

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The idea of this novel came to me when I was reading about several mass extinction events in earth's history. It is now accepted by most of the scientists that another huge asteroid is due to crash in the earth in future, and this event could end most of the animals on earth including human beings. There are also dangers from super volcanoes, gamma ray bursts and other unforeseeable events that could wipe out the human race, and it is now imperative that we must colonize other planets and moons in our solar system and beyond. Such human colonies will be an insurance against such catastrophe, and would insure that human race would survive and might re colonize the earth.

We don't what might happen to these human colonies on distant planets and the moons throughout the galaxy. Some of these might be quite substantial, and thrive long after human race had gone extinct in planet earth but other smaller colonies would be vulnerable without support and help from its mother planet. Some would wither and die and their human colonizer would perish but we humans are a hardy race and it is possible that survivors of these colonies might cling to life in alien environments and after thousands of years succeed in reestablishing human civilization again in those distant planets.

The story of this novel is based on one such human civilization on a distant planet that is established by the survivors of a human colony from planet earth. In the beginning a space exploration mission discovers a planet teeming with alien life and in the following centuries a small human colony is established there but then a catastrophic event destroys the human civilization on earth. The colony on this planet is left on its own, and being small and vulnerable without help from planet earth withers and its survivors had to learn to live like our ancestors ten thousands of year ago. They disperse over the planet and live like our hunter gatherer ancestors tens of thousands of years ago and over the following millennia's grow slowly and acquire new skills and rediscover the lost ones. Gradually over the following the human civilization is established again in this new home of humanity.

Although when you read this book you will notice that in their home the human beings are essentially the same and the human nature is not changed but I believe that human nature will not change and consequently the human civilization will be different yet the same in the words beyond. I have decided to call this world in my novel the planet of Herakoses. The herakos is a large flying creature that soared across the skies of that planet and went to the seas to find its food.

For the sack of simplicity I have used familiar words like grass, bushes and trees for the plants growing in this planet, although these alien plants are very much different from that on our earth. I hope that the readers would accept this as creating new names and a vocabulary for the flora and fauna of this planet would distract the reader from the story.

Nawazish Ali

Mekaul was standing behind a large terrano tree on the edge of grove. He peered into open grassland beyond, but could only see the vague shadows in dim light of two smaller moons in the sky. It would take another hour before the large moon Horan would rise from behind the dark hills in the east. The grasslands that stretched to the towering wall of maunci forest a mile away were lost in the gloom. The beast was somewhere in that dark grassland and might appear at any moment now. But he was weary and tired after hours of waiting, and needed some rest. He yawned sleepily and sank down on a pile of dry grass near trunk of the tree.

He was a tall and well built man in his mid twenties. He had dark brown hair and his deep blue eyes looked striking on his suntanned face. His muscular body was hardened by years of hard work and hunting wild beasts across the plains and the forests. He was wearing a brown leather shirt and trousers favored by the hunters. He had a long dagger in his belt and his powerful bow and quiver of arrows were lying in the grass beside him. The bow was made from okardi wood which was known for its strength and flexibility. It was made by a master bow maker of his town. The quiver was beautifully made and richly painted. The long arrows were made from Kekari wood and were armed with steel arrowheads.

He fingered his quiver idly and drew one arrow from it. He had wrapped the poisoned arrowheads in tree leaves, so he wouldn't nick his hands accidentally while handling it. He knew that to make a sure kill he had to shoot the Keradon in the chest, where the poison could enter its vital organs quickly, and finish it before it could get away. The poison was a mixture of plant and insect poisons that would paralyze and kill its victim quickly. An enraged Keradon was very a nasty beast, and would tear him into pieces if it could find him. He had built a

small platform on the tree, where he can retreat and spend the rest of the night in safety.

A cool breeze stirred the boughs in the trees overhead. He peered again in the grassland, and saw the dark shape lying in tall grasses in the dim light of two small moons. It was the dead body of a mendano from his father's herd. The animal had been ambushed by the predator early in the morning. The young herd boy karik had brought his father's herd of mendanos at the break of dawn for grazing in the grasslands that bordered the towering forest of Maunci trees. As the herd was grazing peacefully in the grasslands, a large keradon had crashed through the tall bushes and had killed a fully grown mendano from the herd in full view of young herdsman. The rest of the herd had bolted in fright and had scattered in all directions, and Karik had fled to the town in the panic, and had reached their house and collapsed in the courtyard.

It had taken some time before he was coherent enough to tell his story. Mekaul had taken his powerful bow and quiver of arrows then and had run two miles to reach the scene of carnage. He had followed the trail of blood through the tall shrubs and grasses, and reached the grove of terrano trees. The Keradon had hidden the half eaten Carcass behind the tall bushes near the grove. He had traced its trail through the tall grasses for some distance, but then had returned to the town to wait for the night. He knew that the keradon will come back to consume the rest of the Carcass. He had returned at sundown to prepare an ambush for the beast. He had built a platform in the trees and had piled dried grasses on it for a bed. Thus prepared, he had waited for several hours behind the large terrano tree, from where he hoped to shoot it without being seen.

The large moon Horan had risen from behind the line of hills in the east after sometime, and the grassland had been revealed in its silvery light. The dark hills were now silhouetted against the bright light of full moon, and he saw some dark specks hovering in the sky over the hills. These were the herakoses that nested in the higher slopes of the hills. The huge flying creatures were returning from their fishing forays in the gulf of Estoran. He had seen these monstrous

flying creatures at close range three years ago, when he had climbed one of the hills with his friends to see their nesting ground.

They had been awestruck as they watched the large number of nests scattered over the steep slopes. The nests were filled with huge herakos chicks that nearly as big as a grown up man. The air was filled with stench of rotting meat and screeching of large ugly chicks. These were tearing at the flesh of large fish and other sea animals that their parents had brought for them from the sea.

'I wonder if they would attack us if we go near them.' His cousin Merano had said. 'These monster chicks look nasty enough to give me nightmares.'

'Yes, it would not be very wise to go near them.' Mekaul said. 'And their parents could be back any time now and then you would be in deep trouble. But why do you want to go near these horrible creatures?'

'I have heard that their nests are filled with precious stones.' Merano said eagerly. 'That these herakoses bring from the far away mountains. You could find a fortune in diamonds and emeralds, if you could drive these large ugly chicks away and search their nests.'

'That's a lot of nonsense, my dear cousin.' Mekaul said. 'It is one of those stories that idle and lazy people tell around the hearth at night. If you really want to make a fortune, you must travel across the jungles and dry lands and reach the land of Ashewara. From there you could see the mountains that are filled with gold and silver. Or you could travel across nameless lands beyond Ishakari Mountains, to reach the shores of inland sea of Sekarmia, where the traders of Metani come to trade for precious stones and metals. One could make his fortune there.'

Mekaul came out of his reverie as he heard a faint sound in the night. He rose to his feet quickly, and peered from behind the thick trunk of terrano tree. He couldn't see anything moving in tall grass and vegetation in the moonlight, but still he knew that the predator was out there. He took his powerful bow and bent it quickly. Stringing it he straightened up and drew a poisoned arrow from his

quiver. He stood there motionless as he waited patiently for the beast to reveal itself.

Time passed slowly, and he saw no movement in the moonlight, but still he waited with the patience of an experienced hunter. He knew that any movement on his part would betray his position to the beast and then it might vanish in the night silently. These keradons were large predators, which usually ambushed their prey from the cover of the bushes and foliage near the watering holes. The people of Sebako town honored greatly the keradon hunters, because these beasts killed a good number of their animals every year, and were a constant menace to their herds. He had killed several keradons and was a hero among the young men of the town.

He saw a dark shape moving stealthily across the dark grasslands. He watched it patiently as it moved nearer. He heard a grunt from the beast as it approached its kill. It came to the carcass and move around it silently. It was nosing the ground around the carcass, looking for the smell of any trespasser.

He heard the sounds of tearing of flesh and the bones being crunched, as the keradon started to eat. The moonlight was bright but still it was a tricky shot, because he couldn't judge the distance correctly in half light. If he missed the shot, the beast would disappear in the night, and if it was wounded slightly, it would attack him. He drew the powerful bow fully, and took his aim carefully. For a long moment he held the drawn bow, until his right shoulder began to ache.

The bow sang loudly, and the arrow disappeared in the half light. He couldn't see its flight clearly in the dim light, but he heard the thump as it struck flesh. Keradon roared and jumped in the air. It turned and charged the nearby bushes. Mekaul slung his bow on his shoulder quickly and began to climb the terrano tree. He had built a platform on its branches in the evening for that moment. He reached the platform and climbed on it gratefully. He could hear the snarls and growls of the wounded beast as it crashed through the bushes looking for its enemy.

He had built the platform by interlacing thin branches over a wooden frame and tying these with strips of bark. He sank down on grass bed and covered himself with his furs. He could still hear the snarls of the wounded beast as it tore through the bushes. He knew that it would take at least ten minutes for the poison to work and paralyze the wounded beast and kill it but its fate was sealed, and it would not bother the herds of people of Sebako anymore.

The sounds died down eventually, and the silence was restored on the ground, save the chirping of some insects. He closed his eyes and pulled the furs over his head, and rocked by the movement of the nest fell asleep.

He opened his eyes and removed the furs that covered his body. Its upper surface was wet from the heavy dew that had fallen in early hours of the dawn. He yawned sleepily, and lying on his back watched the roof of green boughs over his head. The branches of the tree were moving in a gentle breeze and rocking his nest gently. He yawned again and sat up with an effort. The sun had risen from beyond the hills and a mist was rising over the great wall of the forest of maunci trees. He looked down, and saw that the carcass of mendano was covered with insects, and other small creatures that were feasting on it.

He climbed down the tree slowly and looked around for any sign of the beast, but saw none and reached the ground carefully. He had brought some dried meat and fruits with him for sustenance, but now decided that he will go to the town for a hot meal. He surveyed the ground around the stinking carcass for signs of keradon. The grass and shrubs were trampled and tall bushes were crushed. He spotted a series of the blood drops and followed it carefully. He was sure that the keradon must be long dead but still caution was necessary.

He found the dead beast some distance away in a small depression. Its long body was twisted in the agony of death and its powerful jaws were clenched. Its carcass was crawling with strange insects, and other small creatures were scampering over its body. The arrow had struck the beast in the chest between

the front legs. He went down and hacked its long tail. It was a trophy for his successful kill and was treasured by the hunters.

He began to walk toward the town briskly. The terrano trees were left behind as he picked a trail that crossed the grasslands, and reached the Mehaka River near a bend. The town was situated on high ground some two miles upstream. It had over two hundred wooden houses and was surrounded by a strong wooden palisade and a wide ditch. It had a population of around one thousand three hundred people and a number of travelers and traders also lived here. The town was surrounded by the large number of plantations and fruit gardens that were protected by the hedges of poisonous bushes that bore large wicked thorns. His people grew mehani, sambak and jotori fruits and marhi beans in their gardens and pikardi nuts for its oil, which was used in cooking and for the lighting the lamps. They also raised large herds of mendanos and smaller merkapis for the meat and their wool.

The Ashdari traders that came in their sailing ships from gulf of Estoran visited Sebako regularly. The river was not navigable upstream of the town, so the Ashdari traders stayed in the town for the trade. They waited here for groups of mountain men from the Sangori Mountains in the northwest that brought gold dust for sale. These people panned the mountain streams that were the source of Mehaka River for gold dust and nuggets and brought their gold to barter for the goods that Ashdari traders brought from the sea. The city of Ashdari was situated in the gulf of Estoran and dominated the trade of Mehaka River. The Ashdari people guarded the entrance of Mehaka River jealously and didn't allow the ships of Metani and others to enter the Mehaka River for trade. The traders of Metani were obliged to come to the markets of Ashdari City for the trade in gold and other metals brought from Sangori Mountains. The traders of Metani dominated the ocean trade and sailed to shores of unknown seas to bring their riches. Their island city was said to be the richest city in the world.

He saw a small group of people with three pack mendanos coming down a trail from south. He stopped and starred at them curiously.

There were seven men in the group and they were walking openly, leading their pack animals behind them. He decided that they were no threat to his settlement; still it was advisable to be weary of the strangers.

He left the cover of tall menahi bushes laden with wild fruit and walked toward the strangers.

They saw him coming and stopped to gaze at him. As he approached the group, he saw that there was an old man with graying beard among them, who seemed to be their leader. He was wearing a long white robe and holding a staff in his hand. Others gathered around him as he approached.

'Good morning, O' strangers.' Mekaul said in tirany language, used by the traders and understood in many lands. 'I am called Mekaul and I am the son of Ratekon, chieftain of Sebako. I welcome you in our land.'

'Good morning, my young friend.' The old man with white beard said in a deep voice. 'I am Denrik, a scholar from the temple of Shomar. I am travelling through many lands, collecting and copying old manuscripts and surveying the lands. I am an astronomer, a historian, a geographer and a scientist and am interested in all branches of knowledge.'

'I dare to say that's a lot to learn in one lifetime.' Mekaul said. 'I would be content if I could learn a fraction of it.'

The old man, called Denrik laughed.

'Well, you have a point, my friend.' He said. 'But the lust for knowledge is like the lust for wealth. You want more and more and are never satiated. So, you want to learn too. It seems that I am in good company.'

'I learned my letters years ago, when I was a young novice in the temple of Menkora. I was studying to be a priest, but I grew weary of rigid laws of the temple, and a life confined to the courtyard of the temple. Come, let walk with me to the town. It is getting hot as sun climbs in the heaven.'

Denrik introduced to him two of his companion as his servants. They were called Mahiko and Serdan and looked quite tough and travel hardened. The others were a group of traders that were returning from the land of Artaban. They walked together toward the town and the rest of the party followed them with their pack animals.

Mekaul learned that Denrik had come by a ship to a small port in the shores of Artaban and had been travelling for many months through that land. He had visited many ancient temples and scoured their libraries for old manuscripts. He was now planning to hire a sailing ship from Ashdari traders to sail downstream through the forest of towering maunci trees and reach the mouth of Penaka River in the gulf of Estoran. He then planned to sail upstream in that river and disembark on a trading station on a bend of that river to travel inland. He would then travel through the wooded country to the foothills of Urangil Mountains and after crossing those mountains through a pass to reach the dry plains. He would travel with caravans of traders across the dry land to reach the land of Ashewara.

They were soon walking on a trail surrounded on both sides by thorny hedges that protected the fruit gardens and plantations. The town was situated on a rise on the ground and was dominated by a tall watch tower. The people working in the gardens greeted Mekaul warmly, and watched the party of strangers with him curiously. They passed a wooden cart carrying fruits and beans from the gardens to the town.

They reached the fortified town and crossing the wooden bridge on wide moat entered the strong wooden gate in the walls. The lanes between the wooden houses were wide and well ordered. There were not many people in the lanes as most of the men were working in their fruit gardens and plantations. They were soon being followed by a group of noisy children, who were disturbing the pack animals. Mekaul turned and chased the rowdy children away, but they soon returned giggling and shouting, and he gave up with a smile.

They reached a large inn in the part of the town inhabited by the travelers and traders. They entered through its gate and reached the large courtyard surrounded by the rooms and a large warehouse. An attendant of the inn came and took their animals to the stables, and helped Denrik's companion to unload their baggage.

'Come. Let's go to the common room.' Mekaul said. 'There are many rooms in this inn because we have a lively trade and our people profit from it.'

The innkeeper Menark came to the courtyard to greet them. He was a short and bald man but was very efficient in his business. He took them to the common room, where guests of the inn gathered to eat and drink. They sat around the long wooden table on roughly made chairs.

Menark shouted for his servant to bring food and drink for the guests. Soon the table was loaded with bowls of different kinds of fruits, baked roots, roasted meats and bread made from the flour of marhi beans and jugs of foaming beer also made from marhi beans.

During the meal Denrik told Mekaul about his journeys, and the discoveries that he had made in his travels. Mekaul was listening attentively and asked many questions.

Finally the meal ended and Mekaul rose from his seat.

'I have enjoyed your company.' He said. 'But you must now rest; I will meet you in evening. I will take you to my father. He can help you in your quest.'

He paid for their lunch and left the inn.

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Mekaul came in the evening and took Denrik to the house of his father. They entered the house and went to a large room with a hearth in middle. A fire

was burning in it and a wisp of smoke rose toward the hole in the roof. They sat on the chairs near the hearth and talked idly for some time. A servant brought them a flagon of wine of Degarda.

'It is a large and comfortable house.' Denrik said, looking around the room. 'It must have cost your father a lot to build.'

Mekaul smiled.

'Well, my father is the chief of Sebako and controls the trade that passes through our town and he can afford it.'

'I apologize if my comment has offended you; I am not against the trade and money making.' Denrik said. 'Tell me about your education in the temple.'

'I was very curious about the world in my childhood.' Mekaul said. 'So my father decided that I must go to the temple of Menkora to get an education. I was ten years old then and I studied passionately for next seven years but I started to get restless as my education completed and I began my training as priest. I discovered that I had no aptitude for priesthood and didn't want to spend my life as a priest. I had learned all that they have to teach me and there was no more and then I got into the trouble over a virgin of temple.'

'Ah, it happens when you are young.' Denrik nodded with twinkle in his eyes. 'I myself have such distractions in my youth but fortunately I got past these to my goal in life.'

'So I came back to my town.' Mekaul sighed. 'And I began to help my father and took care of his fruit gardens and his herds of animals. My father and my elder brother Henark spend most of their time in managing the trade that is making us rich. I have been a leader in our wars with our enemies, and it is not a mere boast to say that our enemies are reluctant to break peace now. I think I have done well, but I am getting restless again. I don't want to spend my life in a small town, and want to see the wide world and the wonders that are there.'

'I would love to add a strong man in our party.' Denrik said slowly. 'But I don't want to take you away from your father, and he will be less than willing to help me if I did.'

They heard a door opening, and looked up to see the Chief Ratekon enter the room. He was in mid fifties, but was still a strong man. His hair and short beard was graying, but his face was strong and good natured. He was wearing a simple white robe, but there was a dagger with golden hilt in his belt. He gazed at Denrik who had stood up to greet him.

'I welcome our distinguished guest in my humble house.' Ratekon said. 'It is not often that we are visited by great scholars.'

'I thank you for your kindness.' Denrik said as he shook his hand. 'I never claimed to be a great scholar and am just a seeker of knowledge.'

'I respect all those that seek knowledge.' Ratekon said amiably. 'My only regret in the life is that I have not learned to read, so my world is limited to this small town. Please sit down.'

They sat down around the hearth. Ratekon asked many questions and Denrik told him about his travels and gave him the news of far off lands. Ratekon and Mekaul listened raptly. The servant returned and brought more wine.

'So where do you plan to go next?' Ratekon asked. 'And what can we do to help you?'

'I want to hire a small sailing ship that can take us down the Mehaka River.' Denrik said. 'We plan to sail through the forest of tall Maunci trees to reach the gulf of Estoran, and enter the mouth of River Penaka on the eastern coast of the gulf. We will then travel upstream until we will reach the bend of the river near Sorangi; from there we would take a trail used by the traders to Hagani pass, and cross Urangil Mountains to enter the dry lands, and traverse it to reach the land of Ashewara.'

'That's a long and dangerous journey; even the traders of Ashdari can't go all the way to Ashewara alone. The trade is carried from one point to the next by

the local traders, and the traders of Ashdari employ local people.' Ratekon said solemnly. 'You will need all the luck to reach the land of Ashewara, because you will have to pass through the lands where there few human settlements, and no supplies to be had.'

'Not all of my companions are going to Ashewara.' Denrik said. 'Some will part company, and go their own ways, but I expect to find traders and other travelers that are willing to go there on their own business. I need to find a small sailing ship that can take me for first part of my journey.'

'I will introduce you to Hanoek; he is an ashdari trader with his own ship, and could to take you with him.' Ratekon said as he rose to his feet. 'He has sold most of his goods, and has collected a fair quantity of gold dust. He will leave in few days.'

Denrik also rose and shook his hand.

'I am most grateful for your kindness and cooperation.' Denrik said.

Mekaul walked with Denrik to the inn, where he was staying with his party.

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Next few days were spent in negotiations with Hanoek the trader, who drove a hard bargain. Hanoek was protesting that taking Denrik and his party will interfere with his business plans, and would waste his precious time, but Denrik knew that he was trying to raise his price, and stood firm as he knew that Hanoek was soon leaving, and going down the river. In the end Hanoek agreed to take them to the bend in Penaka River near Sorangi for ten gold coins.

'Your father seemed rather distraught this morning.' Denrik said. 'He just sat there listening as I talked to him and didn't say anything.'

'I have told him last night that I want to go with you.' Mekaul said softly. 'He had already guessed it but still he is dismayed by the news.'

'I am afraid that he is more than dismayed.' Denrik said as they walked toward the pier on the riverbank.

'How did he guess that you want to go with us? Denrik asked as they reached the pier.

'He knew for a couple of years that I am getting restless, and spending my time with the traders and travelers to learn about the faraway lands.'

The small sailing ship of Hanoek was tied at the pier. It was some sixty feet long and flat bottomed, and was built for shallow inland waters. It had two lateen sails, one large and a smaller one, and could be rowed if navigation was difficult in the river. There was a seven men crew to man it. They were busy on the deck preparing for the journey.

They walked over pier to the ship. The pier was made of rough hewn planks laid over wooden piles driven in the river bed. Hanoek looked up, and seeing them on the shore came to greet them. He was a heavysset man with a pot belly. His hair was long and his beard was braided. He was wearing a grey robe over his lines shirt and trousers.

'Welcome aboard, my friends.' He beamed. 'I am honored to have a great scholar aboard my ship.'

He shook Denrik's hand and hugged Mekaul warmly.

'I think our young friend Mekaul will also accompany us in this journey.' Denrik said. 'He wants to see far land.'

Hanoek regarded Mekaul shrewdly.

'I don't think that chief Ratekon will be happy to let you go.' He said, shaking his head. 'And I can't afford to make him unhappy. I need his friendship to do business in Sebako.'

'You don't need to worry, my dear Hanoek.' Mekaul said, as they walked toward the large cabin in the stern. 'I have talked to him last night, and he has given me permission, although not with a light heart.'

They entered the cabin, and sat down on bench. Hanoek handed them bronze cups, and poured them dark red wine from an earthenware jug. They drank it slowly, savoring every drop.

'There are six men in Sebako from the trading company owned by the temple of Shardin that are also going to Sorangi.' Hanoek said. 'They are good men, and they will accompany you in this journey, and their addition would strengthen your party.'

'I will take them if you are recommending them.' Denrik said. 'The trader's party from Artaban is going back.'

A strong sailor with big scar on his face entered the cabin, and whispered something in Hanoek's ear.

'Bring him in.' He said, rising to his feet. 'I want him to meet my friends here.'

After a few moments door of the cabin opened, and a heavy built man entered. He was a man in his mid forties with graying hair, but seemed strong and alert. His beard was short, and he was wearing a blue woolen robe. He was wearing golden rings set with precious stones in his fingers.

He gazed at Mekaul and Denrik for a long moment, and then smiled warmly. He shook hands with Denrik, and then took Mekaul's hand in his own.

'My name is Hiraum. I am honored to meet a distinguished scholar, and a young man of courage in a voyage to the lands of Ashewara.' He said with genuine warmth. 'Although the real purpose of my travel is to find new markets for trade and make money, it is still a pleasure to travel in good company.'

Mekaul shook his hand warmly. He had taken a sudden liking to this burly but friendly trader.

'I am happy to have you with us.' He said, smiling. 'We can find new lands and make new discoveries, and you can find your trade opportunities in those lands.'

Denrik nodded, and offered him a seat. Hiraum sat down, and poured himself a drink from the jug.

'I am the agent and the representative of trading company of temple of Shardin.' He said, sipping his wine. 'Our temple is richest in the city of Ashdari, and great wealth is stored there. Our priests are also business minded, since we are trading city. So they have formed a company with some shrewd traders of the city to invest some of God's wealth to bring still more wealth. I am a partner in this company with some shares, and manage their trade upstream. I want to travel to the land of Ashewara to open direct trade because the Sorawangi middlemen in the trade are taking a large share of profits.'

Denrik had been watching the burly trader intently. He seemed to make up his mind, and nodded thoughtfully.

'Let's drink for new discoveries and new trade.' He said, raising his cup to his lips. 'May our journey be successful, and bring us what seek.'

They all raised their cups, and drank to the success of their journey. There was knock on the door, and the sailor with scarred face came in again.

'The people of Shardin Company are coming.' He announced.

'They are coming, and you will find them to be good company.' Hiraum said as he rose to his feet. 'I will introduce you to them.'

They rose to their feet, and walked with him toward the pier. They saw a group of men coming toward them from the direction of the town, and waited for them on the riverbank.

They greeted the five men of Hiraum's Company. They were introduced as Taro, Jamiro, Senard, Mahir and Tarrim. Taro was in his late forties, and seemed to be the most experienced of them. Others were younger, but all of them

seemed to have travel experience from their attire, and the baggage they carried. They talked for some time on the deck, and made arrangement for their journey. Hanoek offered Denrik, Mekaul and Hiraum to stay with him in his cabin, but they made a decision to sleep on the deck. There were wooden poles and enough canvas sheets to build temporary shelters on the deck for the night for the crew and passengers.

As the sun began to set Mekaul and Denrik walked back to the inn, where Denrik and his servants were staying.

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It was a cool morning, when Denrik and his servants reached the ship with their baggage. Hanoek was on the deck, and supervising the last minute preparations.

'Where is Mekaul?' Hanoek asked. 'Don't tell me that Ratekon has forbidden him to leave.'

'No, we went to his house last night.' Denrik said as he lowered his pack on the deck. 'I told him that I will not take Mekaul with me if he didn't allow it. He and Mekaul had a long discussion, but in the end he gave him permission to go reluctantly.'

'Well, I am relieved enormously.' Hanoek said. 'I don't want to lose his good will.'

'You won't, I promise you that.' Denrik said cheerfully, he looked up and waved cheerfully. Hanoek also looked back and saw Mekaul and his father approaching the pier. There were three men behind them carrying large packs.

'Good morning, my friends.' Ratekon said as he boarded the ship, and beckoned his men to bring the baggage on the deck. Mekaul came aboard with a happy smile on his face.

They shook hands warmly, and walked toward the prow of the ship, which was carved in the shape of a sea monster.

'Take my son with you.' Ratekon said, shaking his head. 'I knew that he was restless, and wanted to see the lands beyond the mountains and the jungles. He might have settled down if his wife had not died in childbirth, still he might come out it a mature man.'

'I am a mature man, father.' Mekaul said with a laugh. 'You told me you suffered from wanderlust in your younger days.'

'Yes but I learned that there are many lands beyond the mountains, the jungles and the rivers, and you would find still other lands beyond them, but a man can't live all his life wandering over strange lands. He must sink his roots, and grow up. You can be happy in a small town because that is your home.'

'You are right, father' Mekaul said as he gripped his shoulder. 'I will come back someday, when I have seen many lands beyond the mountains and the jungles, and have sailed down many a rivers, but I will always be secure in the knowledge that my home awaits me in Sebako.'

They embraced warmly and remained so for many minutes. Finally Ratekon stepped back and smiled wearily.

'Come back, my son. I will wait for you, but don't take too long because if you do, I might not be there to welcome you back home.'

He turned and walked toward the pier. His men followed him as he left the ship.

The ship sailed slowly downstream, a fresh breeze filling its lateen sails. Mekaul was standing near the bow, watching the ship move away from his town. He was torn by the opposing emotions as the town dwindled in the distance. He was elated by start of his journey, but the words of his father were in his mind, he wondered if he could see him again. He sighed and looked down in the river.

He saw a large terikona swimming in the river, its powerful tail moving swiftly. Its long snout and armored plated back could be seen above the water. It was at least fifteen feet long and was quite near the town. Normally terikonas were not allowed near the town, any that spotted near the town was killed immediately as it was known to attack, kill and eat people. There were also many smaller montaris in the river, chasing the fish in the tall reed like plants that grew in the river. They were only four or five feet long, but they resembled the much larger terikonas.

'These montaris have strong resemblance to the huge terikonas.' Mekaul observed as he watched the animals swim between water plants.

'Yes, that's because they are related, and share a common ancestry.' Denrik said as he watched a montari emerge from the water with a large fish in its jaws. 'They are like an animal called crocodile that used to live in the planet of our ancestors.'

Mekaul looked at him in amazement.

'You mean in the land of Gods? He asked incredulously.

'Yes and no, it was a planet like our own, where our ancestors lived ten thousand years ago.' Denrik said. 'They had great knowledge and technology and built great space ships; not like this ship of ours, but one that travelled between the stars and reached the world that we now live.'

'But I was taught in the temple of Menkora that our ancestor lived in a land in the heavens. It was the land of Gods, where they lived in harmony and peace.' Mekaul said passionately. 'They lived there for the ages until there was discord and strife in that heavenly land, and the people stopped to respect the laws of Gods. Then the Gods ordered them to leave the chosen land, and sent them in a ship that sailed among the stars and reached our planet.'

'It was only half of the truth, my friend.' Denrik said as he gazed ahead. 'Our people have forgotten much in last ten thousand years that we have lived in this world. There is dim star called sun that you could see in the night in the

northern sky. There is a planet orbiting that star that was called earth. Our ancestors had lived in the planet earth for millions of years until they developed the technology to travel to the stars and found this planet that we now live on. They established a colony in our world, and flourished here for more than a thousand years, and then the human civilization was destroyed by a cosmic event, an exploding star that sent its deadly rays that destroyed the life on the planet earth, and ended of human civilization. But I hope and believe that some people have survived that catastrophe and might be still living on planet earth.'

Mekaul starred at the mighty wall of maunci trees that enclosed the river ahead.

'I have started my voyage of discovery; it seems.' Mekaul said as he turned toward Denrik.

'There is always more to learn as long we live.' Denrik said solemnly. 'I have spent my whole life learning, and will continue to do so for the rest of my days. The journey of discovery never ends, but it is the human life that does.'

They heard a call and turned back to look. Serdan came and informed them that the evening meal was ready. They went to the little kitchen in the stern of the ship. They had a frugal meal of baked bread, salted meats and some fruits, and then went to the deck to erect a temporary shelter with wooden poles and canvas for the night. The weather was mild but heavy dewfall in the early morning would drench those sleeping in open.

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The river was flowing through the towering forest of maunci trees. The trees were over five hundred feet tall, and even in the midday the forest floor was lost in darkness. The ship was sailing slowly in the midstream. A sailor was standing in the bow, looking out for hidden obstacles under water. There were a number of fallen tree branches in the river that impeded the shipping.

'I remember a time when a giant tree had fallen across the river, blocking it entirely.' Hanoek said. 'I stopped the shipping for a whole month, until a fleet of Ashdari ships assembled to clear the river. We drenched the huge trees with mineral oils, and piled dry brush over it and set it on fire. It was at almost five hundred and forty feet long. We set it on fire at many places, and watched it burn in a great conflagration. It burnt for many days, and the sky overhead couldn't be seen for the smoke rising from it. Eventually it broke in many sections and floated away, smoke and flames rising from it as it went down the river. There had been other occasions when gigantic trees had fallen in the river but had not blocked the river entirely.'

'I have heard that there are some men living in the forest.' Mekaul said. 'Although it is believed by most that no human beings live in this forest.'

'Yes, we see on rare occasions some men near the riverbank in the forest.' Hanoek said as he gazed at the dark forest. 'The forest floor is a dark and damp place with the stench of decay, and no large animal lives there; only some insects and small scurrying creatures, but there are some trails that lead deep in the forest. It is said that there are some large clearings in the forest, and some savage men live there but nobody had ever attempted to enter the forest.'

'What do you know about the sea monsters called metandoras?' Mekaul asked. 'It is said that these monsters could be seen in the river at this time of year.'

'Yes, these long-necked sea monsters live in the open sea, but they come at this season to lay their eggs in fresh water.' Hanoek said. 'It is said that when our ancestors first came up the river to trade, they encountered large numbers of these monsters in the river in the breeding season. It used to be a very dangerous place at that time of the year, and every year the trade was stopped for three months until the river cleared.'

'I wonder why these sea monsters come to fresh water to lay their eggs.' Mekaul said. 'Most fish and sea animals lay their eggs in the sea.'

'It is believed by many scientists that these creatures used to live in the rivers and the freshwater lakes eons ago.' Denrik said. 'And then they moved to open sea, but they still come to lay their eggs in the fresh waters.'

'What these creatures are they like? Mekaul asked. 'I have heard that they have long necks, and they can snatch a man from a ship.'

'Yes, their necks are almost twenty feet long and overall lengths of their bodies are near forty feet.' Denrik said. 'They have two pairs of flippers and a broad tail for swimming. They can take large fish and sea animal but attacking the humans are very rare.'

'They become very aggressive during the mating season.' Hanoek said. 'But we will sail down the main channel of the river when we are near to the sea. Metandoras come to the smaller channels to breed, where there is no shipping because these are shallow, and filled with reed islands.'

'Tell me about the land of Ashewara? Mekaul said. 'I have heard that they have a living goddess that people can see, and she leads the procession of Mahinak at the festival that is held every fifth year.'

'Yes, she is a living woman and beautiful too, from what I have heard.' Hanoek said, stroking his beard. 'They worship the Goddess Menahaka, who is a very powerful Goddess but the priests select a young woman of high birth, who is believed to be a living incarnation of the Goddess. She rules the temple and the land of Ashewara.'

Hanoek left them to give orders to the sailors who were trimming the sail. Mekaul looked toward the towering walls of maunci trees that bordered the river on both sides. It was like sailing down a living canyon. The river was in the shadows even in the midday, and the breeze had died down. He saw a herakos flying high in the sky. It was going toward the gulf of Estoran to fish. He left the rails to help Hanoek and his sailors.

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It was the third day of their journey in the river, and they have left the towering maunci forest far behind. The river was now flowing through a low swampy land filled with tall reeds. The river had divided in many channels, and small reed filled islands were in the middle of the stream.

Mekaul took a deep breath, and thought that he could feel the smell of the sea in the air. They were near the mouth of the river in the gulf of Estoran. The scar faced sailor called Barado was standing in the bow looking for any underwater obstacles like submerged tree trunks that might endanger their ship. Hanoek was talking with Hiraum and Denrik in the stern of the ship.

Mekaul was helping sailors as they adjusted the sails to catch the wind. He wiped the sweat off his face, and straightened up to watch the river. He was tired and wanted to rest.

He saw a ripple in the water that was coming toward the ship. Suddenly there was a great splash of water near the ship, and he saw something rise out of water. A long neck emerged from the river, and a great head towered over the ship. There was a cry from Hanoek, and the sailors ran to take cover. Mekaul was standing behind the rigging of the main sail, and was safe. He ran to the rack near the rails holding spiked spears on the lines, and picked up one.

The mentadora lunged on the deck, and picked up a sailor and lifted it high in the air. He heard the shrieks of the sailor as it was held aloft. For a long moment the monster beast seemed suspended in the air and then it crashed in the river. A great fountain of water rose in the air, and obscured it from the view. Mekaul stood near the rails holding the throwing spear, and watched as its great body and broad tail emerged from water for a brief moment. He threw the spear at the beast with all his strength.

The spear sped through the air and struck the broad back of the beast. The body of the monster disappeared in the water, and dragged the line behind it. The line was disappearing rapidly, and he felt a jolt as length of the line ended. The ship swayed as the monster tried to drag it behind it but the line held. Mekaul staggered, and grabbed the rails to stop from being thrown overboard. He saw

the monster's head emerge from the water a hundred feet away, still holding the sailor in its jaws. It tossed the sailor away with a flick of its head, and tried to swim away with powerful strokes of its broad tail. The ship leaned sideways but the line held, and the monster dived under the water.

'Cut the line, cut it.' Hanoek bellowed. 'It has released Mariki.'

Mekaul balanced himself on the swaying deck, and moved toward the line. It was fraying as it moved against the rough boards of the ship. He pulled the dagger from his belt, and hacked at the taut rope. The sharp blade began to cut through the rope, and it snapped with loud crack. The ship shuddered as it righted itself, and Mekaul had to grab the rails again. He looked toward the floating body of the sailor called Mariki.

He watched as one of the sailors leapt over the rail, and hit water with a splash. The man swam swiftly toward the body of other sailor floating in the river. He was swimming with powerful strokes of his strong arms, and rapidly gaining on the floating body. He grabbed it by collar of his shirt, and began to swim back to the ship. The others sailors were shouting encouragement to him as they stood with spears ready to ward off the return of the monsters.

When they were thirty feet from the ship, one of the sailors threw a line toward them. The exhausted sailor grabbed the line, and they were pulled to the ship swiftly. It was just in time, as several great maraka fish attracted by the smell of the blood, appeared in the water near the ship. One fish leapt high in the air, and Mekaul could see its powerful jaws with series of sharp teeth, and then it crashed back in the water. He turned toward the sailors just pulled from the water.

Denrik was looking at the wounds in the chest and abdomen of the sailor called Mariki that were caused by the sharp teeth of the long neck monster. He shook his head as he straightened up.

'His internal organs are pierced.' He said. 'Still I will do everything that I can.'

Mahiko brought his supply of medicines and instruments. Denrik began to clean his wounds and tried to stem the flow of blood.

'Well, it is very fortunate that he has great knowledge of medicine.' Hiraum said to Mekaul. 'We will need all his knowledge in our journey.'

'Yes, we will face many dangers before we reach our destination.' Mekaul said. 'We must make our preparations for every emergency.'

'Why did that mentadora attack us in the main channel? Mekaul asked Hanoek. 'You said that they usually use the smaller channels for their mating.'

'Yes, it is most unusual and I can't remember any ship being attacked by these monsters for many long years.' Hanoek said thoughtfully as he stroked his beard. 'But unusual things do happen, death follow us every time we leave our homes to journey to far off lands.'

It took Denrik more than half an hour to clean and bandage the wounds of the sailor called Mariki. Mekaul learned that the sailor who had jumped in the water after him, and brought him back was his brother Sharika. They took the injured sailor to the cabin of Hanoek and put him in a bed. All that night they tended him and tried to revive him, but he developed a fever, and became delirious after midnight. Denrik used all his knowledge of medicine, but Mekaul knew from his expression that he was not hopeful.

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Mariki died next day early in the morning. They wrapped his body in a heavy linen bag, and used an old rusted iron chain to weigh it down, and took it to the deck.

Hanoek stood near the bag containing the body, and raised his hands to the heavens.

'Hear O mighty Dagash, Lord of the sea.' He called out. 'We are giving one of our brothers in your hands. Have mercy on him, don't let the demons of deep devour him, and don't let Narkora enslave him in his underwater kingdom of darkness. Let him pass through the gates of Mergash to the lands of your domain. He was brave sailor, and he had sailed many times through the sea of Karisam to the unknown shores. We honor him with offerings of Pikaush.'

He placed a large silver coin with hole in the middle on the bag, and touched his hand to his forehead. Hiraum and other sailors came, and placed smaller silver coins on the bag containing body, and after them Mekaul, Denrik and his party placed their offerings and prayed for him. Then the sailors lifted the body bag over the rails, and dropped it in the river. It fell with a splash in the water and sank rapidly in the river.

As the day progressed the ship sailed slowly down the river. The scene changed as they entered the great delta of Mehaka River. The river was flowing through many channels amid swampy islands filled with strange flora. Mekaul sat in the stern of the ship, and watched the strange river animals swim around their ship. He saw some large herakoses soaring high toward the sea.

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They were sailing in the open waters of the sea. They had entered the gulf of Estoran the day before, and were now sailing parallel to the coast. The ship was rolling in the heavy seas as it was built for the shallow inland waters. The sun sank in the sea, and night closed in and a strong breeze filled their sails. They sailed under the stars with lights of a small town to their left on the coast.

The next day saw them approaching the delta of a smaller river in the gulf of Estoran. It was the mouth of the River Penaka. They entered the network of channels between small islands filled with reed like plants and tall bushes. They

saw strange creatures basking in the sun in these islands that scrambled through the mud to slip in the water as their ship approached. Mekaul saw a large herakos gliding over waters, its large talons almost touching water. With sudden movement it rose into air with a large fish in its talons. It flapped its huge wings, and slowly gained height and moved toward the land.

By late evening they had entered the main channel of the River Penaka. The ship moved slowly against the current. A sailor was standing in bow of the ship checking the depth of channels with a long wooden pole. If they were not careful they might become stranded on a sandbar hidden underwater, and it would take a great effort to extract the ship from its trap.

'I am surprised that you have agreed to come that far for twenty gold pieces.' Mekaul said to the captain. 'It is quite far away from your path.'

Hiraum grinned. 'It is also a good trade opportunity. Our friend Hanoek can take a cargo of sepani leaves from Sorangi that will earn him a fortune in his city.'

Hanoek laughed and shook his head. 'Well, don't expect me to sail back empty handed from Penaka River. I would like to make a little trade on the way.'

'I remember a time that sepani leaves were quite a novelty.' Denrik said. 'But in the recent years it has become readily available, and it is even sold in the city states of Megdash, and the middle classes are enjoying the sepani drink.'

'In the older days the sepani bushes grew wild in the forest, and the people of Penaro used to collect the sepani leaves in the forested areas.' Hanoek said. 'But as the demand grew some people began to grow sepani bushes in small plantations, and this developed into large scale plantations worked by slaves and hired labor. The Penaro land owners have grown quite rich, and are building large stones villas, and buying the luxury goods that we bring to them.'

'It is said that you were captured by haupi slave hunters in your younger days.' Hiraum asked. 'And you escaped after several years in captivity.'

Hanoek nodded thoughtfully.

'It is true, my friends.' He said slowly. 'It is a long story.'

'Tell us your story, my friend.' Hiraum said. 'We had a lot of free time until we reach Sorangi.'

Hanoek stared at the tall trees that lined the river. He seemed to be far away.

'I was twenty one years old then.' He said slowly. 'My family, like every family in city state of Ashdari, is a seafaring family, and they were engaged in trade, but my father has lost his fortune in some hasty deals. Like every young man in Ashdari, I resolved to make my own fortune, and signed a five year contract with a cousin of my father. He took me because of our family ties and gave me preference over many aspiring young men that were ready to take the risk of travelling to the unknown lands. Few of them ever succeed, many die in far off lands and are forgotten soon.'

We went to the temple of Shardin, and put offerings on the altar of God for the success of our enterprise. I hired two experienced men as my assistants, and we loaded our goods on a small ship like this one. We sailed upstream in Penaka River for a week, and disembarked in Sorangi near the bend in the river. We hired some local men, and their beasts of burden for transporting our goods, and set off across the land of the people that live in tree houses. We reached the town of Patasi in the land of Ketari people, and offered our goods for sale. We sold our goods at very high profit, and purchased a good load of sepani leaves for our return journey. We left the town after a fortnight, and journeyed through the lands of Shahakas, who live in houses built in the trees.

We were sleeping in a hollow among the trees that was sheltered from cold wind and hostile human eyes, but we had been spotted by a band of haupi slave hunters that were marauding in the area. They attacked us in the early hours of morning when we were fast asleep. They took us captive, and marched us through the lands of Shahakas to the Hagani pass, and crossing the mountains entered the land of Sekardi people. There they sold us to the large plantation owners that grow sepani leaves, and marhi beans on their estates. The starchy

flour of these beans is used for making breads, and is the staple food of the people in those lands.

I was purchased by a young woman called Sumana, who had inherited the plantation of her father. I worked in her plantation as a slave toiling every day, and sleeping in the huts of her slaves. She was courted by a wealthy man of her tribe by the name of Charaka, who coveted her estate. She detested him, and rejected his advances. He grew angry, and began to make trouble for her.

One night some armed men stole into our farm house, and tried to steal her property. I roused the slaves, and we chased the thieves away. She was very grateful, and made me the foreman of her plantation.'

'Ah, so you were quite a hero in your youth, my friend.' Hiraum grinned. 'It is hard to believe that a man of Ashdari could be so foolish.'

Hanoek smile ruefully.

'I was young then, and the blood ran hot in my veins. Any way I became her foreman, and soon gained her trust. She began to entrust the management of her estate to me, which was a smart move because being a man of Ashdari, I am good at managing financial matters. So things went on until she became pregnant.'

Hiraum roared with laughter and slapped his back.

'Aha, so you were a hot blooded young man after all, no mistake about it.'

Hanoek smiled and shook his head.

'Yes, so was she, blood ran hot in her veins, and she was so full of life. So it came about that she chose to take me as her husband, and since I was her slave, it was her prerogative. We were very happy, and her people accepted her choice as it was not against the law, but still it was a bit unusual. We were happy for more than a year, but that suitor of her called Charaka was very angry, and was plotting revenge against us. There came a day, when I left the plantations with some of our men to take our crop of marhi beans for sale to the market in a nearby town. It took us a couple of days to complete the trade.

When we came back on the third day, we saw the smoke rising in the sky, and suddenly the fear filled my heart. We ran to the plantation, and a scene of destruction awaited us. Several of the farm buildings were burnt to the ground, and our workers and slaves were wandering among their ruins. I learned that some masked bandits had attacked our plantation in the dark of the night. They have killed Sumana and our baby, and after looting the farmhouse had burned several buildings, and had fled before our neighbors came to the aid of our workers.

I buried her and our child, and performed the funeral rites as was customary in the lands of Sekardi. After that I called a tribal council of elders to ask for justice and retribution. I accused Charaka as the murderer and looter, and asked for death punishment and the damages for our property being destroyed. Charaka refuted my accusations and called them baseless and prejudiced, and challenged me to provide the proof. Although most of the elders knew the truth, Charaka and his clan had worked hard to win over the elders, and as I was an outlander with few friends, my voice carried little weight in the council. Only a few of our neighbors spoke openly but the majority chose to stay on sidelines, and Charaka was let out without any punishment.

I sold my plantation or what was left of it, and freed my slaves and gave them some money to start a new life. I went to the main town of Sekardi, and deposited my money with an Ashdari trader for remittance to our city, and was advised to return home but the fire of revenge burnt in my heart, and I couldn't leave Charaka to gloat over his crimes. So I disguised myself as a peddler of small household articles, and began to spy his large house that was surrounded by stout wooden stockade. He was a cautious man, and never left his house without his armed retainers. I spied him for more than a month, and learned all about his routine.

Then in a dark moonless night I climbed over his stockade with help of a makeshift ladder, and went to his house stealthily. He was sleeping with one of his wives in his room. I broke into his room, and killed him with my sword. I had earlier started a fire in a wooden barn to distract his men, and escaped in the

confusion. I took refuge in a forest but his relatives were hunting for me all over the land, and I was not safe there. I began to travel by night, and went toward the mountains but the roads was guarded by his clansmen, and seeing no other way I went toward the lands of Sharadas in the north, and went into the service of a chieftain.

I was safe there but I pined to go to my home city, and after two years I left him, and travelled through dry lands to reach the mountains. It took me two months to reach the bend of Penaka near Sorangi. I found there a trader who was a family friend, and with his help reached my city. I claimed my deposit from the trading company to whom it was remitted, and started my own business. So here I am, after twenty years, a rich and fat Ashdari trader that lives just for making money, but the truth is that I still miss her and our child.'

'So you are a human after all; I am not surprised.' Denrik smiled. 'I wonder if our friend Hiraum too has a story to tell.'

Hiraum smiled and shook his head.

'Well, I have my own adventures and stories, and I am sure you can tell us some tales, and our young friend Mekaul has his adventures ahead. Still I am afraid we don't have the time now to go to my tales.'

They went to the cabin of Hanoek for the dinner.

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It was third day of their journey in the Penaka River. The swampy thickets and tangled forests hanging with strange vines were left behind, and now there were wide grasslands on both sides of the river dotted with tall perani bushes, and large wirak trees. They saw large herds of merkapis browsing in the bushes, and saw a pack of keriganos bringing down a seradon in a wood. In the distance

they saw a herd of enormous hirapis browsing high branches of tall wirak trees thirty feet high up.

The ship sailed slowly upstream, the gentle breeze filling its lateen sails. The scar faced sailor was standing in the bow, looking out for the sandbars and shoals in the river. Hanoek was standing with him, and they were talking about the river. Mekaul was standing near the main mast with Denrik and Hiraum.

'We will reach the settlement of Makira in the evening,' Hiraum said. 'We will take fresh supplies, and can hear the news of the lands upstream.'

'Who are these haupi slave hunters? Mekaul asked. 'I have heard that they make raids to capture slaves in these parts.'

'They are remnant of haupi nation that now live in the hills of moon near the Bekaro.' Denrik said. 'Many centuries ago haupi were a powerful nation that used to live on the banks of Mekari Lake. They had built many large cities and were ruled by powerful kings, but then a great flood inundated their lands, and destroyed their economy. After the floods receded there was a civil war that weakened them considerably and brought the end. The invaders from the north overran their lands, and destroyed what was left of their civilization. A faction of haupis under their leader Shako then left the lands around the lake, and after long wanderings settled in a large valley in the hills of moon. After settling in their new home they had to fight many battles with their neighboring tribes in which they were victorious, and they enslaved many of their enemies and drove the rest away. In the following centuries they raided the lands around the Shinar River again and again and plundered the settlements of that land, and began to sell the slaves they captured in their forays to the merchants of Megdash and thus this grisly trade flourished and brought misery and destruction to the people living around haupis. In the city states of Megdash there is a strong demand for the slaves because of their great wealth, and this demand has created a terrible trade in human misery.'

'We too have slaves in our towns but they become free men after seven years service, and are accepted as a part of their master's clan.' Mekaul said. 'But

it is said that the slaves in those far off city states are doomed to be slaves forever.'

'Yes, unfortunately that's true.' Denrik said. 'It is a most inhuman custom, and dooms an unfortunate person and his descendents forever to live of servitude. There are only few individuals fortunate or smart enough to break out of this cycle of misery.'

'Yes, there are some traders in Ashdari too that participate in this shameful trade.' Hiraum said. 'But I and most of the traders of Ashdari shun it because more than half of the slaves die in the journey, and it is a cruel and inhumane way to make money.'

A call from the scar faced sailor Barado brought their attention to a ripple of water in the river that passed their ship closely.

It was late in the evening when they docked at a small jetty near the town of Makira on the right bank of the river. The town was a mile from the river on high ground, and was fortified by a wooden stockade, and a deep trench surrounding it. They walked the path that was paved with wooden boards to cover the swampy patches, and went up to the town. There were many plantations and gardens on higher ground, and lush grasslands teeming with herds of mendanos. A high watch tower kept eye on the surrounding lands.

They entered the town through its strong gate, and went through the main road to the large market where they purchased fresh fruits and other supplies for the journey upriver. They met an Ashdari trader called Sardia, who was an acquaintance of both Hanoek and Hiraum, and from him they learned that there were no reports of haupi raiders in these parts for some time. They went to the inn where Sardia was staying, and shared a meal with him. It was getting dark as they returned to their ship.

They were sailing upriver, the river was broad and slow here as it flowed past the small reed filled islands. Strange water birds were catching fish near the banks of the river and montaris were swimming through tall reeds and in the midstream, and they saw a large terikona that lay submerged in the water near the shore, only its head visible in water as it waited for some unwary prey to come to drink in the river.

It was on the second day after leaving Makira that they reached the Sorangi on the bend of the river. Here the river changed its course to the east, and was flowing through the lands filled with groves of wirak trees and strange tall grasses, and dense shrubs grew in the clearings. They saw a ferry landing made for crossing the river.

They embraced Hanoek and shook hands with his crew, and began to unload their goods and baggage in the boat that had come to take them to the landing.

'Farewell, my friends.' Hanoek said as he watched their goods being loaded in the ferryboat. 'That is hard part of any journey, saying farewells, and wondering if we will ever meet again.'

'It is as you say, my friend.' Denrik said as he gripped his hand. 'We leave the people and the places behind us, but they live in your memory forever.'

'Memories are just the shadows of real things.' Hanoek said sadly. 'These memories torment us more for what we miss; still life has to go on and we are grown up people, and must cope with our lives.'

They got down to the ferryboat, and the ferry man began to pole it toward the landing stage. They saw the ship as it weighed anchor, and furling its sails, began to move slowly. Hanoek was standing in the deck, watching them move toward the shore. Mekaul waved toward him and shouted his farewells. Hanoek smiled and waved back. Barado was standing in the bow and he too waved toward him.

The ferry reached the landing in about quarter of an hour. They disembarked from the boat, and began to unload their baggage and trade goods. It took a good half an hour before they had piled their goods in a wooden shed near the landing and began their preparation for the journey. There was group of freighters staying near the river landing in makeshift tents that carried the trade goods of the traders on their pack mendanos to the Hagani pass. Hiraum began to negotiate with them for transportation of their goods. The leader of freighters a tall man by the name of Shekara was negotiating with Hiraum. He was powerful man with broad shoulders with his long hair hanging on his back. He haggled long with Hiraum and drove a hard bargain, and finally agreed to take them behind the Hagani pass for twenty five gold coins of Ashewara, but he warned them that the local traders of Sorawangi wouldn't allow them to go beyond the Hagani pass, and it was far better to sell their goods at that point at a good price and return to their land.

They made a camp in a grove of wirak trees and built temporary shelters with wooden poles and canvas for the night. They piled dried grasses and spread their blankets over it to make beds for sleeping. A fire had been built in a sheltered place where its light could not be seen from afar. For their dinner they broiled some meat, and baked matari roots over the fire. After finishing their frugal supper they sat around the fire, and talked for some time before going to their beds for the night. The duty of guarding the camp was divided in six watches of three men each, and first trio went into the trees to guard the camp. They slept soundly in their warm beds and the night passed peacefully.

A cold wind arose after midnight and stirred the boughs of the trees and shook their shelters. The fire had died out and only embers were left when Mekaul's watch came. He stood under a wirak tree away from the camp, and watched the dark trail, and the river in the fading light of setting moon. A fog was drifting over the land, and the grasses and shrubs were dripping with dewfall. He didn't see anything unusual, and the night passed without any event. At last the sky beyond the distant mountains began to grow lighter, and its peaks were silhouetted in the growing light of the dawn.

After a frugal breakfast they packed their baggage on the nine mendanos of the freighters. These were large animals, almost four and half feet tall, and weighed over 250 kilograms each. The animals moved their ears and fidgeted restlessly as the large bags of trade goods were strapped on their backs, and balanced carefully. The leader of freighters with his long hair led their party as they started on the trail toward the Hagani pass in the Urangil Mountains. The day warmed as the sun climbed in the sky, and the fog disappeared from the lowlands near the river. The trail zigzagged through the groves of wirak trees and wide grasslands that spread toward the distant forest. The river disappeared from the view behind the rising land and thick stands of the trees. They saw a large herd of merkapis browsing in the tall shrubs and bushes that moved away warily as they came closer. Mekaul saw a tall hirapi browsing the lower branches of a wirak tree thirty feet high.

They stopped for their midday meal near a small stream flowing through a meadow between the woods. The day had become pleasantly warm, and a gentle breeze was stirring the leaves of wirak trees overhead. They glimpsed several tall hirapis browsing the lower branches of trees in the distances. Mekaul saw a strange cloud drifting over the forest in the north.

'What is that haze over the forest'? Mekaul asked. 'It is not a cloud because it is moving, and it is drifting against the wind.'

Denrik shield his eyes with his right hand, and starred at the moving cloud in the distance.

'That is a swarm of chikardas, a small insect no bigger than your nails.' He said after a moment. 'But they can darken the skies as they pass over the land. These insects live in underground tunnels, but for some unknown reason they multiply furiously at times and migrate to other areas. These swarms are known to wipe out the small animals and all scrawling things in their path. Usually they are not a danger to humans but a swarm is still dangerous. It is fortunate that we are not in their path.'

They resumed their march after lunch and a brief rest. The trail was now veering toward north east, and land was more open here. They saw a herd of merkapis running in the grasslands to their north. The animals were running on their powerful hind legs and leaping over the tall bushes. Mekaul saw a man running to their left and then saw several others who were running in a semi circle.

'These are Shahaka hunters.' Hiraum said. 'They are inhabitants of these lands. Their womenfolk tend small gardens of fruits and ground roots, but they are mostly hunter folks and love the chase. They live in tree houses in wirak trees forty or fifty feet high.'

'These merkapis are running very fast, and leaping easily over the bushes ten feet tall.' Mekaul said. 'These Shahakas can't hope to run them down. They must be driving the animals toward some prearranged ambush point. It is a common technique for hunting fast running prey.'

'Yes, they build a kind of concealed shelter from tree branches and boughs in which hunters sit and wait for the herds to be driven to them.' Denrik said. 'These people are expert hunters and are master of ambush. They still think that agriculture is a job for the women and look down on a man who engages in farming.'

'You seemed to know a lot about these hunters for a scholar.' Hiraum said with a smile.

'I am a geographer too, I have written many books about distant lands and their people.' Denrik said. 'I am not like those temple priests that have only the knowledge of the temple rituals and sacrifices to the Gods and spend their lives inside the courtyard of the temples.'

The herd of merkapis and their pursuers had disappeared in the tall bushes, and left behind only the dust that hung in the air.

The sun was setting in the west as they crested a rise in the land, and saw ahead of them the lands covered with woods. They were weary from a long day's march, and were looking forward to a hot meal, and a night's sleep in a sheltered place among the wirak trees.

Mekaul saw some huts in a clearing to their left. He stopped and gazed at them for a moment.

'These huts seemed to be deserted.' He said. 'There are dark and I don't see any movement near these huts. I think we can use them for the night.'

He went toward the huts cautiously. He was followed by Mahiko, and one of Hiraum's men. He was carrying a spear in his hands, but didn't expect to use it.

The huts were deserted and he couldn't see any signs of recent occupation inside them. Wild grasses and shrubs growing around the empty huts and there were signs of small rat like creatures living inside huts. He found some earthenware cups and jars and some others articles of daily living inside huts. They returned to their party waiting on the trail for them.

'I think we can spend the night in these huts.' He said. 'We have to do some cleaning, but it is far better than sleeping under the trees. It is getting cold at the nights and heavy dewfall will chill us to the bones.'

They cleaned the huts of accumulated debris and swept its floors clean. They collected the bundles of dried grasses and shrubs and made their beds for the night. They stabled their mendanos in a large shed whose roof had collapsed, but it still protected the animals from the cold wind, and covered them with pieces of canvas.

Mekaul built a fire quickly and nursed the small flame until it was blazing merrily. They sat around it and soaked its warmth gratefully. The light from the flames danced on their tired faces.

'Ah, I love camp fires.' He said as he placed a large limb of wood in fire. 'For me it conjures the image of home.'

'So you are getting homesick already.' Denrik said. 'I do hope that you are not thinking of turning back.'

Mekaul shook his head and grinned at him.

'Don't you worry, my learned friend, there is no thought of turning in the back my mind. I will go with you to the end of the earth or more precisely to the city of Mirakem on the shores of inland sea of Sekarmia where you expect to find the ancient scrolls of knowledge in the temple of Shemesho.'

Denrik smiled and stroked his graying beard.

'It is good that you remember our goal. Let me tell you more about these scrolls. When our ancestors first came to this planet which we now call our world, they had a great store scientific knowledge, and had great technology to conquer this new world. They modified many plants they found here to their requirements that we now grow for food, and they modified many animals that they found here that we now raise for food and for their hides. But then a great catastrophe destroyed the human civilization in the planet earth where our ancestors lived. It is said that a great star exploded in the vicinity of planet earth, and its deadly radiation destroyed the atmosphere of the planet, and led to mass extinction of most of the life there. Still I am hopeful that some humans may have survived this catastrophe, and there might be groups of men still be living on planet earth. Our ancestors in this world knew that their small colony here is not secure, and may perish in some catastrophe, and all their knowledge may be lost. So they set down their knowledge in writing on a strange material that had lasted all through these millennia and are stored in many locations. I have spent many long years collecting and deciphering these scrolls, and it is due to my labors that many a great advances have been made in our knowledge. I have devoted my life in seeking this knowledge but Still I advise you to turn back when you feel that you can't go any further.'

'I don't understand all that you have just said, but still I am willing to accompany you in your quest.' Mekaul said with a smile. 'Who knows, I may become a scholar at this later stage in life.'

'It is never too late to learn, my friend.' Denrik said seriously. 'You have all of your life before you.'

'Let's hope so, and now I must prepare our dinner.'

Mekaul went to the fire to boil the meat and the ground roots in a cooking pot. Denrik began to write in his journal. He had been busy all day during their march, noting the land and its lay, and watching the plants and the insects and the animals and the birds, and had measured the angle of the North Star after the dark with an instrument and made measurements. He was noting everything in his journal and had drawn a rough map of the land that had traversed. He told Mekaul that he would draw detailed maps of these lands when he reached back his home in Shomar, and would write a book on the flora and fauna of the these lands.

It was getting colder as the sun set behind the horizon, and a haze hung over the forest in the west. A cold wind stirred the dried leaves and fallen vegetation that littered the ground. They set two men to guard the camp for the night, and went to their beds to sleep. The night was silent but for the sighing of cold wind among the trees as they slept in their warm beds. A roar echoed in the night, and there were some answering shrieks in the dark jungle around them. The guards were alert but couldn't see anything in the darkness outside their camp. Finally they settled down behind the thick trees, and wrapped their cloaks around them to ward off the cold, and waited patiently for their watch to end.

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They were walking on the trail through open grasslands dotted with few wirak trees. They have left the forest behind them, and were now in the midst of an open land. The early morning fog had disappeared entirely, and the heavy dewfall of the previous night had dried out, and the grasses and other vegetation were fresh and fragrant. Strange insect like creatures were flying over the bushes, and small animals were scurrying in the grasses. The day was warm and bright, and they could smell the fragrance of strange plants and shrubs that grew around

them. In the distance the dark clouds had darkened the northern horizon, and they could see the flash of lightening in the storm as it moved across the open grasslands.

A pekardo bird was perched on a tall mehani bush, and was watching the movement of the small animals in the vegetation keenly. Suddenly it opened its wings, and sailed through the air. It made a wide circle over the grassland, and suddenly dropped on a prey hidden in tall grass. They saw the struggle in the grass for a moment, and then the pekardo rose in the air, flapping its wings. There was a small rodent like creature writhing in its claws. It slowly gained height, and began to fly toward the large cliff in the north.

'It is the same old drama being played on a new stage.' Denrik said as he walked with Mekaul. 'The life never change, it is only the characters in it that changes.'

'What do you mean by this? Mekaul asked.

'I have read a book about the life on the planet earth that I had found in an old library.' Denrik said. 'The life on that planet was different from the life in our world, but still it was similar in many ways. It is all about the struggle to survive; to eat and not to be eaten.'

'Well, I don't know anything about this planet earth of our ancestors.' Mekaul said. 'But it is true that for every animal the life is a struggle for survival, and only the strongest and quickest survive.'

Hiraum was walking before them. He turned and smiled at them.

'Well, you two can talk all about the mystery of life, but for me these perakis shrubs with their golden pods are more interesting. From these golden pods a potion is made that help heal the wounds. These golden pods bring a good price in the cities of south.'

Denrik nodded.

'Yes, these shrubs are called dermadias in medicine lore, and can also be used in treatment of sikarna worms growing in man's guts. It is a horrible disease and very painful, and if patient is not treated properly, he will die a horrible death.'

They stopped and began to collect the golden pods from the perakis plants that were growing near the trail. The freight men with pack mendanos stood on the trail, and watched them collect the herbs with amusement, but after some time they tied their animals to some tall bushes, and joined them. They spread out in the open grassland, and began to pick the golden pods from deramdias plants. The mendanos began to browse the shrubs and vegetation along trail. It was near the midday, and it was getting hot in the open. The dark storm had moved away, and there was haze in the north.

Suddenly Mekaul looked up, and surveyed the grassland around him in alarm.

'I think we have got company.' He said in a low voice. 'It is exceedingly stupid of us to forget everything, and to spread out to collect the herbs like little children.'

Hiraum called out to his men and the party of freight men and, ordered them to come back to the trail. Quickly they gathered again, and brought their animals back on the trail.

Mekaul lifted his right hand in the air, and walked slowly toward the thick stand of bushes to the right of the trail. He stopped as he saw a movement in the bushes.

A strongly built man wearing animal's skin dress came out of the vegetation. He was holding a spear thrower in his right hand and several long and slender spears in his left.

'Come in peace, O' great hunter.' Mekaul said in tirany language. 'We are a party of traders going on to Hagani pass in Urangil Mountains. We greet you as friends.'

The strongly built hunter watched him silently for a long moment, and then nodded his head.

'I am Henkal, the headman of Soragal clan.' He said in a broken tirany language. 'I greet you as friend in our land.'

There were more than a dozen men standing among the bushes now. They were all dressed in the same manner; a long leather shirt and a pair of leather trousers and leather moccasins in their feet. They were all armed with spear throwers and carried several spears each. Some of them also had axes strapped to their belts.

Mekaul advanced toward the hunter Henkal and took his hand in his own.

'May there be peace in your land, and may there be plenty of game in your hunting grounds.' He said. 'We wish to pass peacefully through your lands.'

Henkal smiled and shook his hand warmly.

'We welcome you as friends, and wish you a safe journey.'

'How long have you been watching us? Mekaul asked.

'We have been watching you for quite some time.' Henkal said. 'We have to be careful in this land because haupi raiders make periodic raids to capture our people, and sell them in slavery. Our hunters keep an eye over the land, and bring back the news of any party that moves in this land. Your party was watched as it marched through the trail, and we have received the news of your approach, so I decided to come to see you and learn about you.'

'It is fortunate that we have met in peace.' Mekaul said. 'We are traders and mean your people no harm.'

'We welcome you in this land and invite you to eat with us. We have hunted several wild mendanos and there is plenty of meat to share.'

They accepted his offer gladly and went with Soragal hunters to their settlement in a glade of wirak trees a mile away. The glade was hidden in a fold of

the land and couldn't be seen from afar. Mekaul saw for the first time the tree houses of people of this land on tall wirak trees. These were built more than forty feet high in the branches of wirak trees and could only be reached through rope ladders that could be pulled up at night. These houses were like little fortresses because it was difficult for the attackers to reach them and they could shoot arrows and throw spears on their enemies below.

They were welcomed by a small crowd of women, children and old men, who came down the settlement on the trees. They were staring openly at the group of traders that had come in their settlement. Their women were bold and curious and one young woman, with long black hair reaching to her waist, came near him to stare at him. She touched his arm and smiled at him. Turning to watching women she said something in her language.

The women around them erupted into laughter and began to speak all at once. There was much merriment as they looked at him with a look of amusement on their faces.

Mekaul looked toward their headman Henkal in annoyance.

'What did she say? He asked indignantly. 'Are they having fun at my expense?

Henkal grinned and shook his head.

'No, she just said that she would have taken you as her mate if she hadn't already taken Shiragal and the other women are saying that she had keen eyes for handsome men.'

'Are not your women ashamed to speak like this? He said with a look of bewilderment on his face. 'It is unthinkable in our land for our women to talk openly about choosing men as their mate. Our women are more subtle in showing their favor a particular man.'

Henkal turned toward the assembled women and spoke in a commanding voice and gestured them to leave. The women withdrew, still laughing and chatting and looking back amusedly at Mekaul's discomfort.

Denrik looked at him with a half smile on his face.

'Don't be so bewildered, my young friend.' He said with a twinkle in his eyes. 'Different people have different customs and you can't judge all people by your standards. Among these people women are free to choose their mate and they can show their favor for a man openly. It is not considered immodest; in fact the very idea of modesty is funny to these people. But you are right; in the more developed societies women are bound by the codes of modesty and propriety. As you learn more you will become more tolerant of different values and mores.'

Mekaul shook his head and began to walk with him toward the large fire that was burning in large open hearth.

'You are right, I made a fool of myself in front of these people and their women are now considering me an idiot. But still it is very strange to hear such talk from a woman.'

Denrik sat under a large wirak tree and smiled at him

'Well, don't be so disturbed, my friend. You will learn that different people have different values and not all see things your way. Most of the times these differences are not fundamental but there are some societies that have very strange customs and ways of life. There are a people that live in the islands of eastern sea, called nimkari whose women are free to cohabit with any men that they like, and in whom the family lineage run through mothers, and then there are great aristocrats of Megdash that keep their women secluded in separate quarters of their palaces, watched over by female guards. There is not a universal set of morality upon which all humanity can agree. You will see many different people as you travel across the lands. There is also a nation beyond the mountains of Ashewara that live only for war. These people consider the agriculture, and tending the herds of animals unworthy jobs for men. Their sole aim in life is to make war, and they devote their entire life in training with weapons and battle drills. The women of this nation are also warlike, and fight over the men that favor, and it is not considered a scandal if a woman kills another in a duel over a man. '

'How do they make a living if they don't practice agriculture and animal herding? Mekaul asked with a frown.

'They have conquered many people and hold these nations in subjugation and live on their tribute.' Denrik said. 'And to maintain their supremacy they have turned their whole nation into an army. They don't practice any other trade or profession and all their artisans and trade men are either slaves or alien people of other nations. They respect only the warriors and hold in contempt the peaceful people engaged in agriculture and trade.'

Mekaul shook his head in wonder and said.

'A warrior is also greatly honored in our land, but we also respect the people who are engaged in agriculture, and other trades. In our land a warrior can also be a farmer, and herder.'

Denrik nodded in agreement.

'It is so for most of the people that lives in small towns and settlements, but when a society becomes wealthy and develops a complex economy, the people are separated in different classes according to their professions, and eventually a class of professional warriors and soldiers emerges that only practice the art of weapons, and lives for war, and in time this warrior class will take the power in their own hands and will become the ruling elite. In the city states of Megdash they have the warrior classes who rule all. It is a lesson of history that people had to accept.'

Henkal came striding toward them followed by an older man.

'You are welcome in our settlement, O' traders of the far off lands. You can eat with us, and we have collected a goodly supply of golden pods of perakis plants, and some other herbs that grow in our land. We would like to see what goods you have to sell.'

They went with them to where several men were butchering the carcasses of mendanos killed in the hunt, and skewing the large meat pieces in wooden skewers. The women were preparing the vegetables, and baking the menapi roots

for the feast. The children were squealing with excitement and running around the clearing chasing each other. The older men of the settlement were sitting under a large tree and talking idly as they waited for the meal to be prepared. The men of their party were sitting on the other side of clearing, and Hiraum was supervising the unloading of large bags from the pack mendanos. They were unpacking their goods to trade with people of Soragal clan.

Mekaul turned and saw the same young women gazing at him, who had teased him earlier. She smiled at him, and whispered to her companions who began to laugh, and banter in high voices. Mekaul shook his head and walked away, and went toward Hiraum and his party.

They were sitting in the shadows of wirak trees with people of Soragal clan, and ate the feast prepared in their honor. They gorged on the roasted meat, baked roots, and various fruits, and nuts with large wooden cups of beer, and fruit wine. It took them almost an hour to finish their feast and cleared away the scrapes. They washed their hands in a wooden water basin that was placed for that purpose.

Henkal brought some leather bags filled with dried pods of perakis plants, and some other herbs used in the medicine, and for seasoning the food. They also brought small bags filled with gold nuggets and dust washed from the mountain streams. Hiraum placed steel knives, axes and spear heads, beautifully forged in the iron workshops of the cities of Megdash in the lands of east. There were also bales of fine mapiri clothes woven from the fibers of mapiri plants that grew wild in the wetlands of Sinari River, and its tributaries. These clothes were brightly colored and patterned, and were highly valued by the women in these lands. There were also mekari clothes that were woven from fibers of thimani reeds that were coarser, and favored by lower classes because of their lower prices.

They bargaining were long and boisterous, and both sides wanted to get better terms for their goods as they haggled. In the end both sides were satisfied and a deal was struck. The people of Soragal took a number of steel knives, axes and spear heads that were far superior to that made by their ironsmiths, and

bought some clothes for their women. The Ashdari traders were also quite happy to receive a collection of herbs, and a quantity of gold dust for their goods.

As the hour was late they began to load their animals quickly, and made preparations to leave the settlement of Soragal clan. Henkal had already told them about a good place to camp for the night. They left the clearing in the late afternoon, and walked back to the trail. They marched slowly on the trail through the grasslands, and woods. The sun was setting in the west, and the shadows were getting longer, when they reached their night camp. It was in a dense wood of wirak trees near a stream that flowed through the long grass. They entered the woods, and walked under the tall wirak trees to reach a secluded place where they were safe from the winds, and curious human eyes.

They built temporary shelters for the night with wooden poles, and tree branches, and pieces of canvas, and covered their roofs with the fronds of tall bushes to protect them from dewfall and cold wind in the night. Quickly they built a fire, and began to prepare their dinner. They had brought some supplies from the settlement of Soragal, and they had dried meats, fresh fruits, ground roots and many vegetables for dinner. They finished their meal quickly, and made preparation for spending the night in the woods. They divided the night in several watches and assigned the guard duties. The night was quite warm, and it was not difficult to stay outdoors. They had corralled their animals in a makeshift stable built with wooden poles near their shelters. They went to their beds and settled down for the night.

Mekaul lay down on his bed, and watched the sky through a hole in the roof. He couldn't see any stars, and the sky was overcast. He could hear the sounds of the wilderness outside his camp. He heard a howl, and honking calls of warning as the predator and the prey played the game of life, and death in the grasslands beyond the woods. He sank into the deep sleep of exhaustion after some moments.

He woke up suddenly, and for few moments lay in his bed listening for any sounds. He could hear distant rumbles in the night, and saw a bright flash lighting the tall trees around their camp. He sat up groggily, and rubbed his eyes and yawned sleepily. He rose to his feet unsteadily, and went out of his shelter to the darkness outside. He heard a mighty boom of thunder rolling across the open grasslands, and felt the moist air on his face. He saw the dark mass of clouds lightening up the sky in the east as lightening streaked across the dark clouds, and the gushes of wind whipped the fallen leaves and dead vegetation across the clearing. He saw Denrik and Hiraum standing under a tall tree talking. He went toward them.

'It seems like a mighty storm.' Mekaul said as he reached them. 'We must prepare ourselves for a deluge, and secure our pack animals so they wouldn't stampede in the storm.'

'Yes, you are right Mekaul.' Hiraum said. 'I have seen such storms in these lands, and saw the land inundated in a few short hours. It is a good camping site as it is on higher ground, but still we must make our preparations.'

They roused the camp, and began to secure the animals under the dense vegetation where they would be safe from downpour. They stacked their bags under the dense stand of trees, and covered these with skins to protect from the rains. The winds had risen to gale force, and whipped their clothing, and filled their eyes and their mouths with dust. They ran around the camp, and collected their blankets and other belongings, and stowed these in the places where these would be secure from the rains.

The first drops hit their faces, and then a steady downpour began to fall from the sky. In a few moments they were drenched to their skins, and their clothing was dripping wet. A blinding flash revealed the clearing vividly, and every tree in clearing was revealed as if in the daylight. Then a mighty thunder hit him like a wall of noise, and deafened him for a moment. A gust of wind followed, driving the downpour on his face, and blinding him as water poured down his face. He ran under a tall tree with vast canopy, but the wind was driving the rain under the tree, and drenching him to the skin. He couldn't see his friends, and the

wall of falling water had obscured the view around him. He hid himself behind the wide tree trunk, but was not still wholly sheltered from the spray. He wiped his face, and cursed himself for not finding a better place before hand. He looked around the camp for Denrik, and hoped that his servants Mahiko and Serdan were with him to help him.

He leaned on the tree trunk, and closed his eyes warily, and waited for storm to subside. Another mighty thunder rolled across the land, and then a bright flash revealed the woods around him. In a brief moment of the light he saw a large shape crouching under a tree before him. He saw that it was some large animal sheltering from the rain under a tree near him, and then darkness returned. He crouched under the tree, and touched the dagger in his belt, but wondered if he could defend himself with a dagger. He desperately wished that he had his spear in his hand at that moment. He moved to other side of the tree to place the tree trunk between him and the large animal in the dark.

Another flash of lightening turned the dark night into the daylight for a moment, and he saw that this animal had brown strips on his body. The beast turned toward him and he saw the rows of sharp teeth in its powerful jaws. He gripped the tree trunk and began scramble up the tree. He climbed quickly and reached a large branch fifteen feet up. He sat on the branch and looked down but the animal was not there. He looked around the tree but couldn't see any sign of the large beast. It had silently disappeared in the darkness of the night.

The time passed on slowly, and the storm raged across the land. He was soaked to his skin, and his teeth were chattering from the cold as he sat on the tree branch. He was utterly miserable, and wondered how he was going to get down the tree as the storm began to subside. His hands were numb from the cold, and he knew that he would fall ill if he couldn't somehow find warmth. He wrapped his arms around him and shivered with cold. He shifted his body to get a better position on the branch and to rest his numb body.

Slowly the storm subsided, and moved away across the forests toward the mountains in the distance. The thunder was still flashing in the dark clouds, but it was now far away and the roll of thunder was not so loud. The rain had turned

into a drizzle, and the winds had died down. He moved gingerly and tried to move his limbs that were numb from the cold. His body was cold and stiff, and with an effort he lowered himself from the branch, and tried to grip the trunk of the trees with his legs.

He climbed down the slippery trunk with an effort and half way down the tree lost his grip, and fell down with a thump in the damp vegetation. He rose to his feet unsteadily and cursed his luck. He was very cold and sore, and caked with mud but was not hurt. He tried to wipe the mud of his face and arms, and grinned sheepishly. He looked around him, and saw some of his companions across the clearing. He stumbled toward them.

Slowly they gathered again under a tall tree. The ground underneath it was not soaking wet like in the open clearing. They were all cold and soaking wet, and shivering in their wet clothing. They rummaged among their bags, and found some clothing that was damp but still better than what they were wearing. They changed their clothes and felt better, but they needed a fire to warm their chilled bodies. Mekaul looked around him.

'We must make some fire to warm ours chilled bodies. I have some experience in making fire in adverse conditions.'

He moved around him, looking to find some dry kindling to start a fire but he couldn't find any. He collected some pieces of bark, some twigs and a bunch of dried grass. He placed the kindling in a little pile, and tried to make fire with his steel blade and a piece of flint. The sparks flew as he struck the flint but couldn't make fire in damp kindling, and gave up after several attempts and sat there gloomily.

'Well, even my experience has failed to start fire in this dampness. We need a miracle to start fire in the damp wood.' He said after a moment as he rose to his feet and looked around him in desperation.

Denrik nodded thoughtfully.

'Well, we do need a miracle, my friend.'

He rummaged in his bag and brought out a glass bottle, and walked toward the little pile of twigs and brush. He opened the lid of bottle, and poured a black powder over the kindling. He took the struck the flint with the steel to produce the sparks. Mekaul was startled as the pile of kindling erupted into bright fire with a whoosh, and presently the damp wood caught fire, and began to burn with a lot of smoke.

Mekaul shook his head in bewilderment.

'You sure can make miracles.' He said with genuine admiration. 'I have never seen anything like it. It sure is uncanny.'

Denrik laughed and patted his shoulders.

'It is nothing, my young friend' He said. 'We of temple of Shomar are working to revive the wisdom, and knowledge of our ancestors. This black powder was called gun powder by our ancestors, who had invented it in their earlier days of discovery. We have books in our libraries that speak of very strange and subtle phenomenon that are beyond our comprehension. We are working to decipher and understand them these books, and I am going to the city of Mirakem on the shores of inland sea to find more rare books in the temple of that city. It is my hope that we will see a renaissance of new knowledge in the coming centuries.'

'I don't understand most of what you just said.' Mekaul said. 'But I will go with you to discover these books, and contribute to the start of a new age for human race in this world. We might rediscover the greatness of our ancestors again.'

Hiraum grinned and stroked his beard.

'Well I don't know what you two are talking about, but it was very neat trick that you did, and it might just save our lives.'

They fed the fire slowly, and soon a large fire was blazing merrily, and they were soaking its life giving heat, and reviving their freezing limbs. They spread their wet clothing near the fire to dry out, and edged closer to fire to receive more of its heat. They had made a fire on the other side of clearing for their

animals that were tethered there, and the shivering animals were standing near it to soak its welcome heat.

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The new day saw a landscape of watery meadows, and the large pools of water where none existed the day before. The trail was still muddy and partly submerged in some parts under water. They had packed their animals, and were preparing to leave to leave their camp. Mekaul was standing with Hiraum, and was telling him about the large animal that he had seen the previous night during the storm. They went to discover any signs that had been left by that animal, and were accompanied by Shekara who was the leader of their freight men.

The storm had washed most of the signs left by the animal, but there were several large paw marks under the tree in the mud that not was washed away by the heavy rains. Shekara stooped and examined it closely.

'I think it is paw mark of a grown mountain tangora, or its cousin plain tangora that are seen near the foothills. This animal is fully grown, and must have weighed at least 120 kilos or more. These animals live on the hills and mountains of the north, and younger and smaller animals can climb trees. I have not seen any tangora in these parts before, although it is said that there are many in these parts. I think this beast was stalking our animals, and was caught by the storm, and left when it saw you. It doesn't attack humans usually, but it is very strong, and can kill a man easily.'

They went back to their party, and after some last minute preparations left the clearing, and joined the trail. The trail was muddy, and covered with little pools of water. They trudged slowly along, their feet sinking in soft mud that slowed them down, but they moved on through the woods and grasslands toward the hills. The sun was bright and warm, and a cool breeze was blowing across the plains. They had to make detours to avoid the water pools, and muddy patches on

the trail. Now other kinds of trees beside wirak trees were growing near the streams and water channels. The tall bushes grew near trail, and small birds and the insects were hovering over the vegetation. They could see some tall cliffs rising from the ground in the distance. Mekaul starred at these tall rocks curiously.

'I think that there is some kind of structure on one of those cliffs.' He said.

'It is a small settlement on top of that cliff.' Shekara said. 'The people in these parts usually build their homes on top of these cliffs. These settlements are built on cliff tops for protection from haupi slave raiders, and other attackers that come from the mountains. These lands are not ruled by the strong kings, and are without any kind government, and there are many bandits that attack the traders passing through. We have to keep our eyes open as we travel across these lands.'

'Yes, you are right; there are many dangers in these parts.' Hiraum said as he walked beside them. 'There are many clans living near the mountains that would attack any trading party that is small and not watchful.'

Mekaul looked thoughtfully across the forests and grasslands stretching to the foothills. He turned toward Hiraum and said thoughtfully.

'We must double our guard, and must have someone acting as a scout to look out for dangers ahead.'

'It is a good idea but who will be our scout?' Hiraum said. 'We don't have anybody with experience that can act as our scout.'

'I have the experience as I have been a scout in many hunting expeditions and war parties against enemy tribes and towns.' Mekaul said. 'I will go ahead and look out for dangers.'

Hiraum looked at him at him thoughtfully.

'You must take somebody with you; it will be dangerous to go out alone in this wilderness.'

Mekaul shook his head and smiled.

'I can go faster and with stealth if alone. I am only man in our party who has the experience of scouting and tracking.'

After some arguments it was agreed that Mekaul will go alone but Denrik was not happy with the idea but Mekaul assured him that he can move silently on the forest trails.

He took his powerful bow and quivers of arrows, and some food and a large water bottle, and began to jog slowly along the trail leaving his party behind.

Two hours late he was perched on a high branch of a tree, well hidden from view. It was something that he had done before; the trick was to find a high place, and sit there patiently, and survey the land around methodically. He knew that he must not be hasty; any ambushing party of raiders might be well concealed in the thick vegetation on the ground, and be as patient as he was, so the patience was needed to be successful.

He had been there for about half an hour and he seen in that several herds of merkapis browsing in the tall bushes, and had also seen a pack of keriganos that was hunting them. He was fascinated by the hunting techniques of these fierce little animals, and watched in amazement as they drove the merkapis toward the place in the bushes, where some members of their pack was hiding in ambush. He could see still the pack of keriganos feasting on the carcass of an animal five times their size. He was about to end his watch, and descend to the ground when he saw something moving near the stream.

He sat there without moving, and watched the long grass and dense rushes along the stream for a long time. His patience was finally rewarded as he saw a line of men emerge from the dense vegetation, and move along a game trail made by the wild animals. He counted more than twenty men moving in a line, leading a line of pack mendanos with their baggage, and it was apparent to his experienced eyes that this was a war party. He knew from the way they moved that it was not a hunting party. They were wearing iron helmets and leather body armor, and were armed with heavy spears and large leather shields. They were

moving like a disciplined unit on the march silently and resolutely. Their leader was a tall man wearing an iron helmet with a tall plume, and was wearing a red cloak over his armor. They seemed to be heading toward the trail that was used by the traders going to Hagani pass in Urangil Mountains. He watched until the war party disappeared in the tall bushes near the trail.

He climbed down the tree quickly, and began to move through long grass toward a game trail that went toward the west. There were still pools of water standing on the ground, and he had to make detours to avoid the muddy patches. He began to run as he reached the game trail, and had covered many miles before he reached the trail used by the traders. He ran slowly but steadily along the trail, and spotted his party after an hour. They stopped as they saw him coming at a run, and waited for him under a tall tree near the trail.

‘Well, what news have you brought? Hiraum asked when he stopped before them. ‘You seemed to be worn out completely.’

Mekaul shook his head and wiped the sweat off his face. He took the water bottle offered to him gratefully, and drank from it eagerly. It took him some moment before he was able to speak.

‘There is a group of some twenty men ahead on the trail. They seem to be a war party and are going on a raid.’

Shekara drew a sharp breath and gripped his arm.

‘Tell me about them, how do they look and how are they armed?’

Mekaul described the group of warriors he had seen heading toward the trail. Shekara listened silently, and gazed toward the distant mountains.

‘They are a raiding party of haupis.’ He said finally. ‘They are moving along the trail, and that means that we should not go ahead because they may lay an ambush somewhere.’

Mekaul nodded thoughtfully.

'They are going eastward on the trail; I think that they don't know anything about our party, but we still it means that we can't go ahead.'

They talked about their situation for some time, and it was finally decided that they should find a camping site far away from the trail in some secluded spot to spend the night and plan their next move. Shekara led them toward the south in the forest over a game trail through tall shrubs and rushes. There were many spoors of merkapis and perkabos on the game trail that had passed earlier in the day. There were several muddy patches and the puddles of water in their path that hindered their progress. They tried to walk on thick turf, and hard ground to leave little signs of their passing for any that might stumble upon them.

They walked quickly and silently through the tall grasses, and soon lost sight of the traders' trail. The sun was setting in the west, and the grasslands were in deep shadows as they found a secluded spot in a grove of tall trees that was almost invisible from a distance. They entered the small clearing and tethered their animals under the tall trees. They worked methodically and silently, cutting tree branches and the fronds of the meshraki bushes to build temporary shelters for the night. They also improvised a simple stable for their animals.

Some of their men left with empty water bags to fetch water from a small stream that flowed through a line of dense vegetation. They built a small fire from dried woods that sent little smoke, and could not be seen from afar. They had already posted three men to guard the camp, and all of them would take their turn to guard the camp through the night. Some of the men were busy preparing their dinner over the fire. One of the men had killed a perkabo near a watering hole in the day, and was now dressing the meat for roasting over fire.

They ate a simple meal of roasted meat, baked roots and some fruits with large mugs of marhi beer. They have let the fire burn low, and it was now quite dark in the little clearing. There were little talk during the meal, and the mood was subdued around the fire.

'So what are we to do now? Hiraum asked as he finished his meal. 'With a war party of haupis on or near the trail, it is not possible to travel to the foothills.

So what are we going to do? Is there some other trail that can take us to the foothills of Urangil Mountains?

Shekara scratched his cheek thoughtfully as he muse over his words.

'There are some game trails used by the animals that can take us to the mountains,' He said after some moments. 'But the Hagani pass is the only easy way to cross the mountains as we can't climb over the mountains with our animals. I think we should reach the mountains by these game trails, and wait for a chance to enter Hagani pass undetected. I don't think haupi raiders will linger long in these lands as local tribes would gather to attack them if they are found. We can wait in the foothills for their departure.'

Hiraum nodded thoughtfully.

'I think you are right. We can't go back and we must wait for them to leave because we can't fight them. Our men are not warriors, and are not well armed. It is the only solution.'

Shekara looked toward Mekaul.

'Tell me about their leader.'

Mekaul looked up sharply at him.

'As I have told you before he is a tall man wearing a helmet with tall plume, and red cloak over his armor. He was leading his men with great confidence.'

Shekara frowned, and tapped the hilt of his long sword.

'His name is Piraka and he is a ruthless man and is without mercy. He will make a sudden raid and then disappear from the scene. We would be better off to wait him out in some valley of the Urangils.'

Denrik looked sharply at Shekara.

'How do you know about this haupi leader?'

Shekara looked at him distractedly.

'I have been traveling along this trade route for past fifteen years, and I know all the clans living along the route and many more that live in the dry lands. I will take you safely across to the land of Ashewara.'

Denrik nodded but he still looked troubled.

'Do you know the way across the foothills? Mekaul asked Shekara. 'We must be very cautious, because if haupis found us, we will not be able to outrun them without leaving our goods.'

Shekara smiled confidently.

'I know all the trails and I will take you to the foothills without being seen. Just trust me.'

Hiraum looked toward Denrik, and then reluctantly gave his assent to the plan. Sitting around the fire that night they planned their next move, and made contingency plans in the case their presence was known to the haupis raiders. Mekaul made rounds of the camp, and checked the guards at their post. The night was silent except the chirping sounds of the insects hidden in the vegetation, and distant calls of the perkabos across the grassland.

That night passed peacefully, and with the first light of the day they broke the camp, and began to move through a game trail that cut through the tall grass and dense vegetation. The land was dotted with mushroom shaped kebarni plants that grew up-to seven feet tall. The air was filled with their pungent smell, and the small birds and insects were swarming around them. The fog was lifting from the foothills and the fronds of meshraki bushes were dripping with heavy dewfall of the last night.

Mekaul left the party, and began to run slowly along the game trail. He was used to running long distances in pursuit of game animals, and could run for several hours. He moved swiftly through the tall shrubs and vegetation along the trail, and left his party far behind. The day was beginning to get warmer, and he was soon sweating as he ran on the trail. A small creature bolted from the cover

of bushes on his approach, and disappeared into long grass to his right. He saw a large herakos soaring high that seemed to be almost immobile but was in fact moving toward the distant sea. The dark clouds had obscured the peaks of Urangil Mountains, and the deep shadows dwelt in the high valleys. A fresh wind was blowing from the foothills, bringing the smell of rain with it.

He was alert as he ran slowly, looking down for any sign of human passage on the trail. He knew that haupis had their scouts looking out for potential targets, and also the war parties of local tribes that might threaten their small war party. He saw a large tree to left of the trail and headed for it. The tree was very large, and had many branches radiating from the trunk near the ground. He climbed nimbly up the trunk and reached a large branch. He went up the branch, and reached a place where he can sit comfortably, and survey the lands around. He made himself comfortable on the branch, and began to scan the meadows and woods spreading beneath him, and the game trails crisscrossing it. The land seemed peaceful in the bright sunlight, and the long line of mountains darkened with rainstorms, posed a dramatic background to it.

He sat there for a quarter of an hour, but didn't see any sign of human beings. He abandoned his vigil at last, and starting to climb down the tree, but stopped as he saw something moving in long grass. He froze instantly and hid himself in thick bunch of leaves. He saw two men moving in deep grass, their long spears visible over the tall vegetation. He stiffened as he recognized the orange cloaks of haupis warriors moving through the dense vegetation. They were looking down on the ground as they walked, obviously looking for signs of human feet. He sat there looking intently as the haupi scouts moved through the meadow. It was obvious that they knew about somebody, or some group of people that were supposed to pass through these game trails. He frowned and wondered, if their presence was discovered by the haupis. He waited for them to pass out of sight in the branches, and then climbed down the tree quickly.

He began to run back toward his group on the game trail. He hadn't gone more than half a mile, before he saw them walking in a long file through the long grass. Shekara ran out to meet him ahead of the party.

'What is it? Did you see anybody?' He asked as he reached him.

Mekaul nodded as he wiped the sweat off his face.

'I saw two haupi scouts ahead tracking for the signs.' He said as he tried to control his breath. 'It seems that they knew about our group and are in these parts. They were looking very closely for signs on the trail.'

Shekara looked toward the mountains in the distance.

'You may be right.' He said thoughtfully. 'I think that they had sent their scouts yesterday up, and down the main trail used by traders, and these scouts have seen the signs of our party leaving the main trail, and going to the south. They have now discovered that we are aware of their presence, and are going through the game trails to evade them. They are now tracking us in these woods where usually traders don't go.'

Mekaul nodded his agreement.

'Yes, I think that you are right.' He said. 'But what are we going to do now. We can't outrun them, and I don't think that there are many men in our group that have any experience in warfare.'

Shekara frowned as he looked back.

'You and I can fight, and there are three men in my group that we can count on in any skirmish.' He said. 'But the rest of our men have no fighting experience, and five of us will not last for long against twenty experienced haupi warriors. We need to find someplace where we can defend ourselves. We need to reach the safety of the hills. I know many high valleys where we can shelter, and defend ourselves. Our enemies will not stay long to besiege us, because they can be surrounded by the local tribes, if they stayed long in one place.'

Mekaul nodded as the group approached, and he informed them about the presence of haupi scouts on the game trail. They held a hasty council to discuss their situation, and examined all their options. It was finally decided that they had to push ahead, as there were not any safe places in the area, and the haupis were

sure to pursue them, if they turned back. Mekaul went ahead with one young man called Indara that belonged to Shekara's men.

They moved quickly, and reached the spot where he had spotted the haupi scouts earlier. He did not see them, and after some tracking discovered that they have moved back to the main trail. He sent back Indara to group with the news, and went north toward the main trail. He spotted the trail of the scouts going back toward the trail. He reached the main trail, and cautiously approached it. He hid himself in thick stand of bushes, and watched the trail patiently. He didn't saw any sign of haupis, but knew that they were camping somewhere close. He spotted some movement in the dense vegetation on the other side of the trail, and saw a couple of haupi warriors going toward a grove of small trees in the distance. He knew now that they were camping in that grove.

After half an hour he went back toward the game trail used by his party, and found them two miles up toward the hills. They were moving quickly, and leaving a clear trail behind. Hiraum and Shekara hurried back to meet him, and he informed them of what he had learnt. Denrik came back to join them, and listened to what Mekaul had to say.

'I think it is a right decision to go to the mountains.' He said thoughtfully. 'But sooner or later they will find our trail, and a fast pursuit will ensue. So how are we going to delay them if they began pursuit?'

Mekaul nodded as he considered the situation.

'I think I will act as a scout and rearguard for the group. I have a powerful bow, and I am a good archer and that is not a mere boast. I will track their progress, and will slow them with a few well aimed shots, and lead them around in a wild goose chase.'

Shekara shook his head, and there were doubt on the face of Hiraum and Denrik.

'It will be very dangerous thing to do, and will not delay them much.' He said. 'And I can't allow you to act as bait to draw haupis away.'

Mekaul grinned and patted his bow.

'It is dangerous, that much I know, since I have been seen some fighting, and don't take death lightly, but I also know that I can do it without much danger to myself. I can run for hours, and can leave the heavily armed haupis behind easily. I can lead them in a chase that will draw them away, and give you time to reach the foothills.'

They scowled and exchanged worried looks, and seemed uncertain, but since there was not another way it was decided that the party will move swiftly toward the mountains with Mekaul guarding their rear, and luring enemies away.

They embraced Mekaul warmly, and bade him farewell. He turned back, and went toward the place he had already chosen. The small caravan was soon lost to sight in the dense vegetation. He ran slowly at a pace that he could maintain for many hours. After half an hour he reached the tree where he wanted to make an observation post. He climbed quickly, and reached a spot where two branches grew together. He cut some smaller branches, and with these he built a small platform on two branches, where can sit for a long time comfortably. He had some food and a water bottle with him, and a cloak for cold of the night. He settled down on the platform, and watched the game trail patiently.

The day passed slowly, and the shadows lengthened as the evening came. He saw several small herds of perkabos, and wild mendanos, and a small group of pekadons that were browsing in the dense vegetations. These pekadons weighed more than three tons, and with their four feet long horns and armored hides, were a formidable animal. Most predators preferred to keep a safe distance from these giants. He watched them as they moved through the tall grass leisurely. The herds disappeared from the sight in the woods. The sun was setting in the west when he saw haupi scouts again.

They were following the trail of his party toward the hills. He watched them as they moved up the trail, but he didn't follow them as he knew that the main party of haupi warriors was following them. It was getting dark when he saw the main body of haupi warriors following with their pack animals. He climbed down

the tree and followed them stealthily. He kept to the long grass and the dense bushes to remain out of the sight in the fading light. The haupis were marching quickly on the trail toward the mountains but after an hour they made a camp in a thicket of tall bushes. He saw that the haupis were erecting small tents for the night, and they built a makeshift corral for their pack animals. They posted several guards that moved around the camp, but couldn't see him laying motionless in long grass in the dark. He lay there for an hour but then decided against the making any move in the night and rose to find a place where he can spend the night. He had decided that he will create a diversion when they set out to march next day. He found a sheltered place among the tall bushes away from haupi camp for the night. He wove the reeds that he had cut near the stream in the bushes to create a barrier that would keep away the predators and made a bed of dried grasses and shrubs for sleeping. He covered himself with his cloak and he fell asleep immediately.

A cold wind was blowing across the woods and the meadows and the predators were moving in the dark. One of the beasts came against the barrier in the bushes and detected his presence but could penetrate the barricade of the strong reeds and giving up, disappeared in the dark.

He woke early in the dawn while it was still dark, and ate a hasty meal of dried meat and some dried fruits, and drank water from his bottle and made his preparations for the day. He packed his cloak and his other belonging in a backpack strapped to his back, and cleaned his weapons. The tall grasses and shrubbery around him was wet with heavy dewfall of the night, and a fog covered the foothills of Urangils. He left the cover of the bushes, and moved up along the game trail in the vegetation.

He saw the trail of his party on the game trail toward the mountains, and guessed that his companions would reach the foothills near the midday. He found a spot where he could hide, and ambush the war party of haupis on the march. He moved around and found an escape route that will take him back to the main trail, and then up toward the Hagani pass. He planned to leave the main trail after

some miles, and to reach the foothills using the game trails. He knew the place where his companions were heading; it was a large cliff of white stone and behind it was a gully leading up the mountains' slopes toward a high ridge.

The light of the day grew behind the mountains in the east, and he could see the forests and meadows stretching away to the horizon in the west. He heard the call of a tirkada in the dense vegetation, and saw a swarm of insects leaving its nest in a tree and flying over the meadows. He drew a deep breath, and placed his quiver of arrows near him on the grass so that he can take an arrow quickly. A herd of perkabos emerged from behind the tall bushes, and began to browse among the bushes and shrubs, and moved slowly across the grasslands.

It was half an hour before he heard the sounds of approaching haupi war party. They appeared around a corner, marching in a line followed by their pack animals. He bent his powerful bow, and strung it with a mighty effort. He placed an arrow in his bow, and waited patiently for the war party to approach. They came nearer, and he could see their faces clearly. They had painted their faces for war, and were looking fierce and warlike in their full regalia. Their leader Piraka was striding confidently ahead of his men. He was tall man with a plumed helmet, and was wearing a red cloak over his suit of leather armor. They moved swiftly and silently on the game trail, a deadly calm in their faces as they marched past him.

He watched as they moved before him, and examined the detail of his plan again. His plan was to shoot a few quick shots to kill or injure some of them, and then run back to main trail and to lead the haupis behind him. He hoped that the haupis would try to pursue him, and he was confident that he would lose them in a long chase. They would have to backtrack then, and go back to game trail where his friends had gone, and resume their pursuit of his party, but they would have lost a whole day by then, and his friends would find the sanctuary of mountains by the next day. It was a simple plan, but still there was a danger that unforeseen events might throw his plan in jeopardy. He might fall on a game trail during the chase, and injured himself, or he might encounter other haupis along the way. He

knew that if he was caught, a prolonged and painful death awaited him, and he vowed that they would never catch him alive. He shook his head, knowing that it was useless to worry about unforeseen events. He cannot back out now; he will do what he had decided and face his destiny.

He took one arrow from his quiver, and nocked it to his bow. He had a supply of poison for his arrows, but he had decided against using poisoned arrows, although he knew that Shahaka people used poisoned arrows against haupi invaders, whom they hated above all their enemies. He pulled the bow fully, the muscles of his right arm and shoulder bulging, and took careful aim. He couldn't take a shot at their leader as he was covered by others following him, so he picked a warrior behind him, and aimed for his back where his large shield could not protect him. It was no more than sixty feet, and he knew that he couldn't miss.

His bow sang loudly. Before the sound had died down, he had shot his second and an instant later his third shot. He heard the sound of arrow striking the leather armor, and saw the warrior jerk at the impact. Another haupi warrior cried out as an arrow struck him in his right arm. Before he could shoot another arrow, haupi warriors had turned and were looking around. One of them shouted as an arrow narrowly missed him. His last arrow missed completely as the haupi warriors crouched down behind their large shields. He turned and began to creep away. He entered a natural ditch in the ground, and began to run quickly. He ran for a couple of hundred feet, and then emerged from it to reach a thick stand of tall bushes. He ran behind the cover of the bushes, and reached a game trail that went toward the main trail.

Behind him he could hear the shouting of haupi warriors, but he knew that it will take them some time before they could find his tracks and follow him, and even then they could not run as swiftly as he, because they were wearing helmets and body armor, and carried spears and shields. He kept running at pace that he could keep for hours. He reached the main trail, and began to run toward the hills. He glanced back but couldn't see any pursuers.

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He was hiding behind the tall bushes near the game trail. He had left the main trail after half an hour, and took a game trail that took him in general direction of that white cliff on the foothills that was the destination of his friends. He had ran for sometime on the game trail, and then backtracked through dense grass to the tall bushes near the game trail, and was now waiting for his pursuers. He hadn't seen them, but he knew that they were coming after him. He had scouted the land around, and found an escape route. He had been there more than half an hour before he heard the sounds of approaching footfalls, and then saw three haupi warriors appear around a bend in the game trail. They had left behind their helmet, body armor and shields, and were only carrying their spears. He noted that they were now in hot pursuit, and believed him to be flying away before them. He waited patiently for them to come near.

He could see their faces as they came near. They were sweating, and panting as they ran swiftly to overtake him, and there was fury and hatred on their faces as they came on. He nocked an arrow to his bow, and began to pull the string. He took careful aim for a moment; the strain on his shoulder almost unbearable, and then shot his arrow. The arrow struck the leading warrior in the chest who staggered, and fell to the ground. The remaining two dived off the trail, and took cover in tall grasses. He didn't waste another arrow, and began to creep away in tall grass. The haupi warriors remained out of the sight, but he knew that they were creeping forward toward where the arrow had come from.

He reached a dry stream bed filled with dense vegetation, and began to run again. He ran in the meandering dry stream for more than a mile, and then left it to find a game trail that would take him to the foothills of Urangils. He found a game trail after some time, and began to run slowly. He was now confident that his pursuers would not find his trail quickly, and would be more cautious as they resumed their pursuit. He smiled as he thought about their leader Piraka, who with the main party, and might be wondering whether to pursue their lone assailant, or to go after the traders' party to the foothills. He was now reaching the higher grounds, and could look back toward where the river was lost in the haze.

He slowed his pace, and began to walk briskly. He was now near the foothills, and the mountains towered over him. He could see the forested sides of the mountains rise over him, and the snow capped peaks darkened with clouds over him. He quickened his pace, and his heart filled with a strange joy as he watched the silver lines of water falling over the rocky precipices.

It was the midday as he reached a game trail that went up the foothills. He was walking on game trail that went up the forested slopes of the mountains. He heard a thunder, and looked up toward the sky. The storm was gathering on the slopes of the mountains, and he could see the light flashing inside the dark clouds. He quickened his pace, and moved toward the stand of trees under a large cliff. He ran up toward the trees as the first drops began to drop. He reached the cover of trees just in time as a downpour came with deafening roars of thunder, and drenched him in moments. He found a shelter in the overhang of the cliff, and sat down to wait it out.

The lightning flashed in the clouds, and the thunders rolled across the mountains, and the water poured from the heavens. He was wet with spray of water inside his shelter, and could see the white lines of water descending from the mountain slopes. Again and again lightning flashed, and the thunders rolled and echoed across the mountains. He wrapped his bow in his cloak, and wished that he could have lighted a fire. Soon he could hear the rush of water coming down the slopes, and knew that his enemies were also caught in the storm. Time passed slowly and the storm began to lose its force, and the thunderclaps became less frequent, and the downpour dwindled to a drizzle. He looked out of his shelter as the sunlight penetrated the clouds. The slopes of the mountains were shining in the light of sun as the storm moved away, and he could see many streams snaking down the slopes.

He waited for half an hour, and then moved out of his shelter. The sun had come out, and the air was fresh after the rains. He began to move up the slope on the game trail. He found many foaming streams going down the slopes, and it was with much difficulty that he crossed them. His progress was slow, but he moved steadily up the trail. He could see the white cliff to his right where his friends

were headed. The trees here were rather smaller than that found on the forest, and the strange bushes and vegetation covered the boulder strewn slopes. A small stream cascaded down the slopes, and formed small pools as it went down. He stopped near one of the pools, and drank its cold and clear water, and also filled his empty bottle. He sat on boulder near a waterfall, and enjoyed its fine spray.

He sat there for some time enjoying the cool air of the mountains, and watched the wispy clouds move over the forested slopes of the mountains. He was tempted to lie down, and rest for some time, but he resisted the temptation, and rose to his feet reluctantly. He looked down the slopes, and saw some movement down there. He tensed as he realized that something or somebody was moving on the game trail that had led him up here. He slipped behind a tall bush, and crouched down to watch the game trail. After some moments he was certain that he saw two specks moving up on the game trail. He shook his head in wonder; it was apparent that his haupi pursuers were still intent on finding him. He considered his next move as he watched two Haupi warriors move up the trail. His enemies were either very brave or quite dumb, as they were still pursuing him with certain knowledge that he could ambush them again under the cover of dense vegetation, and the large boulders strewn on the slopes of the mountains.

He began to creep up the trail under the cover of dense vegetation growing on the slopes. He went steadily up under the cover of large boulders, and dense vegetation, and reached a level place at least a thousand feet over the plains. It was a small meadow filled with bright orange colored plants, and strange tall bushes with large fronds at the top. A small stream trickled down the slopes, and disappeared in the dense shrubs covering the ground. He stopped, and surveyed his surroundings. It was an ideal place to rest but he was pursued by his enemies, and needed some place to hide. He grimaced as he realized that he was losing his nerve by the constant pursuit of his enemies, who were intent to find and kill him. He shook his head; he will show them who the hunter is, he strode across the meadow to the dense thicket of palm like bushes.

He found a place where he could remain concealed, and watch the trail and the meadow. He sat there in the cool shade of the high cliff, and waited for his enemies to appear. It was very cool up here on the slopes of the mountains, and a fresh breeze was moving the fronds of the palms like bushes. The upper reaches of the mountains were in the shadows of clouds that were gathering for a storm.

It was a beautiful day to live, and the thought of death on this bright day seemed like a sacrilege. He sat there, lost in thoughts, and wandered off to the carefree days of his childhood.

After some time he shook these thoughts from his head, and looked down the game trail, but saw no sign of his pursuers. He wondered if they had lost their enthusiasm, and had returned to report their failure to their leader. He decided that it was unlikely, and wondered where his enemies might be at that moment. He fidgeted uneasily as thought struck him that something was out of place. He was about to move out, and investigate when he heard a sound up the slope. He glanced up, and saw the silhouette of two figures on the rock over his head. He sank under the dense vegetation, and crept under the overhang of the cliff.

He heard the faint sounds of his enemies whispering over his head on the rocks. Apparently they were amazed that he was not in the meadow and wondering if he had slipped them. He frowned as he wondered that how his enemies might have guessed that he had chosen that spot for an ambush. Were they familiar to this place from their previous raids, or was it some uncanny sixth sense that had alerted them that he would be there. He remained there motionless, and listened intently for any sounds that his enemies might make but he couldn't hear anything. He was sure that they were around and getting closer every moment. He sat there, and waited patiently for them to make a move.

It was almost twenty minutes before he heard a sound, and peered gingerly from his rocky hideout. He surveyed the little meadow below him, and spotted them on the upper part near the slopes. They were creeping forward silently with their spears ready for action. He crept out of rock overhang, and using the cover of dense vegetation, began to move slowly. He knew that from down below nobody could guess that there was a hideout under the cliff behind the dense

vegetation. He crept toward a large boulder, and crouched down behind it. His enemies were now closer, but he knew that he could miss them at that distance. He had to take out one of them with his first shot, as he couldn't handle both of them at close combat. So he sat there motionless, and watched them move gradually closer. One of them looked down, and said something to his partner who stopped immediately. Both of them bent down to examine the ground, and looked closely for some sign. Mekaul rose to his feet slowly, and nocking an arrow to his bow pulled it slowly, and took careful aim at the larger of the two haupis. He aimed for a long moment as the distance was at least seventy feet, and his target was below him.

His bow sang out, and the arrow flew downhill. His enemies looked up at the sound, but couldn't see the arrow at the last moment. The large haupi clutched at the arrow in his chest, and tried to pull the arrow out him but then collapsed slowly. The younger warrior leapt away, and the second arrow missed him narrowly. He rolled away, and disappeared behind the some dense vegetation. Mekaul crept along the base of the cliffs, and reached a spot where he could creep down under the cover of dense vegetation. He crept down slowly and cautiously, and reaching the meadow took cover behind a tall bush. He couldn't see his remaining enemy, and must be very careful. He had now little advantage over his adversary as his bow was not very useful in a close encounter, and he had to rely on his dagger as he faced his enemy's spear. He wondered if he could back out, and reach the cliff to climb out of this meadow. He rejected the thought instantly as he knew that his enemy would pursue him closely, and kill him if he didn't find a way up the cliffs quickly. It was now the moment of the truth, and he had to face his adversary on equal terms. He frowned as he wondered if he had come that far to find his death in that beautiful meadow in the mountains. He shook his head at the thought and crept forward slowly, and reached another tall bush, and surveyed the little meadow carefully from behind it. He hadn't seen his enemy move, and he couldn't have gone far without began seen. He settled down to wait out his enemy.

The sun began to set in the west across the vast plains before he decided to move back to the cliffs. He worked his way back to the overhang in the cliff, and

sat down under it. He was well concealed by the dense vegetation growing before his hideout. He ate some dried meat and a loaf of bread, and drank gratefully from his water bottle. He now knew that his enemy was very patient, and hadn't betrayed himself so far, but in the dark of the night would surely stalk him. He contemplated his next move; he could either go out to hunt his enemy or try to climb the cliffs to reach the trail somewhere higher up. He decided in the end that he couldn't afford to waste more time, and must leave the meadow to reach his friends. He had seen a crack in the cliff which he could climb to reach the trail, and could find some place higher up where he could spend the night and could find his friend next day. Two smaller moons were shining in the heavens, and he could see his way in their dim light. He gathered his belonging, and started to move along the base of the cliffs. He reached the crack in the rock, and began to climb up carefully.

He climbed slowly and silently, and after half an hour reached a level space over the cliffs. He saw some stunted trees, and dense vegetation growing around him, and looked up. He couldn't see much in the dark but was still confident that he could reach the gully in the slope where his companions had gone. He found the game trail again, and began to follow it up. The large moon Horan had risen, and the mountain slopes could be seen clearly in its silvery light. After an hour he reached a level place filled by large boulders and dense vegetation. He found a place between some large boulders that was sheltered from the cold night winds. He collected bundles of dried grass and some dead bushes, and built a bed for himself between some large boulders. He covered his shelter with large fronds of the bushes, and lying down on his bed and covering himself with cloak, fell asleep immediately. A cold wind was sweeping across the mountains slopes, and nothing moved in the silvery light of the large moon Horan.

He woke up early in the morning. He was stiff with the cold even under the deep cover of dried grass and vegetation, and was shivering as he collected his belonging. He ate some meat and dry fruits, and drank the last of water from his bottle. He left the boulders, and started to walk up the trail. His body warmed up after some time, and leaving the trail he began to work his way across a steep slope strewn with boulders, and stunted bushes. He reached a large cliff, and

climbing it found that he was near a gully overgrown with dense vegetation. He looked down, and wondered if it was the gully behind the white cliffs that he sought. He worked his way down slowly to the gully, and reached the dense vegetation. He found a trail going up to a ridge, and looking down sighed with relief; the tracks of human feet and of iron shod mendanos hooves were plain to see. He began to go up that trail.

The sun was up in the sky when he reached a ridge covered with dense vegetation. There were tall palm like bushes with long fronds growing here, and stunted trees with blade like leaves and small shrubs with blue pods were also growing on this high ridge. He sat down on a large boulder, and looked around him. The strange birds with bright colors were gilding through the trees, and bizarre looking insects were buzzing in the tall bushes. The day was bright and warm, and a cool breeze was blowing on the ridge. He found a small waterfall, and drank the cold fresh water collected in a small stone basin, and filled his water bottle. He washed his face and arms, and felt refreshed after that. He sat under a small tree, and watched the clouds gathering on the snow covered peaks. He was still tired after the previous day's chase and felt drowsy in the warm sun. He lay down on bed of soft vegetation, and looked up at white clouds drifting across the incredibly blue sky. He closed his eyes, and felt the exhaustion of previous day's overcoming him, and dozed off.

He woke up with a start and sat up, and looked around him in alarm. The stones on the ridge were warm under the midday sun, and he felt refreshed after his short nap. He rose to his feet and yawned lazily and bent down to pick his bow. As he picked up his bow he saw a sudden movement with the corner of his eyes, and throwing himself to his right, rolled away to reach the cover of some large boulders. He was just in time, as a spear missed him by mere inches, and thudded into a tree to his left. He had reached the cover of a large boulder, and was scrambling up to his feet, when he saw the charging figure of haupi warrior leap over the boulders to his right. He threw away his bow, and whipped out his long dagger. He jumped over a boulder, and came face to face with his enemy.

The haupi screamed as he slashed with his knife at his throat. Mekaul dived under his attacking arm, and tried to thrust his dagger on the right side of haupi warrior. His dagger merely drew a bloody line in the ribs of his enemy as the haupi moved swiftly to save him. The haupi warrior recovered his balance, and they circled warily as each looked for an opening to assail his enemy.

Mekaul found that his enemy was fast and agile, and could strike with lightening speed, but he too had been in many hand to hand combats, and knew how to handle his sharp blade well enough. They were feinting and thrusting as they circled each other, and were slashing, and jumping back quickly to avoid their adversary's blade. They moved over scattered stones and dense brush as they fought savagely. Suddenly Mekaul tripped over a small stone, and with difficulty saved himself from falling on his back. The haupi warrior seized the opportunity, and lunged to thrust his knife in Mekaul's chest. Mekaul moved quickly to his right, and grabbed the arm of the haupi warrior. He dropped his own dagger to free his other hand, and with both of his hands grabbed the hand of his enemy that held the knife, and twisted it with all his strength. The haupi tried to gorge his eyes out, but Mekaul turned his face away, and forced the haupi to his knees, and twisted his arm hard, until the knife fell from his hand. He turned him around, and placing his knee on Haupi's back, pushed him to the ground. He grabbed the knife of his enemy, and placed it at his throat. The haupi stopped his struggles, and glared at Mekaul as he panted under him.

'Kill, kill.' He said hoarsely in tirany language. 'Why don't you kill me, stranger?'

Mekaul glared at him with the knife still at His neck, but hesitated as he tried to control his breathing.

'Do you think that I will beg for mercy? Haupi warrior hissed under him. 'Never ever, we welcome death in battle.'

Mekaul didn't say anything as he glared at the face of his enemy that was filled with hatred.

'Perhaps you are not so great warrior after all if you hesitate to kill a vanquished enemy.' Haupi said venomously. 'I think you are a coward at heart.'

Mekaul shook his head but didn't lessen his grip on his enemy.

'There is no glory in killing the vanquished.' He said. 'There is a difference between bravery and cruelty. We don't kill in the cold blood.'

Haupi laughed hoarsely, and closed his eyes.

'You fight like a warrior but talk like a weak man. I can't understand you.'

Mekaul released him, and rose to his feet with difficulty. He retrieved his dagger and the knife his enemy from the ground and, turned toward his enemy who was rising from the ground.

'You will go with me to my friends as a captive.' He said. 'I can't allow you to go to back to your war party, and lead them here.'

Haupi glared at him but said nothing. Mekaul went to the tree and pulled the haupi's spear with difficulty and gestured him to move.

They moved up the game trail, the Haupi walking ahead, and Mekaul coming after him with the spear ready in his hands. They walked silently for some time. The game trail reached a ridge, and began to descend in a small valley in the highlands. It was late afternoon, and day was getting cooler as the sun began to set. The high mountain peaks in the north were surrounded by dark clouds, and he could hear rumbles of thunder, and could see light flashing in those clouds. A cold wind was whipping the small trees, and bringing the occasional drops of the rains with it. They went down the valley and, walked along it on a dim trail through the dense vegetation. Mekaul stopped and surveyed the ground thoroughly, and found the footprints of humans and heavily laden mendanos in the damp vegetation. He looked around him, and studied the valley closely.

It was almost a mile long, but was not very wide. The valley bottom was filled with dense vegetation and small trees, and several streams flowed through

it. He stopped as he saw several men in a small grove of trees in the distance. He pushed the haupi before him, and went toward the grove in the distance.

They were soon seen by those in the grove, and several men hurried forward to meet them. As they came nearer, Mekaul recognized Hiraum and Shekara among them. He waved his arms, and shouted greetings to his friends.

When they reached him, they stopped and stared in amazement at the captive haupi warrior with him. Mekaul saw that there was a troubled look on Shekara's face.

'Who is this man that you have brought? He asked Mekaul. 'And how did you manage to bring him in?

'He was the last of group that pursued me.' Mekaul said. 'I was nearly killed when he ambushed me in a meadow, but I managed to capture and bring him along, although I have forgotten to ask his name.'

The haupi warrior glared at Shekara with a defiant look on his face and said haughtily.

'I am shinaka the warrior from the gana of Piraka the fierce, and I think you are the renegade Shekara who betrayed his gana, and have become a fugitive.'

Shekara stared at the young warrior for a long moment.

'So you have lived and what happened to your mother? He asked after a moment's pause.

Shinaka grimaced as he replied.

'She died of fever when I was ten years old but what do you care?

Shekara went to him, and gripped his shoulders.

'You don't know the circumstances, my son, so don't be hasty to judge me. I did what I have to do. I will tell you everything.'

'I don't want to hear anything from you.' Shinaka replied bitterly. 'It is enough that you betrayed us.'

Hiraum came near, and placed his hand on Shekara's shoulder.

'My friend, he may not want to hear what you have to say, but we are very eager to hear it.'

Shekara turned to look at him, and nodded warily.

'You are right, my friend, I owe you an explanation. Let's go to our camp, and I will tell you everything.'

They went toward the grove of the trees, where the party had made their camp. As they entered the grove Mekaul saw that a small waterfall fell from a cliff behind the grove, and flowed in a small stream through it. They reached the camp that his companions have made near the cliff. They have built temporary shelters from wooden poles and tree branches in the base of tall cliffs, and had built a makeshift stable for their animals. The people in the camp came out to greet him, and were very happy to see him again in their midst. Mekaul embraced his friends and shook their hands as they exchanged the news of previous days. The haupi warrior walked proudly with his head held high, and ignored the people around him.

Denrik walked with Mekaul, and told him about their journey to the foothills. After he had left the party, they had marched quickly through the woods to reach the foothills, but were hampered by the flooding in the streams from the heavy rains in the mountains. They had crossed the flooded streams with much difficulty, and had reached the gully behind the white cliff at last. They had found a trail in that gully that led up to this valley. It had been tough climb for their animals, but they had reached at last on this plateau, and had found sanctuary in this secluded valley.

They reached an open place between the shelters, and sat near the fire burning in the middle. Mekaul sat by the fire, and ate the food given to him, and listened to the talk around the fire. The young haupi Shinaka sat there

impassively, and didn't touch his food. Shekara was sitting near him, and asked him some questions, but fell silent after Shinaka ignored him. Mekaul told his friends about his adventures with Haupi team pursuing him through the plains and mountain trails. Shinaka heard his tale without betraying any emotions, and didn't speak a word.

Hiraum turned toward Shekara, and said.

'Well, my friend I think that now is time to hear your story, and to tell you the truth I can't wait any longer.'

Shekara nodded thoughtfully, and looked around him at the eager faces of his companions.

'My story is a long and rather tiresome, I am afraid, and I know that there is a question in your minds about why have I not told it before. Let me tell you that I have not kept my identity secret for any devious reason, but simply because it was so painful, and I knew that the people are not sympathetic to a haupi warrior that had left his tribe to become a fugitive. I was not born a Haupi, but was born in a tree house in a clan of Shahakas in the forests that we have left behind. Don't look so astonished; it is a fact that many a Haupi warriors that go on to raid the lands of Shahakas are the sons of Shahaka families that haupi warriors have abducted in their childhood and raised as their own. Since haupis are always on the path of war and marauding through the lands of their neighbors, it is quite natural that many of them falls to the poisoned arrows and spears of their enemies, and never see their homes in the hills of moon again, and are remembered in the songs of slain warriors sung by their families. So to fill their ranks and to make their tribe strong, they take the young boys and girls of the people they attack, and raise these as their own and it is one of the secrets of their strength. I remember my home on a tall tree, and I remember the face of my mother as she sang a lullaby to make me to sleep; it all that I remember about my family. I don't remember anything else, and I am not sure if they still live or were slaughtered by the haupi attackers. I only remember being carried on the back of a strong warrior who took me to his wife, who was stern and beat me often, but that is how haupi children are usually raised. I grew up to be a strong and agile

young man, and learned the art of spear and shield fighting from the man who had adopted me. Later he was killed in a raid, and I joined then the gana of his brother; let me tell you that every clan of the haupis are ruled by their own headmen, but they are leaders in the community in peacetime, and form the majority in Kharagan, the tribal council of Haupi nation, but young haupi warriors join the military groups that are called ganas that are formed around a strong war leader that had proved his skill in many raids, and could command the loyalties of strong warriors. I and my younger brother Piraka, the same one who is now pursuing us, joined the gana of our uncle Karasha. I was his favorite, and it was said by many that I will succeed him to become the leader of his gana someday.

We began by raiding the lands of Ishkaris, who were challenging our passage into the lands around Lake Chiango, and these people had defeated many war parties of haupis raiding their lands, and killed many warriors. Three thousand haupi assembled under their leaders and declared war on Ishkari clans. We marched from our hills to reach Negrada River, and rowed down the river in fleets of dugout canoes to reach the Lake Chiango, and attacked the Ishkari towns on the shores of that vast lake that's like a sea. We sacked many Ishkari towns, and defeated many armies that sent against us, and in the end Ishkaris in their distress sued for peace, and agreed to pay yearly tribute in future. I returned from the Ishkari wars with great wealth, and something far more precious. It was an Ishkari girl that I had captured in a raid, and who became my wife and the mother of my son, who is now sitting across the fire and glaring at me.

I spent next several years enjoying the peace and tranquility in my life, but we were called again by our leader, and against my will I went with him to raid the lands of Shahakas who were my own people, but now I was a haupi and an enemy in my own land. We attacked and captured many Shahakas as slaves, and began to march back to our hills, but I had grown weary of war and rapine, and I found no glory in attacking the peaceful people who cannot defend themselves. The trouble came in a camp beyond River Penaka when one of our men began to beat one of the captives. He was a senseless brute who was always tormenting the captives, and I hated him for it. We began to quarrel as I tried to stop him, and I gave him a good beating. It was against the rules of gana, and carried a

heavy penalty, and although Karasha was my uncle, still he was bound by the laws of haupis. He gave judgment that I was wrong in quarreling with my comrade for sack of a captive who had no rights under the laws. I was pay a fine, and was ordered to apologies to my adversary. I agreed to pay the fine but refused to express any regret for the incident.

Karasha was very angry and ordered that I might be clapped in chains, and should walk with the slaves to the hills of moon. I journeyed thus for a week but one night I persuaded one of my guards, who was sympathetic to me to loosen my chains, and escaped in the night. I fled to the northeast toward the River Penaka, and eluded the warriors sent to capture me. I wandered as a fugitive, and a stranger in the land of my fathers and in the end joined a party of traders as a guard that plied the Hagani trail.

For the next three years I served first as a guard, and later as a guide to a trading company that sent its traders to the dry lands, and with such a trading party I went to the land of Ashewara. I had become prosperous but still I longed to see my wife and my infant son, so against my better judgment, I left the trading company and journeyed to the lands of haupis, and reached the hills of moon beyond many rivers and forested lands. It was a very dangerous mission as I had to elude the haupi scouts, and watch posts to reach Akhahana valley where I used to live. I reached my house in a glade of trees in peshaki forest, but discovered that my house was in possession of the strangers, and there was no trace of my family. I wandered secretly in the night and searched for my family but I was spotted eventually, and escaped with much difficulty from my pursuers. After months of wandering I reached the landing at Sorangi, and joined again the trading company I have worked previously worked with. I worked for them for several years before I organized my own group and became freighter for the Ashdari traders that plied that route, but during all these years I have been tormented by the question of what had happened to my family, and finally I might have some answers.'

They all looked at the young Shinaka who was sitting across the fire with a stony face, and made no response.

'Tell me how did you and your mother fare after my escape? Shekara asked his son. 'I have waited for sixteen years to know this.'

Shinaka grimaced and looked away. He sat there silently for a sometime, and then shook his head with a sigh.

'After your escape your uncle Karasha decreed that your family must be sold in slavery for your crimes.' He said warily. 'But your brother Piraka purchased my mother and me, and took us into his house. He took my mother as his second wife and adopted me, and raised me with his sons. My mother lived seven years after that, and died from a high fever, and I was raised by Piraka to become a warrior, and they are now my family.'

Shekara nodded forlornly.

'I am happy for you and your mother. Piraka didn't support me when I had fallen from grace, but he saved my family in the end, and I am grateful to him, but we are now adversaries.'

'You can be damned sure of that.' Shinaka said sharply. 'Your friend has killed three of his men, and one of them his own son and my brother, and he will not let you go so lightly.'

Denrik stirred and looked closely at the defiant face of young warrior.

'And where do you stand in all this? He asked shrewdly. 'How will you make your judgment when your father and your uncle come face to face?'

The young warrior looked dejected, and shook his head.

'I don't know what to do; I have been captured by my enemies, and have lost face and can't return to my gana now. I must now wander through the strange lands, and find someplace where I can start again.'

Shekara went to him, and gripped his shoulders passionately.

'You can come with us, my son. I have a home in the mountains where you can live and start a new life. I will make up for all those years, and we can be together again.'

Shinaka looked up at the eager face of his father, and shook his head.

'I am a haupi and will remain so for rest of my life. I can't betray my people even when I am disgraced, and can't go to live with the people who are my enemy. I will find my way in the wide world.'

Shekara tried to console him but he rose to his feet, and walked away angrily. They watched him as went to the cliffs and climbing it reached a high perch, and sat there dejectedly.

'Let him make up his mind.' Denrik said to Shekara. 'You can't expect him to change course suddenly, and leave all that he believed in behind. In the end he will chose his way because he is a headstrong young man.'

Shekara sighed and rising to his feet, walked away.

Denrik, Hiraum and Mekaul sat there talking, and discussed their predicament, and made plans for the future. A Thunder exploded through the valley and they looked up to see the dark clouds moving ominously over the mountains. They went up to the shelter of the cliffs as the first drops began hit the ground.

The night was very cold. The ground was still wet, and a cold wind was blowing across the valley. The large moon Horan was behind the clouds but still the valley was filled with a ghostly light. They were sitting around the blazing camp fire, and were finishing their dinner. One of the men had killed a large mountain merkapi grazing on the slopes, and had brought it down with the help of his companions, and had roasted it over the camp fire. They were drinking a wine that one of Shekara's men had made from the berrylike blue fruits growing wild on the mountain slopes. It was rather sour tasting but still welcome as it warmed their bodies, and lightened their moods.

'Have you posted any guards on the approaches to the valley? Mekaul said as he drank his wine. 'I would not like it if I was roused from the deep sleep by the war cries of the haupi warriors.'

Hiraum nodded and emptied his mug.

'Yes, we have made arrangements.' Hiraum said with a grin. 'Two of Shekara's men are posted in a cave that overlooks the trails coming up to this valley.'

Mekaul nodded thoughtfully.

'That's better but what is our next move? Do you plan to stay here long?

Shekara stirred and looked up, and caught his eyes. He had been very quiet throughout the evening.

'No, I am thinking about moving to a valley where some people that I know live. We should be safe there as this valley is deep in the mountains, and the haupis would not follow us there for fear of being caught on the unknown territory. We can spend some days there, and then reach the Hagani pass through a mountain trail that I know.'

'Tell me about haupi nation.' He said. 'I have heard many strange tales about them.'

Shekara looked toward his son Shinaka who was sitting apart from them in a dark corner. He sighed and stroked his chin.

'Haupis are a warlike people and like to test their weapons against their neighbors. They are the descendants and followers of Shako who had brought them to the valley in the hills of moon centuries ago. In the beginning they had to fight their neighbors constantly that sought to push them out of their new land. They had developed a warrior culture after centuries of warfare and fighting and raiding became a way of life to them. They trained their boys for war from the early childhood, and even their girls are taught archery and the use of spear thrower so they can defend themselves in war. They value valor above all, and a

warrior among them can attain everything, and that's how I was raised. Young men are organized in companies, and are given under the tutelage of the experienced warriors. Their training is very hard; they practice running for days, and learn to live without food for many days. They learn to use the spear and shield, and to fight in tight formations, and how to retreat in an organized way. The boys wrestle and fight with their fists, and carry heavy weights for long distances to increase their endurance. Every year Keshaga festival is held in the spring. In this festival there are competitions for archery, javelin throwing, the sword and spear fighting, and running and carrying heavy weights and wrestling, and the winners are awarded red shields which gives its owner great standing in the haupi society. At his sixteenth birthday a haupi youth can join any gana of warriors, and march with them to seek the riches and honor or death in some far off land. Such is the custom of these people, and I was one of them or perhaps I still am. My young son is right to grieve because he will never become the leader of his gana now, and must settle down to earn his livelihood some plantation.'

Denrik shook his head and sighed; his wise face was sad in the light of the camp fire.

'We humans are such a strange creatures; it is a paradox that some people consider the life of peace without honor, and there are others that abhor the war and bloodshed. Still we are the product of our environment, and for this young warrior the life of peace is a life of shame, and it is difficult to convince him that he is wrong.'

They sat there around the fire, and talked long in the night. The Young haupi warrior sat apart from the others, and remained aloof and silent.

The next day was bright and warm, and the steam was rising from the green mountain slopes after the last night's rains. Mekaul left the camp after the breakfast, and moved toward the gully in the slopes that led to the valley. He went down the game trail, and reached a level spot under a huge cliff. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, and sat on a large boulder in the shade. A cool wind

was blowing across the mountain slopes, and swaying the tall bushes growing on the slopes.

Mekaul couldn't see any movement on the trails down the slopes, and all was peaceful down there. Large flying creatures resembling the herakoses were gliding across the immense space before him, and he could see bright colored birds gliding across the face of the slopes, and landing on the tall bushes and among dense vegetation on the slopes. He looked across the immense forested plains toward the river that was obscured by a heat haze. After sometime he rose to his feet, and as told by Shekara, whistled twice to signal the guards to come out.

He waited there for the guards to emerge from their hideout down the slopes. He had not to wait long, and presently saw two men emerge from the dense vegetation under a cliff, and came up the slopes toward him. He recognized them and waved to them. They came quickly up the trail, and emerged from behind the large boulder that hid the trail.

'Greeting my friends, it is good to see you again.' Mekaul said as he shook hands with them. 'What is the news of the haupi War party?

Graka, the older of the two scouts, looked down the slopes.

'They are down there, we saw them yesterday at the evening, but we haven't seen them today. They are hiding in the foothills, and are not showing themselves.'

Mekaul surveyed the dense vegetation and white streams flowing down the slopes of mountains. He wondered why the Pinaka is staying in the foothills and not coming after them. Was he keeping out of the view for some reason? Or perhaps he feared an ambush on the trail up the mountains, or attack from local clans living near the foothills, but if that was the reason then he must leave this place because by staying in the foothills he was courting the trouble. He looked up and a thought struck him; was it possible that he knew some other trail, and was already climbing through it to cut them off? He made a quick decision and said to Graka and his companion.

'Let's join our group. It seems that he is not coming up this trail.'

They went up quickly up the trail, and reached the ridge in half an hour. They went down to the valley, and reached their camp quickly. Hiraum, Denrik and Shekara came to meet him.

'What is the news, my friend?' Denrik asked. 'I see that you have brought the men guarding the trail with you.'

'The haupi war party was on the foothill last night.' He said. 'But they have not have not showed up today, and it is worrying me.'

Shekara frowned at this.

'What do you mean, Mekaul? May be they have decided not to follow us, and even now may be going back.'

'I would be very happy if that was the case but the truth could be a lot more inconvenient.' Mekaul said. 'There is a possibility that they knew these mountain trails, and could have gone up another trail to head us off. They could be even now climbing in the mountains, and setting an ambush for us.'

Hiraum nodded thoughtfully.

'I don't think these haupis know the mountain trails well but still it is a possibility that we must consider. I think Shekara should ask his son if he knows about these trails.'

Shekara stood there brooding for a moment, and then left to see his son.

They went to the camp, and sat on stones around the fire and examined their options, and made plans for every contingency that might befall them. It was after quarter of an hour that they saw Shekara coming toward them.

'Well, what did you learn? Hiraum asked him eagerly. 'Did haupis know about these mountain trails?

Shekara nodded thoughtfully.

'Yes, although he is not willing to tell me all, but I gathered from what little he was willing to tell that haupi scouts have gone into the mountains and know these trails.'

'So what are we going to do now?' Mekaul asked. 'Will you go as you have originally planned, or should we take another route?'

Shekara considered his question for a few moments, and then said thoughtfully.

'I don't know for sure but I think that we can take the trail to the valley where I have many friends. I know these trails far better than any haupi, and I think that we can leave the Haupis behind us.'

'Then we must not tarry, and leave as quickly as possible.' Mekaul said. 'As every moment's delay brings the danger closer to us.'

They all agreed to that, and began to make preparation for a quick departure. It took half an hour for them make their preparations, and to load their animals with their baggage.

Shekara led the way, and rest of them followed him with their pack animals. They went up to north end of the valley, and began to ascend a trail that went up the side of the valley. The trail went up the tree clad slopes, and they went up slowly because of their animals, which were not used to mountain trails. They reached the stony ridge after half an hour, and stopped to rest. A cold wind was blowing, and it was very cold up there. They resumed their march after a few moments' rest, and went across a boulder strewn shoulder of the mountains. After some twenty minutes' slow march they reached a ravine, and went down a trail that hugged it wall. It was slow going, but after an hour they reached a good trail, that went through the wide ravine overgrown with lush vegetation.

A small stream flowed in middle of the ravine, and many small waterfalls were falling from the high cliffs on both sides, and joining this stream in the ravine. They emerged from the ravine, and saw a highland covered by small trees and thick vegetation before them. They were now moving quickly as there was a

good trail before them that went through a relatively level ground. After an hour they went down to a small valley, and reached a lush meadow filled with strange fauna. There were large mushroom shape plants that were attracting a multitude of small birds and insects, and small trees with long fronds, and scarlet colored plants that were covered with yellow pods. Small streamlet flowed through the cover of dense vegetation, and the land was boggy under feet.

Mekaul looked up, and saw that the sun had disappeared behind the deep clouds, and a cold wind has begun to blow across the valley. He hadn't seen weather like this before, and felt uneasy as he looked around him. It seemed to him as if something was going to happen, and his unease increased.

'This strange weather is making me uneasy.' He said. 'I am used to storms, but this weather is rather quiet and menacing.'

Denrik gazed at the overcast skies, and the peaks around them lost in a white haze.

'I think it is going to snow.' He said. 'I have not seen a snowstorm in my life but I have read about them in the books about the mountains.'

Shekara looked up, and nodded in agreement.

'Yes I think it is going to snow, although it is unusual at this time of the year but in these high mountains snowstorms can happen anytime. We must find some shelter, and collect the firewood because it is going to be very cold, and we could be in deep trouble if we are not prepared.'

They moved quickly through the meadow, and reached a tall cliff under which they saw an opening. It seemed like entrance of some cave. They stopped there, and starred at it.

'I think it is the entrance of some cave.' Hiraum said. 'But it could be the den of some mountain beast. I wonder if it is the den of one of the mountain tangoras that live in these mountains.'

Mekaul starred at the entrance to the cave.

'I think I will investigate it. Give me some fire.'

He collected some dry tinder, and firewood lying in the meadow, and made a pile near a large boulder. Serdan took a large horn used for storing embers hanging from his shoulder and opened its lid. He dumped its content on the ground, and from the dead ashes picked up a dying ember with a wooden spoon. He blew on it gently until it began to glow, and then put it carefully over the dry tinder, and again blew until the tinder caught fire. Soon a small fire was blazing and they gathered around it, soaking its welcome heat. Mekaul took a torch made from resinous cheraka wood that can burn for a long time from his baggage, and lighted it on the fire. He went toward the cave followed by Shekara, Hiraum and Graka. They stopped before the dark entrance, and strained their ears for any sounds but could hear nothing. Mekaul stood waiting for some moments there, and then threw a stone inside. The stone bounced across the floor of the cave, and disappeared in the darkness. Still they could hear no sound, and finally Mekaul bent to enter the cave.

Once past the small entrance the cave was very large, and its roof was at least thirty feet high. The light from the torch danced on the uneven walls of the cave but still they couldn't see its far side. He sniffed to see if he could detect some animal stench, but although the air in the cave was musty he didn't smell any animal reek. He advanced slowly, the torchlight casting strange shadows on the wall, and deepening the gloom on the far end of the cave. The cave was very large, and branched off into many sections in the gloom. He saw some ancient bones in a corner of the cave, but it was apparent that these bones were centuries old. He went back to his companions at the entrance of the cave.

'The cave is very large but there are no indications of any recent occupation.' He said. 'I think we can shelter here with our animals.'

They entered the cave with their animals, and cleared a corner of the cave for their use. They tethered their animals at other end of the cave, and unloaded their baggage. Some of them went out to collect the firewood, and others became busy making preparation for their stay in the cave. They collected large stones to build a hearth, and brought bundles of dried grass for their beds. Soon a

fire was blazing in the hearth that warmed their tired bodies, and casting some light their corner of the cave.

It was getting dark outside, and a biting cold wind was blowing across the valley. They sat around the fire, and talked desolately as the gloom deepened outside. Soon they saw snowflakes floating down from the shapeless gray clouds, and falling silently on the ground. They clustered at the cave entrance, and watched this eerie scene in silence.

'I have heard of snowfalls in the tales.' Mekaul said at last. 'But it is for the first time that I am seeing it with my own eyes.'

Denrik nodded thoughtfully.

'That is a first for all of us.' He said. 'The snow falls only on the high mountains and in the land of far north where the sun always hovers on the horizons. Even on high mountains it is not usual to see snowfall this time of the year.'

The snow was falling silently, and soon the meadow was covered in a thin white layer of snow. They went back inside their cave, and began to cook their dinner on the hearth. It was a simple meal of roasted meat, baked roots, and vegetables gathered in the meadow. The young haupi warrior sat apart from the others, and ate without much appetite.

After the meal they sat around the fire, and talked desolately for some time, and then went to their beds. They drifted into a deep sleep of exhaustion quickly. Outside the cave the snowflakes were floating down from the sky.

The next day they went outside, and saw a very different world covered with white snow. The whole valley and the mountain slopes were covered with white snow, and a deep silence reigned over the world. They gaped as they looked around at the world of strange and eerie beauty, and snow covered trees and bushes formed enchanting forms everywhere. They wrapped their cloaks

tightly around their bodies, and marveled at that strange sight. They walked slowly and watched the silent the ghostly world around them.

'I used to think that the tales of snowfall in the mountains are just travelers' tales.' Mekaul said. 'But it seems that there are many strange things in this world about which we have little knowledge.'

Denrik smiled, and picked up some snow in his hands.

'Yes, the world is full of strange things, and we know so little about them. Do you know that snow is formed when the water vapors in the clouds freeze?

They all starred at him incredulously.

'You say that the snow is made from water vapors.' Hiraum said incredulously. 'How could it be possible that water vapors turn into this white fluffy substance? Are you sure you are not joking with us?'

Denrik put some snow in his mouth and grinned at them.

'No, I am not joking with you, my friends.' He said. 'You can put some snow in your mouth, and see that it melts in your mouths and turn into water. Or you can melt it in a pot over fire, and boiled it to steam again'

Hiraum picked some snow, and put it into his mouth. He remained silent for some moment, and then nodded thoughtfully.

'I think that you are right, master Denrik.' He said. 'It really melted in my mouth, and turned into water, and I swallowed it but still I am amazed that such thing could happen.'

Mekaul looked around him at the silent white world of snow.

'I think we need to hunt for some meat as we are running out of food. I will go out to see if I could find some animal in this snow.'

Graka and another man called Krashka, decided to join him in his hunt. They left the cave after making their preparation for the hunt. Mekaul was

carrying his powerful bow and quivers of arrows, and his dagger, while Graka and Krashka were carrying spear throwers, and several long slender spears each. They moved slowly through the unfamiliar snow, occasionally sinking to their knees in holes filled with drifting snow but mostly it was ankle deep. They were wearing leggings, and leather socks to protect their feet from the cold, and although the sky was covered by shapeless white clouds, the reflection from the snow was hurting their eyes. They walked along the stream that was flowing inside the snowy banks, and avoided the tangled vegetation, and large boulders that were everywhere.

Mekaul saw a large number of footprints along the stream, and leading up to the slopes on the far side of the valley. They stooped to examine these signs in fresh snow. These were the spoor of a herd of animals that had come to drink at the stream, and had dug out the vegetation from the deep snow to forage for food. He saw the signs of browsing and grazing in the tangled brush around him.

'I don't know what animals is this? He said. 'I have not seen tracks like these before but it is apparent that it is some kind of herbivorous animal that live in large herds. I think that we should hunt these for food.'

Graka looked up from the tracks and nodded thoughtfully.

'It is a herd of mountain tapors that live on steep mountain slopes but come down to graze in the valleys. I don't think that we can follow these as they live on higher parts of the mountains among the craggy cliffs. We should try to find some game in the valley; it is much safer than wild hunt on the cliffs.'

They moved down the valley following the small stream, and came to a stand of mekarda trees under tall cliffs. The snow was deeper here, and they moved slowly across the uneven ground with many snow covered holes. They moved carefully as they already had the miserable experience of falling in these holes, and the discomfort and delay caused by it. As they approached the cliff the ground become more open, and free of tangled brush.

Mekaul stopped, and gazed at the cliffs. He saw some movement, but couldn't make out what it was.

'I saw some movement in the cliffs.' He said in a low voice. 'But I am not sure what it is.'

Graka and his companion looked up at the cliffs. The cliffs were made of dark stone, and were covered with dense vegetation and patches of snow.

'I can't see anything.' Graka said. 'But it could be some small animal up there.'

They began to walk toward the cliffs, and reached the trees. There was little snow under the mekarda trees, and they could see little berry like fruits strewn on the ground. Mekaul saw some tracks, and crouched down to examine these closely. These were the footprints of mountain tapors that had come to eat the fallen fruits under the mekarda trees.

He rose to his feet, and looked around him at the clearing.

'These tracks are quite fresh.' He whispered. 'I think that these animals could still be around. Let's move stealthily, and try to find any that might be still around.'

It was decided that they would move in different directions, and try to find their prey under the cliffs. Mekaul moved stealthily through the dense undergrowth, and reached a large boulder. He saw some movement in the dense vegetation, and froze behind the boulder. He sat there patiently, and waited for his companions to encircle the animals. He watched the tall bushes and shrubs under the cliffs, and saw three tapors browsing in the bushes. He crept slowly, and reached the cover of a tall bush.

The tapors had moved toward him, and were now closer. He saw their tawny bodies with dark strips, and pairs of curved horns as they browsed the leaves, and seed pods from the shrubs and bushes, and came closer. They were now some eighty feet away, and still unaware of his presence. He pulled an arrow from his quiver, and nocked it to his bow. He pulled his bow fully, and took careful aim for a long moment.

The bow sang out loudly, and the arrow sped through the air. The tapors looked up at the sound of the bow, and the arrow struck the foremost animal in the flank. The tapors bolted, and bounding over the large stones and vegetation disappeared around a bend of the cliffs. He rose to his feet, and ran after them. He raced slowly over the deep snow and tangled brush, and turned around the bend in the cliffs. He spotted two of tapors climbing a narrow trail up the cliffs but couldn't see the stricken animal anywhere. He followed the footprints of the fleeing animals, and saw a series of blood drops in the snow, and knew that the injured animal is not going very far. He found it between some large boulders. It was still alive, and at his arrival kicked to its feet, and moved unsteadily away. He nocked another arrow to his bow, and shot it in the back. The animal collapsed to the ground but its flanks were still heaving with labored breathing as it kicked its legs. He sat on a boulder, and watched it die before him. The euphoria of the chase had left him, and he felt the same regret that he felt after every kill, but he knew that they needed the meat and the tapor had to die for that.

It took some five minutes for the tapor to become still, and he drew his dagger then, and moved toward it. He whistled twice to signal to his friends, and then bent down to cut it open. He was cutting open its belly, when he heard some sound behind him, and looked up the cliffs.

He saw a large head with powerful jaws full of sharp teeth, and a powerful body ready to spring. The beast was crouching on a ledge on the cliff, and its large and powerful tail was moving slowly sideways. Its body was dark with brown patches, and powerful muscles bulged under the skin. It growled as it moved forward on the ledge. He moved back slowly, his eyes never leaving the beast that was ready to pounce on him. He wished that he had his spear with him, but he had to rely on his long dagger now. His back was now to a large boulder, and he couldn't move back more. He saw a long wooden shaft lying at his feet, and bent down slowly to pick it up. He sheathed his dagger, and picked the long wooden shaft with sharp broken end, and wielded it like a spear. Armed with this natural spear he rose slowly to his feet, and faced the beast. The beast roared and jumped down the ledge, and landed nimbly on the soft ground under the cliff. He

moved sideways, and entered a narrow opening between two large boulders, and the cliffs.

The beast snarled viciously, and advanced toward him. Mekaul shouted, and waved his spear, trying to frighten the beast away. The beast stopped, and growled menacingly as it crouched down. Mekaul waved his crude spear, and backed away further in the narrow space. The beast roared, and suddenly charged him. He was taken by surprise, although he had been expecting the charge, and thrust the spear at flying form of the attacking beast. He was thrown back by the impact of powerful body of the beast, and hit the ground very hard, and was stunned momentarily. He came to his sense after a moment, and saw that the sharp end of the wooden shaft had penetrated the right side of the beast, and it was effectively immobilized as the other end of the wooden shaft was jammed between the stones.

Mekaul scrambled away from the sharp claws of the beast that had torn his cloak, and leather shirt and had left bloody cuts on his chest. He pulled his dagger from its sheath, and slashed the beast as it struggled to come after it. The beast growled fiercely, and twisting its body tried to reach him. The wooden shaft was broken, and was twisting in its body as the beast turned on him. He lunged forward, and sank his dagger in the powerful neck of the beast. He withdrew the dagger, and stabbed it again and again. The mortally wounded beast was roaring, and struggling to get to him but he sank his knife again in its neck, and twisted it harshly. A torrent of blood gushed from the neck wound, and finally the beast collapsed with the end of wooden shaft still wedged in its chest. The breast hissed as the final spasm shook its powerful body, and then it was silenced forever. Mekaul tried to crawl away but couldn't move further. He closed his eyes and lost consciousness.

He opened his eyes, and saw the faces of two very worried looking men over him. It took him a few moments to recognize Graka and Krashka, and then memories flooded back. He remembered being charged by the beast, and how he had entered the narrow space between the rocks, and how had he fought back,

and killed his assailant. He sat up with difficulty and groaned as he felt sharp pain in his back, and chest. His back was sore, and felt great pain as he sat up, and there was burning sensation in his chest from the gashes from the sharp claws of the beast. He saw that front of his clothing was ripped, and his clothing was in tatters, still he was fortunate to be alive.

'What was that beast that attacked me? He asked. 'I have not seen its kind before.'

'It was a mountain tangora, my friend.' Graka said as he cleaned blood from the cuts on his chest, and applied the paste of some plant that set his wound on fire. 'We found both of you lying here, and I was sure that you have died, but I was amazed to see that you are still alive. You are surely very hard to kill, my friend. I am glad that I am on your side.'

Mekaul smiled weakly, and groaned as the burning sensation increased in his chest wound. Graka helped him remove his cloak and shirt, and examined his back. He grunted as Graka touched, and pressed different part of his back.

'Your back is bruised, and blackened from the fall on the hard and stony ground.' Graka said. 'But fortunately you have not broken any ribs, and will get well in short time, but we must care for your chest wound, so it would not become infected. The tangoras' claws are known to poison it victims.'

He rose to his feet unsteadily with the help of Graka and his companion, and limped with them toward the cave. Graka was helping him as walked, and Krashka was coming after them, carrying all their weapons. Mekaul was miserable, and staggered toward their camp, and needed all of Graka's help as he felt a great weakness. They reached the cave at last, and a cry went up as the men working before the cave spotted them coming. Hiraum, Shekara and Denrik ran to meet them, and he was carried by his friends to the cave, and laid on a bed. He closed his eyes, and felt the weariness overcoming him. He heard the talk of his companion around him, but soon was lost in oblivion.

When he opened his eyes he couldn't remember anything, and watched the cave's high roof for a moment, and then memories flooded back; the hunting of the tapor and being attacked by the tangora under the cliff. He sat up with difficulty.

'Lie down; you need the rest, my friend.' Denrik said as he came bearing a bowl of steaming meat broth for him. 'It is fortunate that you have not broken any ribs in the fall, and your head didn't strike any stone, which would have killed you instantly. The cuts in your chest need tending, otherwise it would become infected, and you could develop high fever and delirium.'

Mekaul drank the hot broth gratefully, and felt the strength return to his limbs as the hot liquid went to his belly. He looked around; some of the men were dressing the tapor's carcass, and cutting it in small pieces for roasting over the open fire. He saw the skin of tangora being stretched over a wooden frame on far side of the cave. He sighed, and handed back the bowl to old Scholar.

'I am alive, and I am grateful to all Gods that I am given another chance.' He said. 'It is a different experience being hunted rather than being the hunter.'

Denrik stroked his white beard, and smiled with amusement.

'I am happy that you live, and can go hunting again. I hate telling the Chief Ratekon that I am not bringing back his son, although it is doubtful that I will see him again myself.'

Mekaul smiled, and rose to his feet. He was feeling strong again, although his body was sore from bruises and cuts. They walked toward the opening of the cave.

It was a bright day outside the cave. The sun was shining in the sky, and the day was quite cold. He saw that most of the snow in the valley had melted, leaving the most of the land boggy, but the mountain peaks and slopes were still covered in deep snow.

'The weather has changed quite unexpectedly.' He said. 'It was colder in the morning when we had gone for hunting.'

Denrik nodded, and looked around him.

'Yes, the weather in these mountains is unpredictable and can change rapidly. I think that we will leave tomorrow.'

They sat on some boulders outside the cave, and talked about the events of the day. Denrik told him that they had been very afraid when he had been carried to the cave, thinking that he was going to die, but there was much relief when Denrik had announced that he was going to be all right. At the end of his narrative he looked closely at Mekaul, and asked seriously.

'Aren't you feeling that you have made a mistake by embarking on this journey?'

Mekaul sighed and looked around him.

'Yes, I have thought about it but it is now too late to turn back. Even my father wouldn't approve of my coming back defeated like this. I am going to city of Mirakem on the shores of the inland sea of Sekarmia with you.'

Denrik nodded thoughtfully as he gazed at the distant peaks.

'Still I am not happy that you are endangering your life for my expedition. You should seriously consider the option of returning to your town while it is still possible. Once we enter the dry lands it will be almost impossible for you to return without a large group.'

Mekaul laughed and shook his head.

'May be I have made a mistake, but one has to make his mistakes, and learn his own lessons. It is better than living one's life in some small town, and listening to the stories of the far off lands, and daydreaming about traveling to ends of the world, but being too timid to leave the comfort of his home and hearth.'

'So you want to learn your lessons the hard way.' Denrik said with a smile. 'In that case you are welcome in our group. We will leave in the morning if the weather holds.'

The sun was setting in the west, and it was getting cold. They came back to the cave, and sat near the fire. The men had gathered in the cave, and were sitting around the fire. It was the time of reminiscence and storytelling, and there was an apparent homesickness in the tones of their voices. Mekaul sat there listening to their stories and thought about his small town near the river, and for a moment a strange urge came over him to leave everything, and return to his home. He shook his head, and went to his bed, and lying there gazed at the dark roof of the cave.

He rose from his bed when they called him for the dinner, and ate his meal in silence. The other men were still talking about their journeys, and the adventures they had faced, and the loves they have found and lost in the strange towns and cities through which they had passed in the days long ago. A cold wind was blowing outside the cave, and the moon was pale in the night sky.

The next day was bright and cold. A cold wind was blowing through the valley, and the sky was clear of the clouds. Mekaul went to the stream, and looked in the water; he saw his reflection in water and thought that he looked rather haggard, and disheveled. He took out his steel razor and shaved carefully, and then washed his face and his arms in the water. His body was stiff, and the wounds in his chest were swollen, and he felt weak and lightheaded. He combed his hair with his wooden comb, and went back to the cave.

'How are you, my friend? Hiraum said as looked up from his bowl of soup. 'You look weak and tired. I wonder if you are able to travel.'

Mekaul smiled wanly.

'Don't you worry; I will travel with you to the land of Ashewara, and beyond. I am not yet defeated.'

Shekara looked up from the skewers of meat that he was turning over the fire.

'You can ride one of my mandanos. I will fix you a saddle from the blanket, and you would be quite comfortable.'

Hiraum shook his head in wonder.

'I have never heard of any man riding an animal. Are you sure it is safe to ride one of these animals, although they look tame enough when they carry their loads.'

Shekara grinned at him.

'These animals are very tame, and we do ride them when they are not laden, or if one of us is sick or wounded. Don't worry; Mekaul will be safe enough on one of the animals.'

Hiraum said nothing but still there was a look of disbelief on his face.

They ate a breakfast of roasted meat, and bread made from marhi beans flour with the sweet syrup of a plant that grew on the slopes of the mountains. They had packed most of their baggage, and were ready for the march. They brought their animals outside the cave, and loaded them carefully. Shekara loaded one of his mandanos lightly, and fixed a saddle made from the blankets on its back, and tied it securely with ropes. He helped Mekaul climb on the animal's back, and sat him on the saddle, and told him to hold on to the saddle rope for safety. Mekaul felt very strange sitting on the animal's back, and looked around him. Hiraum's companions and Denrik's servants were looking skeptically at him, but Shekara's men assured them that it was not dangerous. Shinaka was standing apart from the others, and looked amused but said nothing.

They resumed their march, and went up the valley. They walked beside the stream for some time, and then took a trail that went up the slopes. Most of the snow had melted, and there were isolated patches of snow in the shade of tall cliffs, and under the large trees. Strange and colorful birds were gliding across the valley and the mountain slopes, and their long cries floated across the valley. The strange looking insects buzzed over the mushroom shaped plants dotted on the slopes, and small creatures scurried in the underbrush. They saw a herd of mountain tapors on the upper slopes of the mountains amid the snows. A cold wind was blowing but the sun was warm, and they felt cheerful in the bright day.

They went up the slopes, and reached a high ground on the shoulder of the mountains. Strange long stemmed plants with the crowns of long leaves, and dense shrubs grew on the ground, and small creatures were hopping in the underbrush. A lone herakos was gliding in the air, and seemed motionless in the sky. A small stream was flowing among the vegetation silently. They went down from this meadow, and found a trail that skirted the slopes of the mountains.

By the midday they were marching in a long valley beside an icy stream that was coming down from the melting snows. The sky was clear of the clouds, and the day was warm and pleasant. They stopped to rest, and to have their midday meal under some tall trees that were sheltered under some cliffs from the strong winds of the highlands. Mekaul climbed down from his mount with difficulty, and moved around to restore the circulation in his legs. He was weak and uneasy riding a mandano, but still he felt that he had no other option. He saw the young haupi warrior sitting apart from the others, and went toward him.

'How are you doing, my friend?' Mekaul said amicably. 'You are not talking to anybody, not even to your father, although I assure you that we bear you no ill will, even though you are from an enemy tribe.'

Shinaka looked up at him, and nodded thoughtfully.

'Yes I am amazed that you and your friends have not tortured, and killed me, though to tell you the truth if you were a captive of our camp, a very different fate would have been in store for you.'

Mekaul smiled, and sat on a large stone near him.

'We too are a warrior people, and love to test our weapons against our enemies, but we don't torture our captives.'

Shinaka remained silent, and gazed at the far peaks.

Mekaul rose to his feet and went toward the fire, where some of the men were busy preparing their lunch. The day was warm, and a cool breeze was stirring the leaves of the trees. They rested for some time after their meal, and then resumed their march, Mekaul was again mounted on the back of the

mandano, and was getting used to being carried along. They reached an icy stream, and crossed it slowly.

Shekara raised his hand to signal them to stop. He was looking down on some signs in the damp earth on the bank of the stream. Mekaul got down from his mount, and went to him. He saw some tracks on the damp ground near the stream, and bent down to study these closely.

'It is the footprints of the haupi warriors.' He said. 'There are four of them, and they are wounded or sick because they are staggering as they walked. One of them is being helped by the others.'

Shekara nodding in agreement, and rose to his feet.

'Yes, they are returning from the trail from the Ganaka valley. I am wondering what might have happened to them, and if they are the same group that was following us or some other group that happens to be in the same area, although it is not likely that two groups are operating in the same area.'

'Yes it is unlikely but not impossible.' Mekaul said. 'I think we should ask Shinaka, who knows them intimately. He can tell us a lot if he is so inclined.'

They called Shinaka to them, who came and examined the tracks closely, and frowned as he straightened up.

'Yes, it is signs of our gana or what is left of them. It is Pinaka that they are helping along; I wonder what has befallen them; they are in a bad shape.'

Shekara sighed, and looked toward the slopes on the western end of the valley, where the tracks of the haupi group seemed to lead. He turned toward them and said.

'They are not far off as the tracks are quite fresh, and they are going very slowly. I am going to see them before I leave. You people go with Graka, who knows the way, and make your camp near the Kamari rock. I will rejoin you later.'

Hiraum and his companions objected to his going after Haupi group as being dangerous and unnecessary, but he was adamant that he would see his

brother one last time, and assured them that they would be safe with Graka leading them, and that he will head back shortly. At the end they yielded reluctantly but it was decided that Krashka will accompany him.

'I will go with you too.' Mekaul said. 'I think that you would need another man with you.'

Shekara shook his head.

'You are not in shape to walk, and we had to walk to where they have gone. You can't go riding over the slopes as the track there is not suitable for a mandano to carry you along.'

Mekaul grinned at him.

'I am better now and I think that I need some walking to restore the circulation in my limbs. I am coming with you.'

Shinaka came forward with a strange expression on his face.

'I will come too and I won't stay back, but be assured that I will not join them against you. I swear by our God Rachikan that I will not betray you.'

Shekara thought for a moment, and then nodded warily.

'Come than; we need to hurry on, otherwise we may not catch up with them and it will delay our group.'

They bade farewell to their friends, who resumed their march along the trail under the guidance of Graka. They began to follow the tracks of the haupis that went to the slopes at the western end of the valley, and ascended a path that went up the side of the mountain. Mekaul saw several footprints that seemed quite fresh, and knew that they were not far behind the haupis. They reached a level place on the shoulder of the mountains, and saw a small meadow filled with stunted trees, and strange bushes. They tracked the trail to a cave under the tall cliffs, and stopped before the opening of the cave.

Shekara hailed those in the cave in haupi language, and waited for the response.

After several minutes two men emerged from the cave, and faced them defiantly. They were haggard looking young men who wielded spears but no had shields, and seemed in ill health. They starred at Shekara and Shinaka for a long moment, and then said something in haupi language.

'I have come to see my brother Pinaka.' Shekara said in tirany language for the benefit of Mekaul, who didn't understand Haupi language.

One of the young men glared at Mekaul, and then disappeared in the cave. After few minutes he came out supporting his leader Pinaka, who also seemed much weakened and in a high fever. He leaned on his spear, and surveyed them sardonically.

'So the hunters are now being the hunted.' He said in tirany language. 'And who is the great warrior that lured us in this trap?

Shekara gestured toward Mekaul and said.

'He is the one but we are not here to kill you. We are going on our way, and I want to see you for the last time. I wish we could have met in better circumstances.'

Pinaka studied Mekaul thoroughly.

'You seemed also in a bad shape; what has happened to you? Did our warriors caught up with you?

Mekaul nodded thoughtfully.

'Yes, your man Shinaka caught up with me, and we had close fight in a meadow on the western slopes but I was later mauled by a mountain tangora while hunting in a high valley, and killed it after a deadly fight.'

Pinaka straightened up, and starred at him for a long time.

'So you are the beast slayer, and now we have met.' He said at last. 'It was prophesied by the priestess of the temple of Dakasha that I will be defeated by a beast slayer, and that would be my doom. Alas; we have met at last.'

'I don't know anything about your prophesy.' Mekaul said. 'But I am not your enemy, and you have brought it on yourself.'

Pinaka grimaced and shook his head.

'I did what I was supposed to do, and met a fate that befalls any warrior who ventures in a dangerous expedition. I am a warrior, and live as is my destiny; I have no regrets.'

Shekara sighed and gripped his shoulders.

'You have chosen a path that brings only death and destruction to the world, and I don't understand how you can't see the plain truth. We are not born haupis and even if we were, it doesn't mean that we can't choose another path.'

Pinaka pushed back his hands, and moved back.

'I don't know another way, and anyway it is too late to change my ways, but you have chosen another path, and I didn't blame you when you did, although I fell in favor of our gana as your brother. I took your wife and son, and provided for them.'

Shekara nodded warily.

'Yes, I know that and I am grateful for what you did, and that's why I have come.'

Pinaka looked toward Shinaka who was standing there watching silently the exchange between his father and uncle.

'What is your decision, my son? Do you want to go with your father, or want to come back to our tribe?'

Shinaka starred at him for a long moment, and then shook his head definitely.

'I don't want to betray my tribe, but I can't return to the brotherhood of my warrior clan, as I have been captured by an enemy, and I can't live the life of pity, and scorn by the free men of our tribe.'

Pinaka nodded thoughtfully, and there was a look of compassion on his face.

'You are right, my son, it is hard to live among the proud warriors as an outcast, but still I think that you can make your place again among the warriors.'

Shinaka didn't reply, and starred at the distant peaks of the mountains.

'What happened to your gana, my brother? Shekara asked. 'Were you ambushed by the warriors of some clans of the high valleys?

'No, we were defeated by the unseen forces of the high mountains.' Pinaka said sadly. 'We were marching through a trail to overtake you and lay an ambush, but were caught by the snowstorm on an exposed mountain slope. There was no shelter nearby, and we couldn't make fire with wet wood available there, and had to spend the night huddled in our cloaks in the lee of some rocks, and it was a very cold night, unlike any that we had ever experienced in our lives. We hadn't seen a snow storm before, and it was terrible. Seven of our men died that night, and the rest were sick, and died during the next couple of days. I am sick too, but I am determined to reach the valleys of our people to carry the tales of deaths of my men to their families, and to see that sacrifices are made at the altars of Gods in their names.'

Shekara turned toward his son.

'Will you not reconsider, and come with me, my son? He said. 'I can tell you that there is always a chance for a new beginning. You don't have to go to exile for no reason. Come with me, I have a home in a mountain valley, and you will be welcomed there by my family.'

Shinaka shook his head slowly.

'I am a warrior and I have my pride. I can't go like a beaten dog, and find a new hearth to curl beneath. I will go to some new land, and carve a place for myself.'

Shekara nodded grimly, and turned back.

'Very well, go where you want and do what you must, and I will pray that the Gods of our fathers watch over you. I bless you and will make sacrifices on the altars of the Gods in your name.'

Shinaka looked toward his war leader.

Pinaka came to him and gripped his right arm.

'Go with my blessings, and find a place for yourself in the world. I am proud of you, and I too will make sacrifice on the altar of Gods in your name.'

Shinaka turned toward Mekaul and asked him.

'So what do you do say, great warrior? I am in your bondage and I have nothing to offer as a ransom for my freedom.'

'You can go wherever you want to go.' Mekaul said. 'I have nothing against you, and give you leave to go where you may. I only ask that you don't come against us as an enemy.'

Shinaka nodded eagerly.

'I promise you that I will never come against you, and will never aid and abet anyone hostile to you.'

He turned and walked away without looking back at his father, and went down a trail to the valley. They watched him as he disappeared behind the huge rocks where trail took a turn.

'Let's go, my friends.' Shekara said finally. 'I think that we will not see from these men again.'

Turning to his brother he said.

'Farewell, my brother, I hope that you will reach your home, and be again in the company of the warriors and with your family. Put some flowers on her grave in my name.'

They walked back down the trail that went to the valley floor.

It was a cold night, and a cold wind was blowing across the valley. They were sitting around a camp fire, and were eating their dinner of roasted meat and baked roots, and drinking a sour wine freshly brewed from red berries growing in bushes around their last camp. One of the men had killed a large tapor in the evening near a spring under the cliffs, and they had roasted it over the camp fire. They also had found wild plants with bulbous starchy roots in the dense vegetation near the stream, and red berries on the bushes on the eastern slopes. They ate slowly and in silence, and were now drinking the sour wine after their meal. Shekara and his men were subdued, and others were also feeling melancholy. The light from the camp fire was dancing on their solemn faces.

Mekaul, Denrik and Hiraum were sitting apart from the others, and were drinking in silence.

'I wonder where he can go now.' Hiraum said. 'He wouldn't survive for long in the wilderness alone.'

Mekaul looked up and met his eyes.

'I think he may survive much longer than you expect.' He said. 'These men are trained to live in the wilderness, and this particular young warrior can make his way across the hostile lands. I think he may live to see another land.'

Denrik nodded thoughtfully.

'Mekaul is quite right.' He said. 'You are thinking like a city man, and don't understand the capabilities of men trained since childhood in the arts of warfare and hunting. Wilderness is for these men like a second home, and they would find

sustenance where others would starve, and he can track his way across the enemy lands; yet misfortune may catch him in the end.'

'Why didn't he listen to his father? Hiraum said, shaking his head. 'I think it is very foolish and obstinate to go off like that in the wilderness. He should have listened to his father and gone with him to his home and start a new life.'

'Yes, what you just said makes perfect sense to me.' Denrik said. 'But he sees the world very differently, and that's what makes us different from the animals, because while every animal is also an individual, still they obey their basic instincts; but we human are live by the values and ideals of our societies, and we will readily put our lives, and livelihood in jeopardy to confirm to the will of our societies.'

'Well, you may be right, my learned friend.' Hiraum said. 'But I would never put my life in danger just to please the people of my city.'

Denrik laughed and patted his shoulder.

'That's just what you are doing right now, my friend.' Denrik said with twinkle in his eyes. 'Tell me why you are taking great dangers in traveling to that distant land? To make a lot of money, and to be wealthier than your peers in the city of Ashdari, you would say, but do you really need that much wealth to be happy. I know some people that are happier with a small home, and a small plantation to make a living. So why are you endangering your life to make more money, when you already have enough to last you several life times. The real reason is that you want to confirm to the values, and mores of you city, and gain respect, and honor among your peers. So in essence you are putting your life at great risk just to please the society to which you belong.'

Hiraum scratched his graying beard as he thought it over.

'But still I am making a lot of money, and that counts for a lot, my friend.' He said. 'Even you can't ignore the importance of great wealth.'

'Yes, but when you have already more than enough money to live a life of luxury, why are putting your life in danger just to make more money, that you

don't really need.' Denrik said. 'I am saying again that you are risking your life to confirm to the mores of a mercantile society, just as that Haupi warrior is going in wilderness to restore his honor.'

Hiraum shook his head in exasperation.

'Well, that is the downside of great knowledge that you can't see the point of an ordinary man like me, but I am not going to argue because I know that you had a lot to tell me. Let's talk about something less contentious, like where we are going now?'

Denrik smiled and drank his wine.

'Shekara says that he will take us tomorrow to the temple of Dagarda in the valley of Hipakari, where he will ask the oracle for success of our expedition. He has great faith on this oracle.'

Hiraum leaned forward.

'Is this oracle famous for its predictions? I too will consult it for success of my venture. I have great plans for a establishing a trading post in Ashewara that could turn my company into a great mercantile empire and, make me a merchant prince of Ashdari.'

Denrik shook his head doubtfully.

'I have no faith in any oracle, and I doubt that anyone can predict future, still most of us believe in oracles, and base their decisions on their predictions.'

Hiraum grinned, and said with a twinkle in his eyes.

'Trouble with you is that you doubt everything, and that's the weakness of every learned man that they believe in nothing, but I have great faith in those that speak the words of Gods.'

Denrik rose to his feet, and said with a shake of his head.

'Well, you do what you want to, but I am going to sleep. I will see you tomorrow.'

They watched him go his bed under the temporary shelter built from tree branches, and bundles of dried grass and disappear under the cover of furs. They talked for a long time, and watched the large moon emerge from behind the high peaks in the east. A cold wind was blowing across the valley and the mountain slopes, and the heat from the fire was very welcome.