one, visibly withered and dry, who spoke with great wisdom and was clearly revered by the Tigris. His back was bent and he was without the power of locomotion save for the retinue of attendants who carried him on a simple litter. He was most certainly akin to a jaguar but age had blurred his spots to a greyish ochre.

They met him as he lay upon the litter surrounded by his students, who were dismissed as the party approached. With a wave of his hand, Allan was commanded to sit.

The old witch-doctor looked like an old, charred tree as he said in a coarse voice, "I know the path that lies before you. I know your hearts and I have much wisdom to offer if you will listen."

He found them to be very apt pupils, for they listened to him, enraptured to the exclusion of all else, for a full day and night.

The one who captivated them and earned their respect so quickly was named *Kale Nafsi*, which meant *Ancient Soul*. Allan wondered how one came to be named ancient from birth but did not inquire about the matter.

So it came to pass that on the dawn of their third day among the Tigris, Thelugia the white and Kale Nafsi the ancient, both joined their party as well as their cause. Thelugia planned to travel

lightly on foot which contrasted greatly with the excessive retinue that bore Kale Nafsi.

They headed west again and, although the larger caravan moved slowly, they soon were out of the clan's territory. Elyse, Hjaka and Allan marched at the fore with the students bearing Kale Nafsi next, then the mules followed by Phoenix and Thelugia riding upon the great back of Tana. California rode upon her head as a lookout. Their spirits were high and their mission was once again underway.

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They marched until late afternoon when they came upon the small river that Hjaka had marked upon their map. It had been annotated as having a bridge, which caused Hjaka some concern as to what state of repair he should find it in after his long absence. At last, they found the bridge at Kale Nafsi's direction and it appeared to be trustworthy indeed.

The old wizard insisted that he walk alone upon the bridge first, which he accomplished slowly, rising from his litter with only a short, knurled cane for support. Yet he managed only a semi-upright stance, for now he revealed to the caravan that his back was sorely hunched. He took the first step onto the bridge. At that very moment, a voice bellowed in an unknown language that was translated roughly by the babelbirds. The voice was exceedingly deep and spoke slowly, suggesting a mind scarcely sentient, as one roused from long sleep.

"Who stands above me?" It roared from somewhere underneath the bridge.

"It is I, Kale Nafsi, the ancient one. Student of the timeless Chakali. I demand safe passage."

"You demand?" It bantered contemptuously.

"Yes, or the three immortals with whom I travel shall end your long life, which otherwise must endure for all time."

The voice's laugh was a throaty one, full of scorn and impatience, then it spoke again in a tone of wrath.

"I have heard of these warriors who have already caused the death of two timeless Neptalim, but I am a different foe altogether, am I not, Wizard?"

"You are that, great beast, but I humbly request that we do not match our might this day. The strength of the outsiders may prove to be stronger than you know."

"Behold!" Kale Nafsi continued grandly, "There are those among us who could slay yonder hare by commanding the thunder itself."

The disembodied voice laughed again when, at Kale Nafsi's signal, Elyse raised her rifle and, though she was loath to do it, fired and killed the hare in mid-hop at a distance of sixty feet. The weapon's loud report thundered up and down the riverbank and echoed off the distant mountains.

The hare rolled so that its corpse fell down and disappeared beneath the bridge where the voice seemed to be coming from. They heard the unseen-being cry out in fear while Kale Nafsi motioned the caravan to cross in haste.

They lost no time getting across and would have done so safely were it not for one of Kale Nafsi's students, who suddenly ran back alone upon the bridge to retrieve some item he had dropped in his haste.

The terrible voice spoke to him and he dropped to his knees in abject terror. This, evidently, was his undoing, for the beast tasted his fear and attempted no further banter with him.

The caravan watched in horror as an enormous arm, hairy and black, reached up from within the depths, plucked the student like a dandelion and took him screaming over the side.

This had all happened so fast that Allan thought Kale Nafsi had been unaware of it for no objection or alarm arose from his litter. Allan came abreast of it and explained to him what had just happened.

Kale Nafsi replied carelessly, "All of my students have been warned not to go alone upon the bridge once *I* have stepped off." Therefore, he reasoned, the fool deserved his fate and would not be mourned.

Allan told him angrily, "That is more warning than you had cared to give to me and my family!"

The wizard replied calmly, "I only instruct students, for only they want to learn." Allan swallowed his frustration and marched ahead of the caravan for a time.

Thelugia rode along with Phoenix all day and Allan looked forward with great interest to hearing more about their talk. That night, Allan overheard Elyse speak in her sleep to Dayax, though she spoke in a language Allan was positive she didn't know. He could comprehend some names, such as Phoenix's and his own, but that was all.

He wondered what subconscious words were being spoken between them but finally gave up eavesdropping. He knew that he must rest for they were to rise early in the morning to trek westward and deeper into the land of the Tigris. They traveled without incident all the next day and most of the following one. The weather was mild and Kale Nafsi was in a

talkative mood. He told them of the meeting of the Great Council which was soon to be held among the tribes.

"All of our efforts must both take root and flower by that time." he said earnestly. "The Great Council meets biannually upon the plains near the oldest of their cities." Curiously, the party could not induce him to provide them with its name.

"The next tribe we are likely to meet are known to be quarrelsome. They are called Mwitú Moja, or *Wild Ones*." These, they were told, did not congregate together but in rare times of war, famine or wildfire. They did not consider themselves unified under any banner, their own or of any other king in the land. They were barbaric hunters and warriors who hunted and slew their daily meat and neither built homes nor raised crops with their hands.

"We are not to linger or recruit from the Mwitú Moja, but just survive the journey through their land." he said gravely.

For safety, it was decided that Hjäka and Allan would ride with the rest of the family upon Tana's immense back as she strode confidently forward. The Savannah had only sparse groves of trees and Tana picked her own path around them easily.

From their high vantage, they observed mothers and cubs watching them from their lofty homes in the trees and could feel the malice in their eyes. The party moved on, growing more confident that no motley band of disunified warriors would dare accost them.

Elyse thought, *If they were unified under any cause, evil or just, they could present us with considerable peril.* She was grateful for their disunity.

So they spent a tiring day, not in the legs from walking but in the eyes from searching. They scanned the horizon with the diligent, harrowed eyes of a hunted animal. Their nerves, too, were

painfully taut as they passed the watching eyes they knew were hidden in the trees.

They passed grove after grove of them, until the caravan was deep within their land. They felt their own vulnerability even more acutely as night descended. Now they could discern little of their antagonist's stealthy movements. Hjaka explained that they were descending from the trees around them to hunt. From far off in the distance, they heard their primal roars and, very often, the accompanying squeal of pain from their prey.

The travelers were wont to sleep on Tana's back but could not conscientiously abandon the mules overnight, whom they had already failed to protect once before. Kale Nafsi seemed rather unconcerned about the *Wild Ones* and insisted upon traveling and sleeping as usual. They descended from Tana's back, encircled the mules and then waited the long night out. A more interminable watch no one could recall.

They felt the presence of many feral Tigris around them as the latter grew more curious after they had fed. The firelight reflected their eyes as they stalked just outside of its radiance. One of them grew bold and addressed the group from the gloom in an aggressive tone.

"Who are you and on whose leave do you travel here?" Allan looked to Hjaka for answer but he shook his head and pointed back to Allan.

Allan replied, "We are mighty travelers on an errand for the Neptalim. You are welcome to enter our circle and speak with us if you come without violence in your heart."

Allan was disconcerted and astonished a moment later to find the creature standing next to him. He hadn't even seen any movement.

The wild Tigris' smile, which cannot always be taken at its seeming, revealed canine teeth fully as long as those of Hjaka's father, one of which Phoenix still wore around his neck.

The wild Tigris growled and bristled then repeated his question. He seemed to be ignorant of the Neptalim so that Allan found himself somewhat at a loss to explain himself. He earnestly desired that either Hjaka or Kale Nafsi would step forward. Frustrated and bereft of answer, Allan began to get angry and was about to say something impertinent when Kale Nafsi was ceremoniously carried into the scene.

The eyes of the two Tigris met and recognition apparently dawned upon the bold Mwitw Moja, so that without word or bow, he leaped back into the shadows. Once in their safety, he uttered a long, piercing howl which seemed to draw many more creatures to him. The alarmed caravan heard low purring, as if in hushed confederacy. The *Wild Ones*, who did not band together, appeared to be doing just that.

Allan began to fear an attack and was about to order everyone up on Tana's back when suddenly two Tigris moved humbly into their camp carrying a sick or dead feline child. They laid the boy at the feet of Kale Nafsi, then kneeled before him imploringly and began to chant.

At his command, a student brought forth a large shroud with many strange symbols woven into its fabric. This he placed not over the sick boy as the Hunters had been expecting, but over those who sought his healing.

At an impatient sign from the enigmatic witch-doctor, Elyse and Phoenix rushed up to the boy who was breathing in shallow rasps. They took note of his vital signs then Phoenix put his ear to the boy's chest and listened.

He then drew a leaf from his bag, checked his mother for approval, steeped it in hot water and then put the tea to the lips of the young Tigris. Moments later, the rasping gave way to deep, healthful breaths.

Another command by Kale Nafsi and the sheet was pulled from the faithful supplicants. Phoenix covertly pressed the leaf that had healed the patient into the withered paw of the aged healer, then he and Elyse withdrew. The command was issued and the sheet withdrawn.

The Tigris who had brought the child beheld, in wide-eyed amazement, the healthy boy who only moments before had appeared to be near death. All of the Wild Ones, both within and without the circle of light, began to heap praise upon the great Kale Nafsi.

Once they had taken their child and gone, another young Tigris was brought before the great healer. He repeated the queer process of the shroud, though the patient ailed from a severe claw wound that was similar to the ones the family had received from the *Men from Under*.

Elyse and Phoenix stepped forward to administer such narcotics and antiseptics as they thought prudent. The pain appeared to subside quickly and the wound was bandaged. The sheet was removed and the praise once more heaped upon Kale Nafsi, the miraculous healer of the people.

Allan was not a man to insist upon credit due to himself, but he found the charade ridiculous. Though the pair of supplicants could not see who was tending to their sick, surely the owners of the myriad glowing eyes could. Yet, he held his tongue but resolved to speak to the charlatan soon and scold him for his prideful deceit.

The snake-oil sorcerer then did something so miraculous that Allan found himself wholly impressed with the ancient jaguar, though how he had accomplished the illusion was beyond his ability to guess.

A third patient was brought before him, a fair maiden of orange and black with a large notch missing from one ear. Elyse and Phoenix rushed forward the instant the cloth was draped over the devout bearers and, within a moment, sadly declared the victim to be dead. Her death clearly caused by the spear whose broken haft still rested in the breast of the fair victim.

The news worried Allan greatly. *How shall these Tigris behold us if we should fail them? These who, in their utter faith, believe our witch-doctor to possess the power to restore life.*

Acknowledging the diagnosis with a curt scoff, Kale Nafsi dismissed them and began to chant in a low tone. As he began, a strong, warm wind suddenly sprung up from the west. He seemed to be falling deeper into a trance but his voice grew only louder. Rain began to sprinkle the camp as the wind increased and added its eerie roar to the increasing ferocity of the witch-doctor's hypnotic wail.

The mules panicked, braying and kicking wildly, but the family made no immediate move to calm them, for they were entranced themselves. The tempest reached a climax as his voice suddenly dropped to a very low drone, which he maintained throughout the balance of the strange drama.

The low note was instantly reminiscent of the one Dhalin Yaro had uttered at the end of Allan's first meeting with him and he pondered its significance.

Lightning crashed all around them in wicked flashes, setting fire to an unlucky grove of trees. The brief illumination revealed that

most of the Tigris had fled from the scene. There remained only sixty, who were still bowed low in the supplicant four-legged bow that was so uncanny to be observed in those who also walked upright.

Suddenly, Kale Nafsi emitted a harrowing shriek while lightning flashed only a scant few paces before him. When the radiant bolt dispersed and they could look again upon the scene with open eyes, they saw that the lightning had most evidently struck the dead form of the fair Tigris youth, whose corpse now lay charred and smoking. Indeed, a portion of its harness was still burning as the tiny, feeble wick of a candle. Kale Fafsi blew it out solemnly.

Then, seemingly from the ashes of the Tigris' remains, there arose the impossible form of a healthy Tigris cub whose skin was blood-red! The healthy youth carried a black patch precisely where the fair warrior had suffered the terrible wound of the spear. Appearing also upon the apparition was the singular notch in the ear that had so marked the deceased.

Allan knew not what illusion or magic it was, but he felt a distinct reverence in it. Certainly it was not an evil ceremony of black magic, although it looked to all appearances as if Kale Nafsi called upon nature's lightning to occasion the reincarnation of the dead Tigris into the irresistible, red cub.

The sheet was quickly removed and the kitten bounded with evident joy into the arms of what must have been its parents, or at least those of the deceased. Such a bittersweet madness in the impossible scene!

Kale Nafsi remained still for so long that several in the party feared that he had forfeit his own life in the performance of the kind and miraculous deed. Regardless of his catatonic state, the weeping parents heaped praises upon his holy countenance. At length they took their young child, whom they would begin to raise anew, into

the shadows and with them followed the last of the overawed crowd of Tigris.

Whether he was a charlatan or bona fide, the ancient soul knew his art well. Allan pondered heavily but could not discover the illusion. *Am I to believe that he had prepared this event, complete with the rare kitten bearing identical markings? And this upon but a moment's notice?* Yet, trick it must have been for otherwise he must believe that the strange old jaguar who traveled with them had performed a undeniable reincarnation before his very eyes.

They decided to break camp immediately in order to capitalize on the effect of the phantasm on the fickle and dangerous Tigris and were quickly heading west once more.

Over the next few days they traveled easily over a great expanse of rolling hills. They saw no more of the wild Tigris although the scattered groves may have concealed them from view.

Allan and Elyse broached the incident with Kale Nafsi only after he seemed to recover himself, which took a full twenty-four hours. They had been patient with him, supposing that such magic, or even illusion, must be truly taxing and they were fain to disturb his rest.

Allan asked him politely, though rather bluntly, "Why did you take credit for healing the first two patients, who were aided by my family's hand?"

The ancient soul replied indignantly, "I am indeed worthy of the Tigris' praise and homage, for did I not cause there to be with me some white ones with no spots or stripes, who possess a great knowledge of medicine?"

In the end, Allan understood him to mean that he had caused, directly or indirectly, the first two patients to be healed and,

therefore, the Mwitw Moja were wise to come before him and equally wise to praise him.

Allan still felt indignant at the overconfident reply but was duly humbled by the treatment the wizard had given to his third patient, and was, therefore, hesitant to question him about it further. Finally, the wizard said to Allan, "It is better to believe that what you have witnessed is mere illusion and sleight of hand. Any other course must surely lead to a faith in magic, and under such belief, you are certain to fall under its power."

Hjaka told them later that Kale Nafsi, under the tutelage of the timeless Chakali, had learned to focus the electrical energies that make up all living creatures while baring the intent of his deed to First God, both for His approval and assistance.

"When life is near death, the holy wizard appeals to God to summon such a power that serves only to accelerate that which would naturally occur in time; that inevitable result of reincarnation."

CHAPTER 7 - INSIDE THE VOLCANO

Phoenix began been spending much time, and ammunition which he collected from the ground, instructing Thelugia to operate a firearm, and this from atop the immense mastodonian bulk that was Tana. Elyse and Allan spoke alone in excited tones, for truly they have beheld many surprises together and rarely experienced the joyous feeling of being alone with one another.

Allan commended her on her patients' successful recoveries, which kudos she diverted to her son. Soon, their talk took them to dark places of religious theology that they agreed to leave in darkness for the present. She shared with him many new

discoveries, any one of which would win every award by geographical and biological societies worldwide.

They pushed relentlessly onward without adventure when they were suddenly cautioned by Hjaka, who had kept to himself much of late, that they were nearing the land of his birth and, once again, he could not be certain of a happy welcome. The family wondered often at the curious enigma of man and tiger but could glean nothing more of his secrets.

"He either receives a hero's welcome or slinks in the shadows. Truly his conscience must weigh heavily upon him in certain lands." Allan suggested to his family privately, "Perhaps not all among the people were pleased that he had used the gate. Others still, might disapprove of our mere presence among them."

Tana had been speaking incessantly with Phoenix and Thelugia one day when the noble witch-doctor had heard enough of it. In a fit of rage befitting a Mwitu Moja, he ordered one of his students to reprimand the animal sternly, which course of action suited Phoenix's stalwart heart not at all.

The student was a fully grown Tigris who, as do they all, appeared strong, agile and deadly. The students, however, never seemed to allow themselves to make swift movements, choosing instead to adopt the demeanor of a somnambulator. Phoenix wondered whether he would avail himself of his speed and strength or fight, too, within his slow dream-state.

The two momentary foes squared off, Phoenix's strong one hundred and twenty pound frame protecting the almost limitless bulk of Tana, while the sleek feline was evidently highly motivated by his sense of duty to Kale Nafsi. Before anyone could intercede, Tana trumpeted the start of the match.

As it resounded through the air, the loyal student leaped forward and swung an oak staff at one of Tana's down-stretched tusk-like trunks. Yet, before the blow could land, Phoenix threw his body between the two and suffered the terrible blow to land upon his own ribcage.

Tana reared high in rage so close to the boy that Allan and Elyse feared he would be trodden on. Allan dashed forth to pick him up and bring him out of the way of the monstrous hooves and the lucky father yanked him clear by a very narrow margin.

Thelugia fell upon the student and overcame him with many blows, which would have rent him terribly had her claws been extended for mortal combat. The dazed student was helped back to the enclave and the spectators knew that his life would be painful for many days to come.

Alas, Phoenix's skin was dark black along his right torso, demonstrating clearly where the vicious blow had fallen. Tana nudged her two trunks up to Phoenix and nuzzled him touchingly. Allan strode forward to vent his rage upon the students and their master, whose rash command had set the lamentable civil violence into motion.

He was stopped by Hjaka, who apologized on behalf of Kale Nafsi, who certainly had not planned Phoenix's fate. "Nothing holy will be born from an immediate confrontation with the errant wizard. I ask you to let some time pass."

The sad drama resolved with the three Hunters and Thelugia thereafter marching far to the rear of Kale Fasi and his retinue. Phoenix asked Tana to remain quiet for a time to allow tempers to cool. The civil tension was very unfortunate for now the small caravan seemed divided.

The land and its peoples were so treacherous that Elyse found herself wondering again at the wisdom of their undertaking in New Africa.

They continued in that lamentable state for several more days during which Phoenix recovered considerably, yet there was little or no communication between the two factions.

Hjaka approached Allan and said, "I am greatly saddened, for those whom I have sought to heal the hearts of my tribe, cannot themselves live in brotherhood."

Indignation welled within Allan's breast and obstinacy very nearly closed his heart to the painfully fair plea, but Allan was wise enough to understand that Hjaka's argument was just. Allan discussed the issue with his family at length and found in Phoenix a rare perspective for one so young and who still nursed bruised ribs. Phoenix understood the position of the student and held no malice toward him. Nor was he angry with Kale Nafsi himself, who he believed, had only momentarily lost his patience, and with it his balance and wisdom.

Phoenix was very pleased that Snow had employed non-lethal means to resolve the conflict and was happy to have shouldered the blow for his behemoth friend, who probably wouldn't even have felt it.

His words and the sentiments of wise humanity which they revealed, were carried faithfully by Hjaka to Kale Nafsi, who responded with a summons wherein he wished to speak privately with Phoenix.

To this, his parents readily consented, though they felt a pang of fear. Their son now had many who wished to whisper in his ear, where it had once been only his mother and father. Yet, the wisdom of the child must surpass that of the father if mankind is to grow, and they spoke of other matters while the wizard and martyr spoke.

During this time, they talked freely with Thelugia who, they learned, had come from an endangered race in a region she termed the *Coldlands*. Hers was a quest for answers and adventure. She spoke very highly of Phoenix, and the racial differences notwithstanding, the parents caught in her eye a gleam of special affection for him; of *romantic* affection. Their minds wandered upon the possibility of an eventual union between the fair Thelugia and their son, and all that it would imply.

Allan was surprised to discover that Thelugia, or Snow as Elyse and Phoenix preferred to call her, was an artist who had already composed several wonderful landscapes in Phoenix's notebook. While they observed her fingers, they noticed for the first time, deep scars on her palms and suspected that she no longer possessed her claws. Elyse shuddered as she imagined it to be the result of some violence that had been wrought upon her when she was even younger than she already was.

Elyse and Allan held hands as they talked of their many adventures, marveling at them, and for many hours they trekked ever westward over the gently rolling hills of New Atlantis. As the sun fell, they espied the next geographical feature from their map, which was a volcanic mountain now barely discernable in the far distance.

This, they were told by Hjaka, was surrounded by dense jungle made very dangerous by the presence of a race of pigmy men who lived as monkeys.

"From these," Hjaka said, "we may expect ill treatment of any sort. They are known to hurl projectiles from the treetops yet are also capable of more sophisticated traps and plottings as well."

He advised against the use of firearms, as the sound was likely to awaken the *sleeping one*, though he would not expound upon the enigmatic appellation.

Mercifully, he added, "We can travel through their land in one night and one day if we travel quickly."

He also made a point to say, "Should we be attacked, we must quickly discern their leader and slay him." These words sounded highly advisable to Allan but he suspected that it would not be so elementary to put them into action.

Kale Nafsi, too, seemed morose and disheartened, for the poor intellect of the Watu Na Mikia, or *Men with Tails*, placed his magic far beyond their comprehension for fear or reverence. "These," he said bitterly, "understand only pain and death."

His students were each supplied with a short, curved cutlass with which they would protect their teacher. Allan was acquainted with all of the students who were, after the horror at the bridge, now but six. It should be said of them that they were not the lemmings or unreasoning minions that he had taken them to be, but strong, intelligent Tigris who chose to follow in the paths of magic, knowledge, wisdom and mysticism.

They camped that night only half a day's journey from the mouth of the jungle. They discussed at great length what could be done to accommodate Tana's great size, for the interior foliage once again was sure to be a great nuisance to her. To this question they arrived at no better solution than to leave the matter up to her own will.

As they slowly drew westward, the ground became swampy, yet still bore Tana's weight although she left imprints a meter deep in some places. The soil gradually grew firmer as they approached the treeline, which teemed with vines and vague movement.

A student was dispatched to scout for a hidden path that Kale Nafsi had traveled once before, now a great many years in the past. After two hours' time, he returned to proudly announce that he had

found the path which had been indistinguishable from the vantage afforded by their approach due to its naturally camouflaged entrance.

Once found, the swath soon widened, for it must once have been an important route. Yet, it was not quite tall or broad enough to relieve Tana entirely and she was once again forced to break or bend branches and limbs to gain every step.

They penetrated only two miles in that way before night fell, though it mattered little in the forest's gloom. They had seen a great many shepherds of the Watu Na Mikia flying about far above them but had received no injury or communication from them.

As they had been told that the *Men with Tails* never slept, the caravan chose to continue their march through the night, hoping to pass through before any hostile plan could be formulated to deal with the trespassers. Phoenix and Thelugia marched together with the mules while Hjaka walked with Elyse and Allan. The guarded litter of Kale Nafsi brought up the rear of the ragtag entourage.

Several miles passed and they were beginning to feel confident that they would not only survive the jungle, but pass through it unmolested, when suddenly a storm of stones rained upon them from above. The rocks were quite deadly for they averaged the size of a man's fist, yet they struck no one but Tana, who Allan noted, seemed to suffer little pain from them.

Before another moment had passed, the *Men with Tails* flung themselves upon the travelers from great heights with terrible effect. Hjaka fell first and Allan saw his assailant merely tuck and roll upon landing, then spring up quickly, apparently unhurt.

An instant later Allan felt a pressure upon his shoulders and then his face as he was borne down under the weight of one who had pounced from behind. Yet, he too, was up quickly and with his knife in the beast's chest.

Allan looked for Elyse and found her amid a pile of simian bodies, swinging her short-sword in deft arcs, parries and jabs. He then looked for his son but could not see him, Thelugia or even Tana, upon whose back they had been riding.

Two more beasts assailed him from above but he caught one on his sword as he descended and narrowly dodged the other who was killed from behind by a thrust from Cain, the same student who had struck Phoenix with the staff. He smiled at Allan a mere instant before they were set upon once more.

Allan had a very trying time of it, for the infernal imps attacked in unison and were quick and numerous. He fought his way to stand back to back with Elyse.

"Tana bolted west! The last time I saw Phoenix, he was fighting with Thelugia up on Tana's back!" Elyse said in between attacks.

"We've got to find him!" Allan raged as he swung his sword savagely.

They were growing weaker and losing blood from their many wounds, for the small men bit them viciously with long fangs aimed at their vitals. Two more sprang upon Elyse and knocked her prone. Allan drew his pistol and killed one quickly but the other was poised to maul her before he could prevent it. Indeed, its loathsome hand, so similar to Allan's own, held a rock that was already descending upon her.

Suddenly, California lunged at its throat and held on defiantly while the pygmy raked her underside cruelly.

Allan's attention was drawn to a dark figure that he glimpsed flitting in the lower boughs above him. He drew his pistol and fired as the beast leaped upon him, but alas, he had not reloaded it.

The savage fell upon Allan with the impact of rock and he lay prone beneath him.

The feral man rose above Allan and, with a hateful sneer, lifted the crude wooden knife that he would plunge into Allan's heart within an instant. From the ground, Elyse discharged her pistol, executing an extremely tricky shot through the dense melee, which caught this chief of savages through the fleshy part of his nether region.

He emitted a long, plaintive wail that stopped all aggression from his warriors at once. They looked at him lying prone upon his face with his hairless behind bleeding from the projectile. When they saw their chief, whom they may not have loved overmuch, thus wounded and humiliated to boot, they retreated quietly away.

Thus the travelers were left alone to catch their breath and to count their dead and wounded. The dead numbered two unfortunate students whose throats had been torn by teeth, that most primal of weapons. The wounded numbered nine of the remaining ten with Kale Nafsi alone being uninjured.

Allan entrusted Hjaka to follow them with the mules as quickly as he was able, then he and Elyse ran after Phoenix with much apprehension and fear in their hearts for the safety of their boy. They ran for perhaps two miles when suddenly the dense forest gave way to a large glade of many miles circumference and from the middle of which arose the horror known as an active volcano.

Interspersed according to geographic physics but seemingly at random, there existed thick, soupy areas that bubbled sulfurous fumes and occasionally spouted plumes of boiling water one hundred feet into the air. It was far out amidst these that Elyse spied Tana, as well as the bodies of many pteradon-men known as Mtu Kwa Mbawa, who lay slain across the distance between them and their son's mastodon.

Elyse's heart rose at the sight of Tana, but sank as she suspected the flying men, who they had hoped to name among their allies, to have been killed by Phoenix and Thelugia.

The parents rushed recklessly into the minefield of geysers and quicksand, only reckoning the timing of the spouts at the final moment and, therefore, often failed to elude their searing spray. They approached Tana but could not see Phoenix and so closed the final hundred yards faster than they had ever ran before, only to find Tana alone and wounded from numerous lacerations and bruises. Blood trickled from both of her long snouts and her eyes were dull and distant. Yet they did not remain with her but immediately struck opposing paths in search of their son.

Allan found him lying face down and motionless amidst some tall, dry grass. Elyse joined him at her husband's cry and began to breathe into his lungs and apply pressure to his chest. She repeated the procedure for several tense minutes during which Allan had a vision of bringing his lifeless boy to the great Kale Nafsi for resurrection.

His soul recoiled at the vision and Phoenix began to heave great, deep breaths and soon recovered sufficiently to recount to them his tale. When the pygmy simians had attacked, contrary to their earlier supposition, Tana was greatly injured and panicked, as animals are wont to do in certain circumstances, and the three riding her had held on for their lives.

They were continually harried by those bold simians who held on and continued their attack during Tana's flight. The pair spoke of the other's brave deeds, but not of their own. If taken at face value, their actions were very heroic indeed.

"When Tana carried us into the glade, we were set upon by gigantic apes who sprang from the trees." Phoenix explained

breathlessly. "We wouldn't have lasted a minute against them but, as they closed in on us, long tridents began to strike them down from the sky with the sudden ferocity of lightning!"

Phoenix explained that the Mtu Kwa Mbawa were unfailing in their aim. They descended upon the apes and fought bravely, and paid dearly, for the victory that had saved his life. The gorillas were cowardly at heart and soon relented, carrying their dead away with them and dispersing among the trees in all directions. Thus, Phoenix had fallen from exhaustion, not through injury, though of these he had suffered many.

What grew to confound the family next was the location of Thelugia, who Phoenix recalled last fighting the apes from atop Tana. They searched long and hard but found no trace of her. They were forced to assume that she had been carried away by the apes.

So it was that dusk found them turning bodily around and, having rejoined their bloodied caravan, they entered again the abominable forest which was home to the unsophisticated yet dangerous primates. The beasts who looked so alarmingly human, yet had not yet even earned a name among the Tigris.

They had moved only shallowly into the forest when they were met by what they took to be a group of gorilla ambassadors, who suddenly appeared in their path.

Hjaka took the lead and listened to them. He then explained to the brutes that they sought the warrior had been lost in the battle. Through elaborate grunts and pantomime, Hjaka was finally able to elicit the answer that Thelugia, the white one, was yet alive but could only be ransomed at great expense. After he related this to the party, he asked the ape what gift he could offer for her safe return, to which the beast said nothing.

The travelers offered that which was valuable to them, such as weapons and tools, but it soon became clear that what the apes wanted were the blankets they knew the caravan possessed. The adventurers quickly parted with the whole of their excess and the beasts brought her forth.

She was noble of bearing and silent, though with a moment's opportunity it was evident that she would relish the chance to strike mortal blows to the foul abominations who were her captors. She crossed over to the caravan, however, with downcast eyes as if ashamed at her position, but when Phoenix rushed to her with an embrace, she knew she was part of the family and returned his endearment in spades while the apes disappeared with their booty.

They returned to a point that existed about midway to the great volcano and camped upon the glade that was large enough to be termed a plain. They jested somberly around the fire which burned late into the night, telling their tales to which others added such details and perspectives to which only they had been privy.

The land seemed to test its inhabitants' character to extremes, yet could also reward one quite tangibly as well. They spent two days there to recover their health, for their lacerations gave them much pain.

Elyse dreamed at night of Dayax Ubox the Moonflower, with whom she spoke at length. She recalled few details upon waking, however, but carried the reassurance that her guardian was yet with her, as indeed, she said were Allan's and Phoenix's. Allan confessed that he did not feel the presence of Dhalin Yaro nor did he see him in his dreams, which he thought was probably for the best.

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They awoke to the high-pitched chanting of Kale Nafsi and arose to witness him sitting cross-legged in a posture of meditation that

would not have appeared unusual save for the detail that he hovered four feet in the air!

This feat of illusion, seen in the sober light of day, threatened to expel Allan's reason and would have proved victorious over him had he been left to his own ponderances.

At that moment, a warm wind arose with such vehemence that his attention was turned to calming the frightened mules, who had been through so much yet understood so little. When he returned to the party, the tempest had receded slightly. Though it was still impressive, it was not of a similar caliber to the other night when he had seemingly performed the reincarnation.

Allan shuddered as he beheld the crippled form of Kale Nafsi once more sitting upon the ground as the winds died down. He seemed to be catatonic and while they awaited his return from the spirit world, they occupied themselves by straightening up the camp which was once again in a state of alarming disarray due to the magical wind.

When the wizard awoke, he summoned them all before him and shared the vision that he had beheld while levitating in communion, although with what or whom he communed, he did not say.

"The conclusion of our quest is drawing near and it shall come to be viewed as both a defeat and a victory for it is to be marked with heavy loss. My own life, he prophesied, shall be forfeit as well as those of several others among the caravan." Allan thought that it was fortunate that he did not name them.

"Yet, should you persevere, you will find your efforts to be a seed planted among the people. In time, it will grow and calm the hearts that

presently beat with anger and hatred, so that they may come to exude tolerance and forgiveness in their stead. This, too, shall multiply with each successive generation and one day, perhaps, all will be well."

When he had closed his prophecy, he then bade them each to approach closer, one by one, as he called out their names. To each of them in turn, he bestowed the gift of a talisman on a leather strap which he instructed them to wear next to their hearts.

He also spoke a name for each of them that was in his own tongue, while he sprinkled them with an unknown liquid. The strange baptism was a very solemn affair during which no one spoke a word, indeed, even the animals were mute.

When the ceremony was concluded, they bowed before the ancient visage of Kale Nafsi, who apparently had fallen asleep for they heard snoring from within his litter, and thus retired to discuss what they had learned among themselves.

First, they compared the talismans that he had given to them and found them to be nearly identical to each other save for a unique number which was etched into each. The medallions appeared to be a bronze-gold alloy and very old. They had been fashioned with the depiction of a great Neptalin spreading his wings about the world, which was in turn watched over by an eye in the heavens above. This eye, they understood at once, was First God, the literal source of life on earth, placed eons ago by the God of creation to ensure the survival of life on the planet.

Phoenix's talisman carried the Roman numeral I, Elyse's the number II and Allan's the number III. He thought that perhaps the wizard had ranked them by importance and Hjaka believed this to be true as well, although he had received no talisman himself.

They next spoke their given names to each other, albeit clumsily at first. Phoenix had been dubbed, *Rafiki Kwa Wote*, which translated into *Friend of All*. This, they agreed, was very appropriate for what creature was his enemy?

Elyse was named *Yeye Inalinda*, meaning *She Who Protects*. Upon hearing it, Allan recalled the ferocity with which she had slain the *Men from Under* in order to save her son, and this name Allan considered to be very apt as well.

Allan was dubbed with the somewhat vague title of *Mtu Wa Hatima*, meaning *Man of Fate*. Hjaka, too, had been bestowed with a name, which seemed to please him very much for they heard him repeating it under his breath. His was *Ukimbizi Ya Mwokozi*, or *Seeker of Saviours*.

They spoke of many things around the fire that night, but only inwardly did Allan ponder the portentous words of Kale Nafsi relating to the success of their quest. Remembering the prophecy, he wondered who among them would live to see its completion.

It is odd, and therefore worthy of note, that they all experienced intense dreams that night, which seemed stranger still as they found them to be eerily similar when discussing them the next morning. The Hunters dreamed of the looming volcano, upon whose rim they stood despite the intense heat which should have engulfed their bodies. As they looked down into the broiling magma they heard a voice from the heavens instructing them to have faith. Then they clasped hands and leaped into the inferno. After their inexplicable plunge, perhaps not surprisingly, they remembered nothing more.

Hjaka listened to them recount their dream, then repeated his given name, but would not reveal the vision that he had experienced. He ventured only to tell them that theirs was not identical to his

own. *Perhaps he alone of the party was destined to outlive their grand adventure?* Elyse thought sadly.

The sun was high when they began the march toward the volcano that was only a few miles before them. It billowed acrid smoke and fumes irregularly and, given their dreams of the night, it proved more than sufficient to weigh heavily upon their hearts as they closed the distance toward it.

As they stood only one-hundred yards from the base of the volcano, they could discern two things. The first was a small cave which seemed to denote the only method of ingress to the mountain. The second sight which met their eyes were the masses of uneven ranks of large apes, who once again leaped toward them from the forest ringing the broad glade.

The caravan fired upon them to great effect although the apes closed upon them quickly. They had succeeded in slaying perhaps twenty of the beasts, which represented only a very small portion of their number.

Kale Nafsi instructed them to move toward the cave at once, though Allan immediately saw that his litter could not be carried the distance before the apes would be upon them. Still, his brave students picked him up and began fast-trotting toward the cave until, with a sharp word from him, they placed him on the ground and encircled him with their cutlasses drawn.

Allan looked skyward, hoping to see the winged army of the Mtu Kwa Mbawa descending on the brutish horde, yet beheld only the sooty clouds and a dark sky bereft of winged-saviours.

Kale Nafsi then ordered his students to retreat into the cave and leave him alone upon the plain. His selfless order was particularly painful to his students and as difficult for them to comply with as Abraham's task of slaying his own son. Their love for him was

clearly evident for tears streamed from their eyes and they looked back at their master as they reluctantly obeyed his command.

Allan moved as if to save him but Kale Nafsi had anticipated his action. The ancient eyes bored their will into Allan's brain and he motioned curtly for Allan to lead the party through the cave.

From the mouth of the cave, they maintained their terrible volley of lead, with Thelugia joining the firing line for the first time, but still the apes advanced with the fury of a tempest. Their improved resolve was so marked that Elyse wondered if perhaps they had been reprimanded for their earlier failure and cowardice by someone or something capable of instilling them with far more fear than death presented to them.

The apes separated into two war-parties as a portion veered off from the main body toward the lone, lost Kale Nafsi. The main body still advanced toward the cave. When the snarling apes came upon the helpless wizard, they slowed and encircled him menacingly until the ancient soul could be seen no more.

When the main force of gruesome assailants were nearly upon them, Hjaka insisted that they all proceed into the narrow cave. "There we will be safer from the beasts and prevent them from surrounding us, as will certainly occur if we try to make our stand upon the open plain."

Allan looked once more for the *Men with Wings* but saw no hope descending from the charcoal sky. Tana trumpeted loudly and, though she could not hope to follow the party inside, she escorted them safely to the cave entrance. She would now have to fight or flee and Phoenix wished her success in a hurried, emotional farewell.

None of party had wished to leave the *Ancient Soul* or the noble Tana to die upon the grim plain but it was evident that they could

not be saved. Yet, at the last step before entering the tunnel, Phoenix turned and rushed out to make the attempt.

He was tripped by Thelugia and fell hard to the ground. Before he could rise, his father carried him over his shoulder in a way that he hadn't done since Phoenix was a little boy.

Likewise, the son too, behaved as he had not for a decade or more. He kicked and screamed in a veritable tantrum of acute emotional pain caused by the imminent death of the magical Kale Nafsi and his noble friend, Tana. Allan carried his son deeper into the dark, steamy cave until such time had passed that they all knew their friends lay beyond anyone's aid.

They were not followed into the cave, but chose to travel a fair distance within before they attempted to rest. They sat upon their haunches, for the soil was too hot to sit upon, and gave vent to their grief. Hjaka, who seemed almost hard-hearted in his pragmatism, scouted the path ahead while Allan attempted to explain his behavior to Phoenix, as did Thelugia, with whom Phoenix was also very upset.

"Why didn't you just let me go try to save them?" Phoenix asked the two angrily. He felt betrayed by them for thwarting his *ghande*.

The father had no words that he believed his son would hearken to, but Thelugia spoke gently, "They gave their lives so that you may live. It would be dishonorable to die with them. It is hard, my friend, to let someone sacrifice for you. It is much easier to die than it is to live."

Phoenix's heart mourned the fate of poor Tana who could not have hoped to enter the cave and whose angry trumpeting seemed to accuse him of cowardly betrayal. In time, they heard Tana no more and the broken-hearted boy found respite in sleep upon his

mother's lap who, for her part, seemed content that her boy was safe.

Later, Allan thanked Thelugia for preventing his son from rushing out to die with Kale Nafsi and Tana, but she seemed to hold herself in severe remonstrance for what she termed her own treachery.

She hung her head sadly and said, "I wonder if, instead of thwarting his ghande, I should have followed him to a noble death myself." She shook her head as if to clear her thoughts. "This I could not do for one reason, I love Phoenix and could not allow him to die."

After her accidental confession, she threw herself upon Allan and he held her like the father-in-law he felt like he was becoming. He wondered if Phoenix was aware of her deep feelings for him, then he smiled at his own foolishness. *What father is privy to budding love before the lover himself?*

So it came to pass that the first prophecy of Kale Nafsi became fulfilled, for they were certain that he could live no more. His students displayed a mixed mien. There was one bold fellow whose eyes now exhibited the unmistakable gleam of ambition. The others now seemed bereft of the peace they had displayed not an hour before when Kale Nafsi had been their teacher.

Allan wondered at the love and respect they had for their teacher and looked for a parallel emotion within his own life, which he found in his family but in little else.

Cain, for such was named the youth who had once aimed a blow at a innocent monster but had struck a noble boy, had shown himself to be penitent and wiser after the incident with Phoenix. The man had won Allan over, too, because he was a musician and played the flute after dinner on occasion. Cain now spoke to the bold,

ambitious Sesar, who clearly wanted to assume the role of leader among the students.

"We are all to become teachers now. There is no equal to Kale Nafsi among us to follow." Cain said wisely, and though Allan thought that he had presented the winning argument, Sesar would have none of it.

"I have studied under our fallen master longer than even you, Cain. I will be the light in the darkness. They will learn to follow me." Sesar said haughtily.

"Do as you choose, I will only follow my heart." Cain replied with sad resignation.

Allan had been keeping watch for the brutes behind them but no sound was to be heard. *Perhaps they knew something about the cave that he did not?* Hjaka had placed himself at the leading edge of the party while everyone else slept the sleep of the weary despite the ground's merciless temperature. Allan guessed at their innermost thoughts and his heart ached with compassion for them throughout his long watch.

Later, Thelugia approached him. "I will take the next vigil. Your son is also relieving Hjaka at our fore."

Allan thanked her and went to sleep next to his wife. He did not dare to approach his son who still resented being alive when Tana and Kale Nafsi were not; a circumstance for which he held his father and Thelugia accountable.

The weakened caravan arose to a lightless morning inside the cave and followed Hjaka up the path which had been cut into the bowels of the mountain. They followed a very broad spiral and found themselves above the place where they had camped the night

before but discovered that they had gained several hundred feet in altitude.

The walls drew inward like a cone so that the path immediately above them was broader than the one above and obstructed their view. Another deep grumble shook the ground all around them and small bits of hot, loamy rock fell from the stalactites high above, landing upon their heads and splashing soundlessly into the broiling magma far below. Still, they marched on.

The choking smell of sulfur grew heavier as the air grew thinner and they found it becoming increasingly difficult to breathe. With their binoculars, they were able to barely discern the original camp now thousands of feet below. They could see with their naked eyes, the molten rock bubbling further down in the center of the cone.

A vote was offered for camping after the long day's march but few wanted to rest in the oppressive gloom or to lie upon the searing earth. They decided to march onward into what must have been the dead of night. They completed each revolution of the giant spiral with fewer steps, during which conversations were sparse and tended toward the morbid.

It became clear, however, that Phoenix would grow to forgive his father, if for no other reason than, otherwise, he must harbor an eternal grudge against the fair Thelugia as well, neither of which was in his nature to do.

At last the cave relented and they neared the large, open cone at the top of the volcano. The air there, though still hot and humid, was free to mingle with the night and even that paltry favor served to help rejuvenate their bodies and heighten their morale.

They performed another half-spiral and looked over the edge to behold a chilling sight. The plain far below was littered with the bodies of the apes they had killed, but even with binoculars they

saw no sign of Tana or Kali Nafsi among the dead. They shuddered as they realized that the apes must have taken them.

A spout of boiling water erupted, spraying over them like a wave upon the rocks. They were each badly burned in numerous locations, including the hapless mules. Allan didn't know what to do next, for at the crest of the active volcano, the path seemed to end.

There were no more spirals above them, just the flute in the middle running down to the lake of broiling lava far below. Yet, without hesitation, upon reaching the end of the path, Phoenix and Cain began to search intently for a plaque or symbol they said was carved into the ground. They must have been taught a secret from the enigmatic *Ancient One*, for they continued to describe what it was they sought.

"The symbol will depict a Neptalim carrying an infant." Phoenix said to the surprised party.

"It is said to lay somewhere on the ground here, although now it will assuredly be covered with the thick ash that has accumulated over untold centuries." Cain explained.

They all began to search the volcano's perilous crest, employing many of the myriad tools they still carried on the faithful mules to rake aside the thick ash. Several times more they were beset upon by spumes of boiling water from the many intermittent geysers around them.

With a triumphant cry, Elyse, who always wins at such games, drew their attention to a large tile of the strange brass and gold alloy, which she had partially revealed from underneath eighteen inches of ash. Upon the unlikely tile, which measured five feet square, was a lifelike rendering of an angel rising from the cone of

a volcano, whose torso tapered to become an arrow that pointed down to the very tile upon which they stood.

In the arms of the angel was an infant, who was rendered in bas relief and, therefore, subject to increased deterioration. Its edges were so blurry that they could not even discern the species of the child.

"Perhaps it is not the work of erosion." Elyse reasoned, "Maybe it was the intention of the artist to disguise the nature of the child." Several of those present agreed with her.

To their horror, Phoenix and Cain admitted to their terrible secret. Cain began, "My fallen teacher told us of this sacred place. It is here that he was leading us and from here we must hurl ourselves into the volcano."

"But do not fear," Phoenix continued as he beheld the horrified countenances of his friends and family, "for we will be caught by the angels who wait only for our leap of faith."

Allan scoffed, clearly outraged at the idea. His wife's brain rushed through many thoughts and emotions but she said nothing. Hjaka asserted that he knew of a legend that spoke of a leap of faith into a volcano, but knew of no sacred tile or awaiting angel. His legend was one of *ghande*, a martyr's death.

Cain offered to take the leap first but, having failed at diverting them and seeing no other possibility for survival, Allan and Elyse insisted that they begin with one of the mules.

Cain countered, "The mules lack sufficient faith to conclusively prove the issue."

"I suspect that I, too, may lack faith. I insist that we experiment with the mules."

"Also," Elyse added, "we certainly could not abandon them here alone under any circumstances. They must go first."

So it was that they found themselves leading a duly frightened mule, who had been faithful to them through many hardships, to the edge of the cone. With a resigned sigh, they cast him from the ancient, holy tile into the inferno below. As Rebecca went over the side, Elyse turned away and choked on bitter tears. So it went with all of the mules, though her assistance was sorely missed for they did not go to their doom easily.

Phoenix chivalrously asked his mother, "Do you want to take California with you when you go?"

She jumped up and held him tight. "If we must do it, then we will all take the leap together."

"I'm sorry Mom. Kale Nafsi said that no more than two may take the leap at once."

Cain verified his words but did not profess to know why it was so, yet Kale Nafsi had made a point of forewarning them upon the issue. So it was that madness, which must have been occasioned by the noxious fumes of the wretched place, seemed to overcome them all. Allan, the sober father, found himself finally acquiescing to the suicidal act.

Cain leapt first with Sesar, the would-be leader, who clung to Cain for strength. They uttered no cry and disappeared from sight almost immediately, as had the poor mules.

Phoenix and Thelugia were to go next but Elyse and Allan could not bear it and so insisted that they go before their son. Their parting endearments were brief but duly emotional.

Allan gazed into the flashing green eyes of his beloved wife and they kissed upon the holy tile at the edge of hell. Then they jumped.

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They fell through the air for only fifteen feet before they were caught by an unseen force that they soon realized was a slide! It had been fashioned from volcanic glass and had been rendered nearly invisible against the sooty clouds that surrounded it. They slid a very long time, during which Elyse and Allan were wrenched apart and lost sight of one another.

The substance seemed impervious to the volcanic heat for it was cool and as slick as ice. Allan slid down some unknown distance and was deposited, after a brief but terrifying freefall, into a deep pool of warm water. As he rose to fill his lungs, he looked for Elyse and found her already swimming toward him. Then they both heard screaming from above and moved away from the mouth of the slide to avoid the falling bodies of their son and his true friend.

Soon, they flew through the air to land safely in the pool, while Elyse and her husband cried out with relief. What they had mistaken for screams of fear or pain were actually those of glee! The parents marveled at youth and how it managed to find enjoyment in spite of life's apparent catastrophes.

The dog and the students came next, one by one, until the entire party was swimming to the shore where the mules were already shaking the water from their tails. The babelbirds fluffed and preened but did not appear to be injured in any way.

They regrouped and were obliged to scour the area to reclaim supplies and repack the mules, for much had been unsettled by their long slide and subsequent dive. They found many of their

items floating upon the black subterranean waters but many more were lost in its black depths.

There was only one exit to the cavern, so they moved wearily through it not knowing when or from what direction their next peril would arise. They found the path to be lit by the phosphorescent glow of the immense fungi that grew upon the ceiling like fleshy stalactites.

Color, as they could perceive it, was confused by the eerie light for no two mushrooms glowed with the same hue, though they all pulsed like living hearts, mute and timeless. Of these, the Hunters took pictures but no samples, for they hung too far above them.

Elyse conjectured, "The mushrooms must absorb the sulfuric fumes for the air here is fresh." Allan breathed deeply and agreed with her.

They looked but saw no spoor from animals or man and eventually made a hasty camp, dressed their many burns and fell asleep without posting a guard.

They awoke in what would have been late-morning had they a sky to tell them so. They felt so refreshed that it was almost inexplicable. Elyse, pretty as she always was, awoke to find that she had been completely healed of her burns and appeared to look fifteen years younger.

Phoenix, too, was healed and seemed taller and to bulge with new muscle, though gratefully, he did not appear to lose age. In short, no one in the party failed to note an incredible healing and revitalization that had seemed to shed years of ache from their bones.

Allan wondered, *Why did the mysterious Kale Nafsi lead us to this subterranean font? Why had he divulged its secrets only to*

Phoenix and Cain and indeed, how had he first come to learn of its existence?

Perhaps the old wizard had made pilgrimages here for many centuries past, for it truly felt as though one could live there forever if he could but dip occasionally into the subaqueous marvel.

Yet, eternal life or even just a very long one, had never held attraction to Allan's adventurous soul and so he and his family waited at the camp while three of the students went back for a second dip in the veritable fountain of youth.

Of these three, two returned shortly in a state of wild apprehension. They told the tale of their leader, Sesar, who had wished to have the pool to himself for even a moment. He had raced ahead so as to be the first to reach the dark, still magical waters. Then he had flung himself into the pool lustily without bothering to remove his garments.

The second-helping of mystic healing was apparently disallowed by design, for the two survivors claimed to have seen the hapless Sesar burst into flames upon contacting the bracken water!

"He ignited like a torched hay bale!" said one breathless student who was not overly fond of the would-be leader.

"He burned like oil floating on the surface of the lake, but his clothes did not." The other sadly related, "As we fled, we beheld the remnants floating on the surface yet we dared not retrieve them for fear of touching the water again."

Elyse thought that the consensus belief at the time, was that a person may only dip once within the magic pool. Allan was sorry for the prideful fellow but also proud that the man had, in fact, led his followers well. His unwitting sacrifice had saved the lives of

several superior men, although his death could not be considered *ghande* for it had not been not willingly given.

The Hunters winced at the effect of the poor fool's folly but accepted the words of the witnesses without seeking the evidence with their own eyes.

Once again, Allan felt that the ancient land required strict adherence to its moral code of honor or, perhaps, to that which dwelt within them all.

They pressed forward for the duration of a day and night beneath the glowing canopy of weird light. Hieroglyphics had been carved into the corners at junctions which Elyse and Phoenix photographed and labelled.

One path was always marked with a fiery serpent, the other with a large tree, so their decisions were elementary. The runes soon led them out on the thither side of the volcano from that which they had entered.

Awaiting their arrival was a sight that occasioned great rejoicing among the heartsick party, for Tana was there waiting for Phoenix. She looked very much like a boy's loyal puppy, for she wagged not just her tail but with her whole body at the excitement of their reunion.

A moment later they espied another, equally glorious surprise, for under the shade of a nearby tree, sat the hunchbacked wizard Kale Nafsi! He was apparently well and seemed supremely pleased with their arrival. His students swarmed around him with supplicant gestures, some fully prostrating themselves at his feet.

All of them, save Cain, who merely bowed respectfully low. Observing him, Allan thought, *Perhaps he will not look to his*

teacher for direction so often, but will find more answers within himself.

The miraculous personage of the *Ancient One* refused to hear their tale or to recite his own, for he said that they must hurry. "The meeting of the Great Council is drawing near."

Where the Hunters had come to believe that base survival was their only goal, the witch-doctor reminded them of their greater mission. All hope for the successful resolution of the civil unrest still lay before them.

Allan groaned inwardly but then remembered how the gift of the strange baptism had given him the strength of years and he steeled his resolve once more. *Perhaps we are given only that which is necessary to fulfill our quests, and if we desire merriment or satisfaction, we must look for them along the way.*

CHAPTER 8 - THE GREAT COUNCIL

They traveled westward that day during which Tana loudly related her story, and that of the mute Kale Nafsi while Phoenix translated to the rest of the party.

"Once Tana had helped us all reach the cave, she felt that her duty was complete and had proudly turned to face the apish horde and her own noble death. Then she sighted the prone form of the wizard upon the plain. She gathered him gently in her trunks and fled into a narrow gorge several miles distant."

"She was menaced during her flight by only a few apes due to her superior speed and endurance, and these she had been obliged to step on. Once entrenched in the gorge, she laid the sorcerer a safe

distance behind her and defiantly turned to meet the onslaught. In the narrow confines of the natural gorge, she could contend with the feral primates in smaller numbers."

Phoenix paused for breath before continuing Tana's tale. "She fought valiantly against the mighty torrent of the low-born apes, who she stomped, rent, kicked and crushed until the pile of dead itself became a barrier that they could no longer climb. One beast might climb several feet up the gruesome barricade only to slide back down as the ghastly terrain failed him." The Hunters beamed with pride for Tana as Phoenix shared her story.

"Tana's thick hide was wounded in hundreds of places but none of them mortally, for the tusks of the apes could not pierce the vitals of my thirty foot behemoth. When the stubborn but defeated apes had retreated far away, Tana freed herself from the wall of dead. Then she bore Kale Nafsi who navigated her to the secret exit on the far side of the volcano to await our return."

Every member of the caravan made a point to pay homage to the great mammoth who had saved them all.

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As they drew near the trees on the west side of the great glade, they saw none of the Watu Na Mikia or of the primal, nameless apes. They traveled several days more without molestation of any kind, though they could perceive the menacing shadows of the Kivuli Mnyama prowling in the gloom.

After the uneventful trek of several days, the thick forest finally relented and they found that the meagre path they had been following joined with a larger road. Upon the busier thoroughfare many Tigris walked, all souls making the westward pilgrimage to meet at the Great Council.

The Hunters observed the wondrous result of the apparent interbreeding between the Tigris and dog-like Canid tribes. Of these, they had heard tales but had never yet beheld. One such mismatched couple, of which the father was Canid and the mother Tigris, cradled their offspring who greatly resembled a hyena pup.

Allan marveled at Mother Nature, or First God, and was startled at his new perspective of Her. He felt that wisdom would continue to dawn upon him with every day spent in New Atlantis.

Hunter and Thelugia drew much attention to themselves, mounted as they were, high atop Tana. The pilgrim children pointed and laughed while Phoenix performed inane hijinks for their amusement. From these good-humored, if not overly dignified exploits, Phoenix won many friends among the people as the caravan drew them all closer to their destinies.

They saw a glorious walled city far to the west but was told by Hjaka that their destination was not so far as that, for the meeting grounds were located to the east of the city and they would arrive at them first.

The mass migration of the people terminated on a vast plain in whose center rose an immense scaffolding. The crude structure looked new and Allan guessed that it had been built specifically for the event.

"Look closer, my friends." Hjaka instructed them.

The Hunters were slow to realize that the tall structure had been built to house the most gigantic babelbird anyone could ever hope to see. Elyse estimated its height accurately at just over sixty feet tall!

Allan soon ascertained that its purpose was that of a public address system, translating and projecting the words of a speaker to the masses who were gathering for miles around.

The evidence Allan gave for his conjecture was largely due to the man who spoke into the creature's vast ear. The prodigious avian's voice boomed out with incredible volume, what was translated by Allan's own bird as *testing...testing*.

Allan laughed aloud at the absurdity of it all while they began to construct a thorough camp which was to serve them for many days. They had arrived with ten days to spare and commenced to fortify their position with a sturdy shelter against the elements, as well as from the curious eyes and ears of their close neighbors.

They drew much attention to themselves, for the tools they possessed afforded the swift construction of a very amiable shelter, the like of which the Tigris had never seen. They sized it large enough for many men but could not accommodate Tana's Brobdingnagian height, but she contented herself to linger and graze nearby.

The travelers grew to know their neighbors and shared their tools with them. The neighbors offered their own labor in return and the bonds began to run deep between them all. *Brothers under First God*, as they were fond of phrasing it. Nor did such a moniker ring false to them, for the wizened travelers knew that they were all brothers and sisters under their Creator.

Allan and Elyse were pleased to observe that the meeting grounds were tenanted by a people who lived in respect for one another. There were no harsh words or fighting to be heard. Nor were the organizers of the event given to wasteful pomp or glamour, for no further accoutrements were added for the speaker at the spare rostrum high above. When the event began, it would be one lone individual addressing them from the tall podium; an individual with a very loud voice.

The speakers were to be heard chronologically from *Kitabu*, which was the name they gave for the hulking grimoire which, the party

soon learned, must be signed with one's own blood. Indeed, a grim-bladed writing implement lay next to the tome for that very purpose.

It seemed to the Hunters that, to be heard at the Great Council, one must shed blood for his cause. When their turns came, each member of the party, save the students, strode forward and cut the fleshy skin of their palm with the sinister quill and scribed their name into the hideous book.

Allan had the presence of mind to note that their page rested many thousands of pages after the first entry, which denoted the first such meeting of the Great Council many generations in the past. Allan found their own names to lie within the first three hundred speakers for the upcoming council, which he considered fortuitous given the immensity of the gathering.

The Great Council allowed a voice for every sentient creature who so desired to speak, at the mere cost of his blood. The logic seemed to ring with a barbaric simplicity that spoke of fairness and greatly appealed to the Hunters. The sole criticism that Allan would have offered of the immoderate democracy lay with the length of time each speaker was allowed to hold the rostrum, for Hjaka assured him that there was no time limit at all.

"No individual however, is allowed a second opportunity to speak." Hjaka said.

Allan hoped that little time would be spent in adversarial refutation and idle banter, which seemed to mark political meetings everywhere.

Many personages of great note were present, indeed, kings from many Tigris territories waited in line to sign the dread tome and to be heard.

Though a king may stand next to a beggar, all were equal before Kitabu.

There were to be formally introduced only three issues, and these were to be voted upon at the conclusion of the meeting once all of the speakers had been heard. Hjaka informed them that the official measures upon which all were to vote, were often merely declarations of war or religious law.

Yet, even among the Hunters' own camp there arose factions who felt opposed to an idea, or merely a tiny aspect of another's, so that while they agreed on many of the same ideals, interpretations of methods and ceremony threatened to become a crippling impediment. Allan expected that this effect would be magnified many times by the myriad opinions of the populous who were arriving in droves every minute.

Still, he thought, it could be argued, that it is this participation from all of those who would unite as a people, which is required in order to rob thieving politicians and lobbyists of their powers of persuasion and control.

The atmosphere grew more thrilling as they drew nearer to the day when the Great Council would begin. They turned their thoughts to the rare moment when it would be their turn to speak what was in their hearts for all of New Atlantis to hear. They began to wonder what they would say.

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Several days more passed and the parade grounds grew very full indeed. Feline bodies were everywhere and the impatience became almost tangible. Tempers grew short and the harmony that had marked the throng died under the weight of idle time. Small, bloody skirmishes broke out between clans who were growing hungry and mischievous due to their boredom.

Finally, rising above the growing bedlam, a vast horn sounded throughout the plain. All eyes turned to the high rostrum to behold a hooded figure cloaked in green robes. Allan could barely discern the movement of his mouth from the height before the colossal babelbird translated his words in a booming utterance that was understood by all.

"Welcome to the Great Council." Deafening cheers and applause erupted from the crowd that now numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Phoenix covered his ears but Tana was captivated by the moment and blew her horns excitedly.

"We have many speakers to hear but, according to the law of Kitabu, I must first introduce the grand topics. First, there is the issue of religious disharmony that runs throughout our fair land. Second is the issue of war between ourselves and the foul Canid races across the great river.

Third," here many eyes turned towards the Hunters' caravan, "we must address the circumstance of the awakening of the Ancient One."

Hjaka shifted his weight uneasily and seemed to avoid eye contact with Allan while Kale Nafsi laughed loudly. "Do not fear, Allan," the wizard began, "you are not to blame for the transgression. Hjaka, however, will have to answer for his behavior."

"Who is the Ancient One and what do they mean by awakened?" Allan asked Kale Nafsi whose vague answer was interrupted by the speaker.

"Without further ceremony, Kitabu summons the first speaker."

The Master of Ceremonies began to descend from the podium using one ladder while the new speaker ascended slowly up another one. He caught his breath at the podium and began to speak.

"I am Hansil Harker and I will be heard this day. I speak for the tribes of the Lowlands who wish the freedom to worship God in our own way. We are continually ravaged by the barbarous Canids and ask the Great Council to declare war against them. Lastly, we demand death for the sneak-thief who awakened the Ancient One." The Tigris of the Lowlands howled and purred in acquiescence while the Highland tribe mocked and jeered them.

As Hansil Harker began the long descent, another individual began the climb and soon addressed the masses. "I am Tern Thorndrop and I represent many of the Highland tribes. We wish the Great Council to adopt our religious law so that God will favor our people once more. We wish to facilitate trade between the Canids and Tigris and, therefore, are opposed to war. Lastly, we ask for the head of *Hjaka the Heretic* for his crimes against God."

Many individuals were heard that day and all agreed on only one topic; that Hjaka must die for the crime of awakening the Ancient One. Allan and Elyse grew irritated by their own ignorance of the issues and finally turned to Thelugia for clarification.

"The Ancient One is our old god. Our people banished Him to the bowels of the mountain so long ago that none alive today can recall the event. It is said that He was cruel, cunning and lacked the humanity that existed within even the breasts of his basest worshippers."

"And Hjaka wakened him by using the gate without a proper sacrifice?" Elyse asked astutely.

Thelugia glanced furtively at the nervous Hjaka then cast her eyes to the ground. "That is so."

"We should get him out of here quickly!" Allan suggested with concern for his friend.

"There is nowhere to hide. If the Great Council decides to claim his life, it shall come to pass." Thelugia said with a fair imitation of stoicism.

Allan moved closer to speak with Hjaka. "Tell me friend, are you not concerned about these calls for your head?"

The tiger-man smiled, "Yes, Allan, I am. Yet, the council has not yet heard my tale or yours, so my fate is yet unknown." They spoke in further whispers while the speakers came and went. Elyse remarked that no two speakers seemed to agree on more than two of the three grand issues and she began to fear a riot, or even a civil war.

The sun fell and the moon rose yet the council did not adjourn. Allan learned from Hjaka that there would be no break in the council until the last soul had been heard. Allan and his family went to sleep but noticed that none of the Tigris followed their example. *Would they stay awake for the whole council?* Allan wondered as unconsciousness overtook him.

The next week followed the same course and Allan wondered how many more Tigris would be heard before his family was called upon to speak. He was no longer enamored with the democratic proceedings, which proved only to exemplify the civic disagreement and unrest among the people of different tribes.

The tribes that lived near the Canid borderlands were typically advocates of religious freedom and war while those living in the larger settlements and cities favored a unified religion and peaceful commerce with the Canids. All parties agreed on only one topic; that Hjaka must be sacrificed to the Ancient One for his sin.

The tedium was hard on Phoenix, who entertained Thelugia with mocking pantomimes of each new speaker. He knew how they would cast their vote after the first four words they spoke. He

worried about Hjaka but knew that there was little he could do in the face of the established customs of the land.

Elyse worried constantly about her family's safety and especially for Hjaka who seemed to be a doomed man by all accounts. Yet, when she spoke with him, he seemed confident that all would be right in the end. She and Allan spoke briefly of flight but gave it up as futile and cowardly.

"We will see this Council through to its end." Allan said finally.

"Yes, the decisions must be those of the people, but they can't seem to agree on very much."

Kale Nafsi retired to his litter and he was seen no more for another week. The thousands of Tigris in the crowd grew visibly fatigued from two weeks without sleep and behaved with increasing depravity. One day, an unknown tribe had sent a flaming arrow into a wagon belonging to the Lowlanders. They responded by accusing everyone around them of treachery and gained few friends for their efforts.

A few days later, a young, bold Tigris climbed the podium with a dagger in his hand and murder in his heart. The immense babelbird was given a command by its master and it struck at the youth. His severed body fell to the ground a moment later in two distinct thumps while many within the throng cheered his demise.

Phoenix was disgusted with the Great Council and its growing madness. "It's hopeless, Snow! Your people are just like the people back home. No one can see any perspective but their own!"

"They may see more than you know. Their lives are very hard and their needs are different but they are all Tigris in the end."

"They sure don't act like it." Phoenix said shaking his head.

The speakers came and went unceasingly, day and night, for three grueling weeks. They lobbied tersely for their favorite cause and cast their votes accordingly. Allan felt the air growing denser, perfumed by the myriad unwashed, unrested bodies gathered in the vast, windless plain.

The family had finished dinner and were gathered around the campfire discussing their situation gravely. Suddenly, a Tigris in a green robe blinked into existence beside them.

"With honor, I request Allan, Elyse and Phoenix Hunter. With deference, I request Hjaka and Kale Nafsi." They rose and followed the mage a few steps then found themselves at the foot of the tall rostrum.

"How'd we get here so fast?" Phoenix asked the hooded mage. "Blink magic saves the Council valuable time."

"What am I going to say?" Allan asked his wife, suddenly wishing that she had scrawled her name into the horrid Kitabu before him. "Just speak your mind." She answered him as if it were going to be that easy.

Allan grasped the wooden ladder and climbed the first rung. The sixty-foot avian took an immediate interest in him and brought its hooked beak close and smelled him. Then it lowered its left eye to him, which was nearly as tall as Allan. His resolve nearly failed but he forced himself to be brave so that his family could follow his example.

The bird grew agitated and began hopping up and down as much as its cage allowed but it never stuck. Allan reached the podium and cleared his throat, hoping that his cough would not be broadcast to the illimitable crowd.

"I am Allan Hunter. A man must be free. There should be no law governing religion. War is a terrible price for freedom and must be avoided until it is unavoidable. Let your army then be comprised of volunteers, not draftees. Lastly, Hjaka shall not perish to appease your forgotten god."

Allan descended the ladder after his bold words and heard nothing but waves of murmur that rippled through the crowd. He hoped that his words were wise and that his vote would count but doubt was strong in his heart.

Elyse began her climb before he reached the ground and they smiled at each other as they passed. The behemoth babelbird performed his inquisitive performance and she reached her hand out to caress its monstrous beak. Those observing her from within the crowd held their breath but again the bird did not strike. Elyse climbed further and reached the podium safely.

"Fair Tigris, I am a stranger in your land and lack many details, yet I am certain of much. Religion is a personal relationship with God, and no one can dictate that relationship to another. Second, war is the plaything of the serpent. Lastly, Hjaka was sent by his tribe to seek a savior, not just for themselves, but for everyone of Tigris blood. He appealed to the Thandor but they refused him. I beseech you to listen to his words before you judge his actions. Thank you."

Phoenix flew up the ladder, pausing only to commune with the uncommon bird as his mother had done. They, too, smiled at each other as they passed on the ladders but Elyse caught the flame in her son's eye and grew worried about what he would say. At the top, Phoenix paused as he regarded the many tens of thousands of fierce tiger-men around him. "I am Phoenix Hunter. When we are young, we need guidance from the wise and strength from the strong. When we are in our prime we need nothing from anyone. When we are old we need only wisdom. You must

conclude this council with *everyone's* perspectives in mind. Make no laws about God, force no one into war and spare my friend, Hjaka!"

When they passed on the ladders, Hjaka said, "Thank you, my friend, for your wise words. Perhaps they will be heeded."

"Good luck!" Phoenix called after him.

The sea of Tigris purred menacingly as Hjaka waited at the podium.

"Brothers, you have heard rumors of my crime but Kitabu will hear me without prejudice, and I ask that you do the same. The wise words of the youth who has no tiger must be heeded. Let freedom, tolerance and peace reign in our land!"

Hjaka finished his terse plea and the crowd roared a combination of approval and disapproval. As he descended, he had expected to see Kale Nafsi ascending the ladder. Indeed, he had been rather curious as to how the aged and crippled wizard would manage it. At the bottom of the rostrum, Kale Nafsi closed his eyes and spoke a secret word in a strange language.

He blinked to the top of the podium in an instant and looked larger and far more formidable than he had appeared only seconds earlier. He addressed the crowd with the certain authority of age.

"Children of God, calm yourselves." The warlike among them roared in defiance until he looked directly at them. "Do you wish to fight amongst yourselves or do you wish to rout the evil from among your numbers?"

This was the first question addressed to the crowd in the long three weeks of the council and it took the Tigris throng by surprise. He repeated his odd question and it seemed to further polarize the

crowd. Those advocating violence grew incensed and wild, while the pacifists called for a routing of the evil that plagued their lives.

Suddenly, many things happened at once. A horde of the large, wild apes descended upon the plain from the cover of the surrounding forest. Blurry forms of the Kivuli Mnyama sprang from the shadows in the midst of the throng, rending all within reach. The immense avian spread its wings and cracked the tall rostrum which had been its cage. Kale Nafsi began to fall. Hordes of winged men with tridents appeared in the sky and engaged the horrid apes before they could fall en masse upon the dense throng of surprised and enraged Tigris.

Allan instructed his family to climb on Tana's back and to watch out for projectile attacks. He looked toward the rostrum which had been torn asunder from the incredible strength of the frightened bird but could not discern the body of the ancient wizard on the ground anywhere amidst the rubble.

The Hunters looked out over miles of mortal combatants. Phoenix felt nausea well up from the sight of the lost brotherhood of the Tigris people. Everywhere he looked, victors extinguished the life of their victims with cruel relish. Casualties and crimes ran high on all sides. Tigris teeth and claws rent horrible wounds into the apes, who fought back with mighty pummels from fists with bone of stone. Tridents skewered Kivuli and ape alike but many of their number lay trodden on the ground. The apes and Kivuli attacked all living creatures regardless of theism or politics.

Suddenly, lightning cracked the night sky and thunder boomed so deafeningly that everyone present upon the plain fell to the ground in pain from the sudden sonic assault. They looked skyward to behold the full, yellow moon of a moment prior had turned to a sizzling ball of electricity that resembled a vast eye, and it looked angry.

The volcano erupted, spewing magma and ash miles into the electrically charged sky. A burst of power from First God shot into the volcano and the ground rumbled as if from an earthquake. The overawed combatants began to tremble as they beheld an immense, wicked form slithering out of the burning cap of the volcano. Its eyes burned red with hatred and its fangs dripped a seething poison as it drew itself out of the mountain.

"It is Baal, the Ancient One!" the frightened Tigris cried out. The adventurers recognized the great serpent from their spirit journey with the Neptalim and remembered its irrepressible evil. The snake had the ethereal body of the dark-spawned Kivuli but was large enough to dwarf the enormous babelbird. Its body stretched from the volcano and traveled miles on the wind to reach the vast plains before even the most dexterous of them could react.

The vile snake's dark mist sizzled with power granted to it from the omniscient ball of energy in the sky. The great serpent wound its way through the myriad bodies of Tigris, ape and winged men. As it passed through them, Allan noted with horror that many of them were simply absorbed into its shadowy body! Hjaka smiled broadly and pointed at the sky. Kale Nafsi hovered high in the air and emitted a glorious light that entranced those who were not enshrouded by the evil snake.

"I asked if you wished me to rout the evil from among your number. Now it shall be done! The Ancient One shall absorb all those who belong to him!"

Horror marked the faces of the wicked and cruel as they realized that the shadowy god, who had been their chosen master, was calling them back to him. The wispy serpent snaked through the multitudes and very nearly one third of the mass were claimed into its evil.

Allan noticed that very few Mtu Kwa Mbawa fell to the sinister judge who could somehow recognize those who belonged to him. The Kivuli were absorbed without fail and many of the apes as well. Kale Nafsi's laughter boomed and echoed across the turmoil as if with the voice of the mighty babelbird.

Thelugia looked into Phoenix's eyes, which were wild with concern for those falling to the serpent, but she detected no fear for himself. Nor did any of the Hunters' caravan fear the serpent directly, but the stark madness of the scene around them was a horror they would never forget.

The snake grew sated and seemed to fall asleep in the midst of those whom he could not claim. The electric moon shot forth another ray as Kale Nafsi spoke a booming command. The slumbering evil wailed mournfully as if with vast numbers of tortured souls as it was dragged back into the volcano by the will of First God and the temporal magic of the wizard.

The ethereal snake disappeared within the burning confines of volcano and another painful sonic boom brought the survivors to their knees. The moon was yellow again and many were weeping for reasons as varied as the whims of nature. Some were grateful to find their families wholly intact but the vast majority of the people experienced many losses.

Kale Nafsi fell as gently as a feather and landed safely on the ground. Allan and Hjaka rushed down Tana's rope and found him in a limp, nearly catatonic state of exhaustion. They bore him back to his litter but found that only three of his students had survived the serpentine judgement. They resolved to carry the mystic's litter themselves and considered it an honor.

The wizard, in collusion with First God, had commanded the Ancient One to seek its own flesh and then return to its underworld. The great Kale Nafsi was responsible for dispensing

with much evil that night although the means employed were painfully harsh.

In the bittersweet aftermath of the *cleansing*, the survivors encircled Hjaka and Kale Nafsi. Hjaka spoke gravely, "My father and I have accomplished our fell task. We have rid this land of those with evil in their hearts. This is according to the will of First God."

His voice grew stronger and more charismatic as he continued, "We now have a land as pure as Eden. May we all go forth to rebuild it with our hearts equally pure."

Allan watched those who had experienced severe losses for he thought it likely that some of them would seek retribution for their loss. He smiled as he observed the hotheads to be calmed by their own people. *Without evil in their heart*, Allan thought, *no man seeks retribution*.

Hjaka spoke long lessons to the people as they packed up to leave the plains of the Great Council. The Hunters were eager to talk to Hjaka alone but contented themselves with providing medical aid to the many victims of civil violence. The student named Cain became Hjaka's primary disciple and began helping him teach sermons of tolerance and patience, as if he had always known how the drama would end.

Phoenix and Thelugia wandered through the waning masses congratulating everyone on their pure hearts which held no evil. Truly, it was an honor to simply remain alive after the terrible toll exacted by the powers of Good that day.

The campfire seemed miniscule and insignificant that night on the lonely plains. The travelers wanted answers but were too tired to extract them from the enigmatic Hjaka.

"I don't think he needed us at all!" Phoenix said.

"I agree." Elyse said. "He certainly didn't need our *great wisdom*."

"I think he just needed an excuse to use the gate without payment. He needed to wake the god of evil." Allan ventured.

"But why would he have guided you to the Neptalim who showed you the secret of First God?" Thelugia countered softly and no one could answer. "Someone paid your toll at the gate. Somebody believed that your family needed to be here." The Hunters ruminated upon her words in silence for a time.

"Do you think Kale Nafsi is really Hjaka's biological father or is it just the tribal use of the term?" Elyse asked her husband.

"There could be blood between them but didn't Hjaka say that he was old enough to be a grandfather four times over? That would make the wizard even older than him!"

"I wonder." Phoenix said to Thelugia quietly.

"About Hjaka's father?"

"No, about whether you can come home with us through the gate."

"You don't think your family will remain here?"

"I wonder."

Allan and Elyse Hunter awoke in the early dawn, as was their custom, to find the four of them alone upon the barren plain. Hjaka, Cain and the students had spirited the wizard away during the night.

They roused Phoenix and Thelugia for breakfast but had to fight their bitter feelings of abandonment and betrayal. Once again,

their trusted guides had left them alone and the Hunters would have to choose their own path in the strange, dangerous wilds of New Atlantis.