

CHRONICLE OF THE LAKE

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Written about 1972

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For all who love mountains and valleys,
forests and flowers,
rivers and lakes,
and chess.

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Chronicle of the Lake takes place in a fantasy world. Any resemblance between the people and places in this story and those in the real world is purely coincidental and highly gratifying.

Prologue

Dr. Miller was waiting in the shade of the maple tree when Chris Lowie hopped from his truck in front of the research station.

“You’re late,” said the older man. He pointed to the other folding chair. “Sit down. Black or white?”

Chris sat. “Sorry, Joe, I got carried away with my work. Black.” They began to set up the chessmen on the card table between them. “We began a new level today.”

“Hmm. Anything interesting?”

“I’ll say. Some of the finest obsidian points I’ve seen.”

Dr. Miller muttered, “You archaeologists. You always talk in superlatives.”

“Here, look at this and tell me it isn’t beautiful.” Chris pulled from his pocket a long piece of stone with a sharpened double edge and fluting down the middle.

“I’ll admit it’s nice.” The biologist rubbed his finger. “Still sharp, too. How old is it?”

“It’s from a period just before the Tarmian Empire—about 3,000 years ago.

“A long time ago.”

“Yes.” Chris ran his hand through his wavy blonde hair. “Things have changed a lot since then.”

Dr. Miller handed back the stone and moved his knight.

“Aha,” said the archaeologist, “a Reti opening. Trying some razzle-dazzle today.”

Miller frowned. “We’ll see.”

The plastic armies progressed around the chessboard. After a while the old biologist took a stained pipe from his breast pocket and filled it with tobacco. Waiting for Chris's move, he sat wreathed in smoke, staring out at the placid lake in the hollow between the mountains. Forests stretched away from it in all directions. The distant gleam of a city could be seen in the clear air, with smaller towns and villages scattered along the shore. A large, rocky island jutted out of the middle of the lake. It looked like a misplaced temple. Nearer at hand was the swamp that surrounded the research station's landing.

Dr. Miller wrinkled his brown forehead and drew on his pipe,

"No, I don't think that's quite right, Chris."

"What do you mean 'not right'? Of course, it's right. You made the same move yourself just a minute ago."

"Not your move. What you said."

"What did I say?"

"That things have changed a lot since prehistoric times. I'm not sure I believe that."

Chris leaned back in his chair. "How can you say that? From stone knives to factories? Everything has changed tremendously."

"Oh, sure, we've come a long way technologically. But there is a lot more to the universe than technology."

"True enough," said Chris, looking again at the stone knife. "But they had a very different way of life from ours too, different beliefs, different worries, different everything. Just suppose you and I had lived then, at the beginning of civilization, Man was just beginning to find himself."

"Yes, and probably he was a little surprised at the kind of creature he was. Man was reaching out," said the biologist, "trying to find his place in the universe. I wonder if he has succeeded?"

"We certainly seem to have found a place."

"True, but is it the place we belong in, or have we fooled ourselves somehow?"

Chris frowned. “That is philosophical—different department. We can never really know the answer to that.” His frown turned to a smile, “but we can imagine.”

“I’m not sure my imagination is that good.”

“You underestimate yourself, Doctor. You are a biologist, a scientist; I am an archaeologist, an historian. All that training must be good for something. Let’s imagine what we would have been doing 3,000 years ago. What would have been our place in the universe then?”

They both leaned back in their chairs. “Very well,” said Dr. Miller. “Let’s imagine.”

Chapter 1

Lake People

The grey boar turned and saw young Ratu. It charged, yellow tusks glistening with spittle, a dull red gleam in its eyes. Ratu held his spear ready near his right temple, his thick black hair whipping in the wind. His legs trembled as he watched. He felt he had become a sapling on the shore and was about to be blown to slivers by a storm from the lake. The boar was not twenty feet from him—he had to do something!

Suddenly a lean figure sprang from the bush beside him and thrust a spear deep into the creature's breast. The beast charged at its assailant, throwing him over its back and into the soft grass. But it was too late. The boar heaved a great sigh and collapsed into the dust.

Ratu ran to the side of his rescuer, who had already risen and was brushing himself off, "Lorim, are you hurt?"

"No. No fat pig can hurt a tough old man like me," he said, running his fingers through his grey beard and straightening his green tunic. "That was yours, though. Why didn't you kill it?"

Ratu looked down. "I do not know. I couldn't move. I . . ." He broke off.

The young man looked at his mentor and saw the familiar look of disappointment on his face. They had been together nearly a year, living in a hut set a little apart from the rest of the village. Ratu was receiving special instruction prior to the great succession at which he would become Ratu-tani, the chief priest.

Lorim, eldest of the Oak set of Eel clan, was his instructor in lore and ritual, including the killing of the sacred boar. Lorim's eyes were like watery

pools that twinkled with knowledge. But they did not twinkle now. They reflected disbelief and despair for Ratu and his people.

“Surely tomorrow will be better,” ventured the young man.

“I hope it is so. You know the law. Tonight, we ask the chief priest to offer sacrifice for you.” He thought for a moment and added, “And where prayer does not succeed, perhaps magic will.”

Lorim quickly tied the boar’s legs to his spear and lifted it up onto Ratu’s shoulder. Ratu could feel the animal’s warmth lingering beneath its fur. They turned and vanished into the forest, leaving no trace but some torn leaves and a spot of red where the great beast had died.

The village hummed with activity as the two returned. The workday was drawing to a close, and any projects to be completed must be done quickly so that the evening meal could be finished before dark and the coming of the night spirits. A dozen fishing canoes moved gently with the current in the middle of the broad lake.

Beyond them loomed Tani, the island, the earth’s navel. It stood like a sentinel, observing the villagers’ every act, giving its approval or disapproval as necessary through its prophet-priests, watching carefully that the incessant struggle between light and dark not be won, lest nature’s harmony be disrupted. Ratu looked, gave the sign; and walked on.

A group of children playing at the shore saw their approach and ran to them. Each wore a breechcloth. They smiled mischievously in greeting. Their mothers sat nearby, weaving baskets of various shapes and sizes from the reeds that grew thick in the fen where the dwellings were built. Juveniles Ratu’s age stood knee-deep in the water, pulling at plants or hunting frogs and other small animals to eat. A band of women came with berries and fungus from the forest to the northwest. They sang as they arrived at the shore, deposited the treasures in canoes, and paddled out to their homes, built on log pilings a few yards into the swamp.

Ratu and Lorim put their prize into a round bark made of reed and driftwood. The old man grunted. “First we go to Kanu-tani.” He shot a glance at Ratu.

They paddled among the houses, moving toward the center where the chief priest's house stood, larger than the rest and decorated with bones of various animals and enemies. Had it been late winter, when the lake was low, they might have gone straight to the building; summer brought the lake close to the floors, so they had to maneuver carefully to keep from jostling against the supports.

They tied their little boat to a post by the main entrance. A woman reached down and helped them onto the landing. "Welcome, Lorim," she said pleasantly. "It is many days since last you came to us." She did not greet the younger man.

"Indeed, it is. I have been in the forest, teaching the future one."

"So," she said, folding her arms gracefully. "Kanu-tani is in the inner room. Ngana-han is with him."

"It is well," the old man replied.

The house was dark. It had one small window, high in the south wall, and the door in the east wall. They picked their way past piles of furs and tools toward the curtain that divided the main room from the tani's living quarters. In the corner could be seen heaps of wicker baskets and small wooden boxes from which strange smells arose.

The woman parted the curtain and two men stood to greet the visitors. The tani and the han were men in their prime, strong and handsome, yet lines of care showed on their faces. They had held their offices nearly ten years, and they were glad they would soon be succeeded by their younger relatives. They would then move on to the first council of elders.

Kanu-tani threw back the boar-skin cloak that hung from his shoulders. He shook Lorim's hand and kissed his brow. A blue stone bounced with other ornaments on a string around his neck. "Lorim, welcome. How goes the training of my sister's son?"

Lorim paused before answering. "Tani, I have come to speak to you about this. But first, Ngana-han, long though it is since the tani and I have rested beneath the same roof, longer still it is since you and I have passed a pleasant evening together."

The han smiled. "True, Wise One. Your duties have taken you from us, as is the will of the gods."

Everyone ignored Ratu. He seated himself in a corner behind Lorim and averted his eyes from the two warriors. It was improper for an adolescent to gaze on such men. Instead, he stroked the soft beaver on which he sat and counted the repairs that had been made in the woven reed walls.

After some idle chatter, Lorim got to the reason for his visit. "Kanu-tani, in the training of your sister's son I have found him very receptive to herbal lore, also the sacred knowledge of the beginnings, and to the lesser rites. Yet in other things I have found him to have weakness." He paused again.

"Today we hunted the boar. The young one had seen it thrice before, yet as the pig charged, he found himself unable to move. He would have been torn to pieces had I not come to his aid. Never have I seen such a thing—to be so afraid. A little fear is normal, but this!" Lorim held up his hands in exasperation.

The tani and the han exchanged looks. Lorim continued, "The spirits are at work; only they have such power. I have brought the pig. Take it tonight to the sacred island and offer it to the god. The succession must continue. If not, it will pass out of your family to a different lineage. And who knows but that one day, if Ratu's sister should have a son, he would claim the priesthood. Then there would be a division in the tribe, and strife over who should lead in the holy order."

The tani paused before answering. He closed his eyes as if in deep thought, then said, "It is well you have told me of this, Lorim. I will go to the island tonight and seek the gods' help. I shall ask the lake as well, for she has limitless powers."

The men talked a little longer, about relatives and friends and the more humorous events of the day. When they rose to leave, Kanu-tani withdrew a nasturtium leaf from a small leather bag that hung round his waist. He rubbed it on the hands of his two adult guests and murmured a spell, while Ratu silently moved into the other room where the woman sat cracking nuts. The others followed shortly.

After the dead boar had been transferred to the tani's boat, Ratu and Lorim climbed into their own and began the homeward journey. They hurried, for dusk had come while they were inside. The shadows of the houses and the trees on shore lay black about them. Away to the east the mountain tops shone bright in the last sunlight. In the west a long bright slash of evening color cut across the darkening sky.

Lorim's house stood beyond the edge of the village, not far from shore. On the landing they found a basket of hot bread and fish and a smaller one of fresh berries, left there by Ratu's sister. Lorim's wife had died of an illness some years before, so usually his mother's brother's daughter provided food for him, but as the new tani's teacher he shared the food given Ratu by his mother's people.

After their meal Lorim built a small fire on the box of sand in the middle of the house. Then once again he told the story of creation to his young pupil. He had barely begun when Ratu interrupted him. "Lorim, thank you for what you did."

"Asking the tani for help? Anyone can do that for anything."

"No, I mean for not telling him about the other times. You know." He looked away, embarrassed.

"Yes, I know. You are special, Ratu, and will be a great tani one day. The spirits desire to destroy you. Why that is so I do not know, but they have great power. Only greater power can defeat them. Kanu-tani will summon that power. Then you will see the evil spirits flee and your own self-will return." He paused. "But all this will not teach you what you must know."

He continued his story. "After the creators had borne earth they nourished her for many years with the light of stars through a great tube. This tube joined earth at the place called Tani. When earth was old enough the tube was removed and a great stone placed over the spot where it had been, and a spirit put in the stone to guard it. But the stone was not tight, and so earth's blood seeped out all around, making the great lake. When the creators saw this they sent other spirits into the lake to stop the leak and seal the hole forever.

"Things were well with the universe for a long time. Earth gave birth to forest and to many spirits, good and bad. And then the bad spirits banded

together to attack Tani and dislodge the stone. They thought earth would die and they would have power over all the other spirits. It was a terrible struggle. There were lights in the sky and thunder, and the rocks cracked and broke under the strain. So great were the powers that were unleashed that earth groaned and flexed, and so were created the mountains that surround the valley.

“But when the creators saw all this pain, they were sad. They saw too that Tani and the good spirits became weaker with every day that passed, while the evil spirits grew stronger. They said, ‘The only merciful thing to do is kill earth, and all spirits and rocks and trees and living things. Such misery and suffering cannot be endured.’

“It was then that they heard a voice. A very small voice it was, and at first, they were not sure where it came from. But they looked down at the lake, and there by the shore stood Han.

“Han called to the creators and begged them not to destroy the earth and all things. But they said they must, for the forces of good were growing weak, and evil strong, and if the good were subdued even the creators would be in danger. Then they asked what manner of creature Han was, for they did not recognize him. He replied, ‘I am a son of earth. There are many of us in the forest, hiding from the terrible fight. If you will spare earth and all things from destruction, some of us will come live on the lake. We will feed the good spirits and serve them, that they will have strength to continue the struggle against evil.’

“The creators considered this suggestion and decided to give Han a chance. So it happened that Han and his brother, their families and friends moved onto the lake. They went to Tani too, where a huge blue stone had been placed as a token of the agreement. It is there that sacrifices of fruit and fish and sacred boar are made each midwinter’s day. This is how good is nourished. You are a descendant of the wife of the brother of Han, Ratu. It is to you that the responsibility for maintaining the covenant and all the important facts of lore and ritual will fall. Be happy in your duty, for it is through us that the universe is preserved, and harmony maintained.”

Lorim leaned back against the wall. Ratu yawned and looked out the little window that opened toward the east. Lights burned on the island, and the blackness of the lake surrounded it. The sight reminded Ratu of the

special sacrifice being made on his behalf. He thought of Han, the courageous.

The two said good night, and the young man crawled onto his pallet by the east wall as Lorim heaped ashes on the fire to preserve the coals until morning. Ratu pulled his furs up about his shoulders and he closed his eyes, but he did not sleep. His mind was wide-awake.

Everything had been easier before. He had known for a long time that spirits longed to seize and destroy, or at least dishonor him, but his position as future tani kept the other children from thinking too badly of him, and the tani protected him. When they swam out into the lake, he always stayed closer to shore, near the fen. He was a good shot with the spear and sling and had a reputation among the boys as a hunter, but when confronted with a large or dangerous animal in the woods, his courage fled.

And he had a mortal fear of being captured by the forest people. When the rest of the village was busy trading on the rare days they appeared, Ratu slinked behind the houses, out of sight. He did not know why such fears troubled him. They never mattered much until now. Now he must prove himself. He must be the heir of the brother of Han.

