



# The Temptation

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# How a Dream Troubled Lord Chutt

Something woke Lord Chutt in the middle of the night. The governor-general of Obann lay in his bed in the dark, listening for whatever it was that had jolted him out of a sound sleep. But he lay in silence. Nothing stirred: no creaking of floorboards, no doors opening or closing, no wind rattling the shutters on his windows.

“Not natural, this much silence,” he thought. And his eyes were wide open by now, and yet he couldn’t see a thing. It was as dark as it was silent. Such a deep darkness wasn’t natural, either.

But then he did see something.

From pegs on the wall, where Lord Chutt could admire it from his bed, hung the golden mask of the Thunder King, conqueror and ruler of all the countries of the East—and very nearly of Obann, too. But he had perished in his golden hall, crushed by an avalanche. Ysbott the Snake had burrowed into the wreckage like a worm and retrieved the mask for himself, but couldn’t keep it.

Chutt had it now, an heirloom of his house forever. He’d kept it as a trophy, but, as Ysbott had warned him, it

was more than that. “It’s the mask that makes you the Thunder King,” he’d said. “It has the power of command. And it has chosen you, my lord.” For this Chutt had made Ysbott, outlaw and vagabond, the Judge of Obann City.

Alone in the dark, Chutt found his eye drawn to the mask where it hung on the wall, and to his astonishment, he could see it. The mask now gave off light, a light from within, by which it illuminated itself and nothing more. This had never happened before, and Lord Chutt was afraid.

And now, as if he had been there all along, a man stood against the wall, a man who wore the mask. He was a shadow, flat, but also the opposite of a shadow: light displayed against the dark.

Lord Chutt discovered that he couldn’t move, not even a finger. He could only watch as the shadow gathered substance and became the solid figure of a man, clad in golden presters’ robes—a man emerging from the wall.

The man stepped free of the wall, approached in utter silence, and stood at the foot of Chutt’s bed. The eyes of the mask were pits of darkness. But then the man reached up with both his hands and took off the mask.

Chutt recognized Lord Reesh, the late First Prester.

Like most people in Obann, Chutt believed Lord Reesh lay buried in the vast ruin of the Temple of Obann, which had been burned to the ground by the Heathen when they almost took the city. There was a rumor (but it was the truth) that Reesh had escaped the destruction of the Temple and found his way up the mountains to the golden hall, only to perish in the avalanche. Lord Chutt did not believe that story. But he knew Lord Reesh when he saw him, and he was seeing him now.

“Chutt.” It was Reesh’s voice, none other. Chutt knew it well.

“My lord,” he managed to reply.

“Why do you do nothing, Chutt, when you have inherited my mission? You have brought down all the gold from the Golden Pass, only to hoard it like a miser.

“It has been given to you to return Obann to the glory of its ancient days, yet you sit on the gold like a dragon in a fairy tale. I tell you now, that if you continue to do nothing, all that you have gained will be taken from you and given to another.”

During Reesh’s lifetime, Lord Chutt never knew how low an opinion the First Prester had of him, so those words now came as something of a shock. Had he not brought the gold down from the mountain, an enormous achievement in itself? Had he not reconstituted the High Council of Obann, with himself as governor-general? Had he not pledged the gold for the rebuilding of the Temple? Despite his fear, he burned to justify himself. But his tongue would not obey.

Chutt fought to regain his power of speech. Lord Reesh stepped backward and seeped back into the wall, leaving only the mask hanging on its pegs. And the light that was in the mask went out, leaving Chutt in total darkness.

His muscles suddenly relaxed, and with a great sigh, Lord Chutt fainted on his bed.

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That same night Queen Gurun’s brothers, Heric and Bolli, with the girl Barseen and her uncle, Shesh, two survivors of a shipwreck from distant Arachosia, camped under the stars on Obann’s southern plains. They were more than

halfway to Lintum Forest, but had no sure way of knowing that. All of them were very much farther from home than they'd ever dreamed that anyone could be, but at least the stars were the same.

Herric and Bolli had come from Fogo Island in the north in search of their sister, and Barseen and Shesh from Arachosia across the western sea—seeking, said Barseen, “to know what’s happened since the ancient days.” No one from her country had been to Obann in a thousand years.

It was a cold night for Shesh and Barseen, late in the winter with spring already knocking at the door. But Herric said, “This is like a summer’s night, back home.”

Shesh chuckled. It turned into a cough, and Barseen shot a worried look at him.

“They raise tough children up there on Fogo Island,” he said. The children all noticed that his teeth were chattering, although he tried to hide it.

“Uncle, it’s time we turned in,” Herric said. Having come this far together, all the way from Durmurot, the boys now called him “Uncle.” “Even the mighty men of Fogo Island need their sleep.”

There was one tent for the boys and one for Shesh and Barseen: Obannese army tents, with army bedrolls, the gift of General Hennen. “These are the best we have,” he’d said, “and I just pray that they’ll be warm enough. You really ought to wait for spring before you make this journey.”

“But you’ve warned us there might be enemies along the way,” Herric answered, “so maybe the winter weather will protect us.”

And it had, so far. Since leaving the road along the Imperial River and turning south, then east, to avoid the

city of Obann, they'd met no one at all. Under no circumstances, Hennen had said, were they to approach the city. It was in the hands of King Ryons' enemies, who would surely take them hostage.

"I can't get used to all this fine, fertile land with no one living on it," Shesh said, as he rose from his seat by their campfire. "The Day of Fire was a thousand years ago, and still the land lies desolate."

From time to time in their journey they passed by great flat-topped hills, not knowing that these were all that remained of thriving cities. Had they spared the time to explore them, they would have discovered the signs of former habitation. But Shesh, to make sure their rations would carry them to Lintum Forest, steered them on a course that permitted no deviations.

On two occasions they'd seen giant flightless birds stalking the plains in search of prey, but these had not molested them. They were far enough from the city by now to avoid encountering patrols; but Hennen said there were still scattered bands of Wallekki riders, remnants of the Heathen army of invasion, that would kill them if they met. But so far they hadn't seen any.

"This is a sad and lonely country," Barseen said, "and I'll be glad when we get to Lintum Forest, where there are people. Come, Uncle—it's time we all went to bed."

"Our sister will feast us when we get there," Bolli said. But after they were snug in their bedrolls, he turned to his brother and asked softly, "Do you think Uncle Shesh is getting sick?"

"I do—and keep your voice down!" Herric said. "Tomorrow we must ask him to ride in the back of the wagon, all

bundled up. It may be that he's too old for this."

"We'd better pray for him," said Bolli, and they did.

# How Born's Army Turned Back

Martis brought Ellayne and Jack home the next day from King Oziah's Wood, where Ellayne's mother had sent them to escape the enemy's raiders when they'd broken into the town. Now the surviving raiders, disarmed and dismounted, were being sent back to General Born.

"I'm sorry I missed that!" Ellayne said, when she heard how Yergen the strong man had beat down, with a fence rail, three raiders, discomfited another three, and Jessa the archery champion had shot their captain dead. "And right there in front of you on our own sidewalk, Mother."

"Don't listen to her, Baroness," said Jack. "She doesn't know what she's saying."

Baroness Vannett sighed as she ushered the children back into the house. "Children!" she thought. "Ellayne's as tall as I am now, and Jack's an inch taller than that." Jack was her son by adoption: it wasn't to be thought of anymore, to separate him and Ellayne.

"I think, when your father comes home, I'll go to bed and stay there till the summertime," Vannett said. In the baron's absence, she'd had to command the defense of

Ninneburky. She permitted herself a brief ironic smile: all that work they'd done, strengthening the walls and deepening the moat—and the enemy simply charged into town because the gate was open and there'd been no time to close it. A lesson to remember, she thought.

“Father's with King Ryons' army?” asked Ellayne. “They won their battle?”

“The winter weather won it for us,” Vannett said. “Born's army just broke down and couldn't go any farther. The baron and the king will see to it that Born goes back to Obann City.”

“But they'll come again,” thought Jack, “come warmer weather.” But now was not the time to say so.

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Born's army had a long way to go to return to Obann City. Born's newly appointed colonel, Frowley, had placed his general under arrest. Frowley had reached an agreement with Roshay Bault and King Ryons' chiefs: for as long as Frowley marched westward, there would be no more fighting.

“You are a fool,” Born snarled, when the colonel told him of the agreement, “and Lord Chutt will surely hang you for a traitor.”

“I don't think he's going to be too pleased with you, either, General. For half a spit, I'd leave these siege machines behind and you with them. My only concern is to get this army back to Obann with no more loss of life.” Frowley shook his head. “I'm probably saving your life while I'm at it—not that I expect a thank-you.”

Against Born's advice, Chutt had ordered out the whole

army, in the dead of winter, to march all the way upriver and fetch Roshay Bault out of Ninneburky—with orders to raze the town if it resisted. As anyone could have predicted, the weather would not permit that plan to be carried out. And along the way, Chutt's whole Wallekki cavalry, under that arch-traitor, Bassas, went over to the enemy and lacerated Born's flanks. Once they and Roshay Bault were joined by Ryons' army out of Lintum Forest, Frowley judged it suicidal folly to continue. Born's last throw of the dice, sending out his few remaining cavalry to take Ninneburky by surprise and snatch the baron's family to force him to give himself up, had been a total loss. And then the army's officers mutinied.

What would Chutt do when they returned to Obann? He'd made Born the general of Obann and had given him a seat on the High Council. Presented with a humiliating failure, he'd be enraged.

All the general could think now, under armed guard in his tent, was how to save his own neck from the noose.

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“Your Majesty,” said Shaffur, chief of the king's Wallekki, “I think, once we get as far as Cardigal, you can leave the rest of this business to me and bring the army home. And the baron and his men can return to Ninneburky. I very much doubt those people will be tempted to turn east again.”

“They'd have to be crazy to do that,” agreed Helki the Rod. All the chieftains voted for the plan, and Ryons gladly accepted their advice.

“And if the king and queen would honor us with a visit,”

Roshay said, “all the Eastern Marches would rejoice.”

“We’d be very happy to do that, sir!” Ryons said. “I mean, if we can. I’d like to see Ellayne and Jack again.”

“We’ll make it a holiday,” said Roshay. “That is, if your chieftains approve. All of you are welcome.”

“We’d eat you out of house and home!” said Chief Buz-zard of the Abnaks. “But I think we can spare the king for a few days.”

“Only a few days, though,” Shaffur said. “The war’s not over yet. Chutt will try again.”

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Lord Chutt had no thoughts for armies or invasions. He’d had the dream for two nights in a row and dreaded his next night’s sleep. Either Lord Reesh’s ghost was haunting him, or he was going mad. For the first time in his life, he felt an acute need for deeply personal advice, and there was no one whom he trusted to give it to him.

Otvar—whose election as the new First Prester Chutt had paid good money to arrange? The thought of confiding in Otvar made his flesh creep. He doubted Otvar even had a spirit: so much for Otvar giving spiritual advice. Lord Otvar was the Temple, and the Temple was just another class of politicians. Only fools and lunatics like Orth, the recently deposed First Prester (and good riddance!), dabbled in what they called spiritual things.

But so pressing was his need that Chutt finally chose Gallgoid for his confidant. Gallgoid had at least known Lord Reesh personally, and Gallgoid wouldn’t dare to laugh at the dream. That Gallgoid was King Ryons’ chief spy in the city was a thing unknown to Chutt, and unsuspected.

Chutt summoned Gallgoid to his home, and they conferred in the parlor behind closed doors.

“I’m going to ask you for your advice about something that must never be mentioned to another living soul,” said Chutt, and Gallgoid perceived what Chutt had left unspoken: “Because if you do, I’ll turn you over to Ysbott and his torturers.” Chutt was trying to be calm, but trying so hard gave away his agitation.

Gallgoid was amazed to learn a bad dream was the cause of this. And Chutt, of all people!

“I don’t want to hear a lot of superstitious twaddle,” Lord Chutt said, after he’d described the dream. “I want to know what I must do to make it stop.”

“Dose yourself with castor oil,” Reesh would have said, but Gallgoid couldn’t say that.

“My lord,” he began carefully, “you are anxious about many difficult and complicated things. You govern a city racked by war and disorder; you have many enemies—”

“Many?” snapped Chutt. Gallgoid spread his palms, tacitly apologizing for the adjective.

“I’m only saying, my lord, that it’s natural for the burden that you carry to weigh upon your mind. And the troubled mind dreams troubled dreams.”

“Yes, yes—but what should I do? If I could only do something, I might get a good night’s sleep!”

It was always Gallgoid’s aim to give Chutt bad advice disguised as good, working patiently to lead him to his downfall.

Gallgoid almost smiled, which might have been fatal. What worse advice could he possibly give this man than to try to emulate Lord Reesh?

“Sir, Lord Reesh used to collect objects from the distant past, from before the Day of Fire. Perhaps he showed them to you.”

“He did,” said Chutt. “All just a lot of trash, really.”

“But Lord Reesh was a keen student of the past, and those objects were part of his study. They taught him many things—chiefly that the men of Obann’s ancient empire had powers far, far beyond our own.

“With those powers they were able to travel by land and sea, and even through the air, in the machines they learned to build. They knew how to speak with one another across vast distances, even as you and I speak face-to-face. And they had machines of war that could, in the blink of an eye, burn an enemy city to cinders.”

How often had Gallgoid heard Lord Reesh speak those very words!

“It was the desire of Lord Reesh’s whole heart to find the way back to those days, to recover ancient knowledge, to be as those men were—wise and mighty as gods. To do the things they did.

“That, he believed, was the source of the Thunder King’s great power, by which he conquered all the East. Lord Reesh believed our enemy had tapped into some of that lost knowledge, and by it grew great.

“My lord, unlike Lord Reesh, you have unlimited wealth at your disposal. How better to employ it than to search out the secrets of the past? Why, you could hire an army of scholars, explorers, and diggers to find and study ancient artifacts. Lord Reesh was sure they would eventually yield their secrets, if only he could obtain enough of them. But what he couldn’t do, my lord, you have the power

to have done for you.”

You could see it in his eyes, how this speech broke through Chutt’s fears and ignited his imagination. Chutt had always been somewhat in awe of the old First Prester. That he could be like Reesh, in any way, must not have occurred to him before.

Lord Chutt rang for his butler.

“Let’s drink to it, Gallgoid! You’ve comforted me marvelously well! Let’s drink to the ancient world and all its secrets—eh?”

The governor-general was contented now, and so was Gallgoid.

## Lord Orth's Epistle

Just east of the mountains in the Abnaks' country, First Prester Orth—who had been voted out of his position and didn't know it, but would not have been troubled by the news—waited for Chief Foxblood's runners to come back from Silvertown with a supply of decent reed paper and perhaps a few sheets of costly parchment, if it could be spared. For Orth was about to send out the most important letter he'd ever written in his life. He had already devoted much time to composing it on scraps of hide.

"To Prester Jod and Preceptor Constan, my brothers and fellow servants of God the Father of all nations, greetings and peace to you in God's name, amen.

"I deem it needful for you to know of a vision obtained, here in Abnak-land, by a young Wallekki chief named Allifar, a new disciple of our God. I believe with all my heart that the vision is true and meant for all of us; but I defer to your wisdom and to God's unfailing grace, to search out what it means."

Orth thought the vision ought best to be described in Allifar's own words, translated into Obannese. Between Hlah, the son of Spider, and Chief Foxblood, both of whom were fluent in Wallekki, a reliable translation was produced.

"I, Allifar, was sleeping in my bed when God called me

to go up into the mountain, and I went. But the night was very cold, and I had not climbed far before I had to take shelter in the lee of a great rock, and it was there that I had the vision.

“I saw a stair, as in a great king’s palace, a bright and shining stair reaching up to heaven and reaching down to earth. And on the stair, passing up and down, silently, I saw bright, beautiful beings that had faces like the faces of men; and it seemed they shimmered like reflections on a pool of water. But I could not see to the top of the stair because the light was too strong for my eyes and there were many colors in it.

“I waited for God’s voice, for I knew that He would speak; but I heard no word, no sound. And then the stair was removed, and all those bright beings, and the light went out; and I found myself shivering against the stone. That was when I knew that God had spoken—not in words, but in the things He showed me.

“And I do not know what He said, because the things I saw were more than words can say.”

Orth added, “This was foretold in ancient times by Olwyne the prophetess: ‘Because you have hardened your hearts against me, and you will not hear my voice, I will speak to a people who have not heard, and they will hear; I will make myself known to people who have not known, and they will know me.’”

Orth knew that the clergy of Obann would not accept a vision that came by a barbarian, but Jod and Constan might. They would judge it on its merits, and with prayer.

If only they could have seen Allifar, when Hlah brought him down from the mountain, half-frozen to death. If only

they could have heard his voice. There was not an Abnak in the whole camp who didn't believe that Allifar had truly seen what he said he'd seen. "We enjoy tall tales," said Foxblood, "but what kind of man would lie about a thing like this? Allifar is not that kind of a man."

But what did it mean? A stairway reaching down from Heaven to the earth, with angels passing up and down—what was it? And Orth noted that if the stairway reached down, it also reached up, from the earth to Heaven.

"A stairway connecting two worlds, Heaven and earth: spirit and flesh," Orth said to himself. "Nothing else quite like it in all the Scriptures—unless it's something I ought to be able to see, but haven't seen."

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In due time the runners came home with paper, no parchment, and news that troubled them. The pass to Silvertown was free of snow, so they made good time.

It takes a very long time for any news to get from Obann to Silvertown, if it gets there at all. Now, with spring awakening in the foothills, and Orth's thoughts turning to certain travels he might make, come summer, the runners found this news just arrived from the capital.

"Et-taa-naa-qiqu, the word is bad," the first runner said. Hlah and Foxblood waited with Orth to hear it. "In the great city far away, they have decreed that you are no longer the chief of the holy men of Obann. They have taken away your honor and given it to another."

"We grieve to tell you so!" the second runner said. "But that is what they told us in Silvertown and made us promise to tell you. They, too, grieve for it."

“No longer First Prester of Obann?” cried Hlah. “But this is our fault, for keeping you here for so long!”

They were all surprised when Orth laughed softly.

“My brothers, it’s nothing!” he said. “There was a time in my life when I would have done anything, good or evil, to be chosen First Prester. May God have mercy on me, but to win that prize, I betrayed my city—and my Temple!—to the Thunder King. The weight of that sin crushed my soul; and when Hlah found me starving in the marshes, I was no better than an idiot, consumed by fear and knowing nothing but my guilt. You remember, Hlah, my son.”

“It’s true,” said Hlah. “You’d forgotten even your own name. I thought you were a harmless madman.”

“And so I was,” Orth said, “until God finished His work in me. I suffered much, but I deserved it, and God meant it for my good and yours. I thank Him for it every day.

“As for being First Prester, I’m glad that yoke has been removed from my neck. God has given me no end of fruitful work to do out here, among you—and, I dearly hope, among the other nations of the East. Almost too much for me to take it all in! For I have a desire to take Allifar with me and visit the Wallekki, and sow the seed of God’s word in their country. And now I’m at perfect liberty to do so!”

Foxblood frowned. “The Wallekki can be dangerous,” he said. “Now that the Thunder King is gone, they will fight among themselves. It may be wiser not to visit them just yet.”

“I’ve also promised the Fazzan that I would visit them again,” said Orth. “There’s so much to do out here, one scarcely knows where to begin.”

“You are excited,” Foxblood muttered.

True, Orth thought. The whole vastness of the East lay before him, waiting for God's word—waiting for him to bring it. Just here in Abnak-land, there were Scriptures to be translated, people to be taught, reciters to be trained and ordained—"A feast too big to be eaten by one man!" Orth thought.

"I'll have to pray for guidance," he said. "But first I have some letters to write."

# How King Ryons Visited Ninneburky

Shesh's cough grew worse, and although she tried not to let it show, the cold weather was telling on Barseen. Herric made her get down from the cart and walk, as a way of keeping warm. Then at least her teeth stopped chattering. Bolli always walked with her and insisted on draping his cloak over hers.

"Bolli, you'll freeze!" she would protest.

"I don't think so," he would answer. "I am sure no one on Fogo Island has ever done this much walking—no one ever! At home, whichever way you go, you can only walk a little way before you reach the sea. I find that all this walking makes me hot." It made him hungry, too, but it would do no good to mention that. They had to make their rations last; there was no one out here to sell them more food.

Shesh wanted to walk, too, but by now any sustained effort always worsened his cough. Wishing to set a good example for the children, he never argued when Herric made him get back on the wagon and bundle up with his bedroll wrapped around his shoulders.

"Please don't worry about me!" he said. "I've survived

worse than this, and I'll get better when we get to Lintum Forest. I had a terrible fever once, on a voyage to the Fairy Islands. The captain was sure I was going to die. They were just about ready to sew me into my hammock for burial at sea, but then the fever broke and I was fine."

"Are there really fairies on the Fairy Islands, Uncle?" Barseen asked, knowing how he loved to reminisce about his voyages.

"The people that we traded with all said so. We didn't see any, because the fairies don't like to be seen. But I met an old man who said he used to go into the woods alone and made friends with some of the fairies by playing tunes to them on his hornpipe. Then they would come out and dance with him."

Bolli loved that story. "But what did they look like, Uncle? There are no fairies on our islands."

"They look like little tiny people, the man said, but all furry with red or golden hair. And they had a way of appearing out of nowhere and disappearing just as suddenly. You could never see them unless they wanted to be seen, and that wasn't very often. And their speech was like the chattering of rodents. He never did learn how to talk to them."

Herric enjoyed the stories, too, but he kept to himself his worries that they wouldn't reach the forest in time to do Shesh any good.

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It was an unexpected treat for Jack and Ellayne to see the king, the queen, and Fnaa again. They couldn't have their friends all to themselves, because the whole town

made a holiday of the royal visit. There were people to be thanked and honored—Jessa and Yergen in particular—and parades of the Ninneburky militia, inspections of the town's defenses, and a service of thanksgiving at the chamber house. "I'll make some of your speeches for you," Fnaa offered the king. "No one will ever know the difference."

"I'd be ashamed to play tricks on these people who are good to us," Ryons said. But he had no idea how to give the kind of speeches that a king should make, so all his efforts along those lines were very short and simple—which only made the people enjoy them all the more.

This was Gurun's first visit to Ninneburky, and she sighed with relief when the baroness took her away from the crowd and steered her into Roshay Bault's parlor, with strict orders to the groom to station himself at the front door and let no one but family come into the house.

"Thank you, my lady!" Gurun said, when she was settled on the couch. "I was running out of words to say to all those people."

"It must have been rather overwhelming, Your Majesty."

"Please, my lady! I am not a queen, even if people call me one. I came to Obann on a boat, because I went out fishing and a storm carried me away. Everything that's happened since was all God's work, not mine. Please just call me Gurun."

"If Ellayne grows up to be like this girl," Vannett thought, "I'll know I've been a good mother. If this is not our queen, then Obann has been cheated." Then and there, Vannett loved her. But she only said, "Well, it sounds to me like you could use some peace and quiet, Gurun. And a cup of tea, I think."

Wytt stayed under the back porch all day and night, coming out only briefly to purloin some kitchen scraps. These he shared with the old rat that had its own nest there.

The rat was troubled because the humans outside were so excited, swarming here and there like ants. And just a few days ago, there had been fighting and killing in the streets. There was still a faint aftertaste of bloodshed in the air.

“What makes them so fierce?” he would have asked, if he could talk. Even so, he and Wytt communicated in their fashion. Rats were quite intelligent, in Wytt’s estimation: in some ways, more intelligent than humans.

Wytt explained, in nothing much resembling language as we know it, that today the big people were happy they were still alive and their nests had not been destroyed. “But they know there are more bad times to come,” he made the rat to understand, “so they please themselves as they can. The things they do are hard to make sense of.”

For a few quiet minutes, they chewed companionably on bacon scraps.

King Ryons was here in Ninneburky with his hound, Cavall, and his hawk, Angel. Wytt intended to make friends with them sometime when it was quieter. Ryons also had in his company one of the gigantic flightless birds that roved the plains, killing and eating any creature in its path. Wytt was astonished to find one traveling peacefully with humans. That was Baby, raised by Perkin the wanderer from a chick that could sit in the palm of his hand. Now Baby guarded the king, and guarded him well. Wytt sensed that the monster was there for some good purpose.

Up above, in Baroness Vannett’s kitchen, humans came

and went all day, feet clumping heavily on the floor, and delicious and exciting aromas wafting down below. In spite of his vague unease, the old rat was glad the humans were so happy. It was better than having them running around killing each other: nothing a rat could do but wedge himself into the darkest corner he could find and shiver, unable to stop his ears against the sounds of war. He was very old for a rat, and he liked his surroundings to be peaceful.

“Big people don’t know how to be peaceful,” Wytt explained to him. And because rats neither tell lies themselves, nor expect to hear lies from others, the old rat accepted that as simple fact.

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After supper Jack and Ellayne went to the stables with Fnaa to share their latest adventures. They settled down by the stall that belonged to Ham, their donkey, and enjoyed a pleasant evening.

But Ryons, being king, had to stay behind with the baron and the baroness, Bassas the Wallekki, Captain Kadmel of the Ninneburky militia, and Chagadai, the chief of the king’s own bodyguard of Ghols, who had all gathered in the parlor to talk about the war that would be sure to be continued in the summer. How Ryons envied Fnaa, Jack, and Ellayne! Indeed, at times like these he envied anyone who was not a king. Being king, he had to hear this talk, even if much of it was still a bit beyond his understanding. Gurun sat beside him, and he was grateful for her being there.

“It was too bad we couldn’t have given them a harsher lesson,” Bassas said, struggling to find the words in Oban-

nese. "They'll be back in the summer. They won't see themselves as having been defeated."

"Maybe some will remember that we let them go when we could have done worse," said Roshay, "and be grateful for it. Not that gratitude would ever enter Chutt's mind."

"The siege engines would have made short work of our defenses, had they been able to get them here," Kadmel said. "I don't see how we could ever strengthen our walls enough to keep them out."

"We can't," said Roshay. No one contradicted him.

Chagadai spoke up. "It may not be so easy for that man in Obann to decide what to do. If he looks to the west, there is General Hennen to oppose him. He has you, my lord baron, in the east. And there is our army, safe in Lintum Forest where he can't get at us. And who knows what might be stirring against him in the city of Obann itself? He'd be very much a fool, if he thought that city was secure for him." Gurun translated the Ghol's words into Obannese.

"He has Gallgoid in the city to subvert his plans," Roshay said. Gallgoid had successfully contrived the escapes of both the baron and Ellayne from Lord Chutt's own house. But he hadn't been able to stop Chutt from sending out the army in the winter to attack Ninneburky.

"But what are we to do?" asked the baroness. "Just wait for the next invasion?"

"We're not strong enough to move against the city," Roshay said.

"Chutt is a crawling reptile who is not as strong as he looks!" Bassas raised his voice. "The city is full of people who hate him, and even more people who fear him and wish to be rid of him. Since he made that man Ysbott the Judge of

Obann, no one is safe. And because of that, we may indeed be strong enough to move against him.”

Ryons knew the name of Ysbott. Helki had hunted Ysbott out of Lintum Forest. What exactly the Judge of Obann might be, Ryons didn't know. But he did know, as did every man and woman in the forest, that Ysbott was an outlaw and a murderer. And he knew that the day Ysbott came within reach of Helki's rod would be Ysbott's last day on the earth.

“Is there nothing we can do?” he asked.

“Our God will show us what to do, Father, in His own good time,” said Chagadai. “He always has.”

## Tidings from the War

General Born had sent no messages since his army passed by Cardigal: not one word had Lord Chutt heard from him these ten days. He supposed it was because the army was busy besieging Ninneburky.

But then came word from the young oligarch of Cardigal, Gilvaethwy, who owed his position to Chutt and had, on other occasions, proved himself a willing tool in Chutt's various schemes. Gilvaethwy's rider came with a message, for Chutt's eyes only, in a cipher. Chutt had to take it to his office and fetch the key to the cipher out of his safe so he could read the message.

"My lord governor-general," Gilvaethwy wrote, "lest any man try to deceive you, I make bold to give you these unwelcome tidings.

"Your army has turned back without coming in sight of Ninneburky, having mutinied and placed General Born under arrest. The Heathen army came out of Lintum Forest to harass Born with cavalry, and the weather greatly slowed his army's progress. Finally, your Wallekki cavalry have betrayed you and gone over to Roshay Bault and attacked your army several times.

"My lord, I await your commands, if there is anything that you would have me do."

Chutt sat stunned.

His first thought, when he was finally capable of any thought at all, was that he had no force in the city able to cope with an army in revolt. He'd sent out with Born practically every soldier that he had, relying on Ysbott and Lord Otvar to keep order. Did he even have enough men to hold the walls and bar the gates?

Even at the outset, the move against Ninneburky was unpopular. Chutt had counted on a quick kill, Bault's town taken before any opposition in the city could be organized. Now he had a mutinous army on his hands, and no way to keep it out of the city.

His mind floundered, like a nonswimmer cast into deep and deadly water. He needed a loyal, capable military man, but had none. If the rebels decided to break into his warehouses and seize his gold, how could he prevent them?

He ground his teeth. "Think! Think!" he snarled at himself. But no thoughts were forthcoming.

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Ysbott hastened to his master's house. "Come at once!" was all the messenger could say. But his outlaw's instinct told him that something had gone wrong. That Chutt should turn to him in a crisis pleased him greatly.

Chutt pulled him into his office and locked the door after him. He'd never seen Chutt so distraught: the man's lips had gone white.

"My lord, what's the matter?"

Chutt read Gilvaethwy's message to him and went on to spew out a stream of fears approaching panic. Ysbott let him go on uninterrupted until he ran out of breath.

“Can you raise a force to defend the city?” he concluded.

“My lord, I wouldn’t want to try!” said Ysbott. “Any kind of battle is the last thing that we need.” And he thought, “That’s all it would take to turn the whole city against us.” But saying so would not be wise.

“What are we to do, then?” Chutt cried.

“My lord, if we can’t keep them out, then we’ll have to let them in,” said Ysbott.

Chutt stared at him, speechless. Ysbott had to think quickly, and with accuracy. But it was not slow thinking that had enabled him to survive so many years as an outlaw chief in a forest full of enemies.

“Sir, the only thing to do is to blame it on the weather and ply those soldiers with gold. When men are cold and hungry and tired, they’re difficult to handle. The last thing those soldiers will expect is a warm welcome and a handsome bonus—so they can eat and drink and have a good time, with all their recent hardships fading by the hour.” That was how Ysbott used to handle his men when they grew restive. Any necessary murders could be put off to a more opportune time.

“Go on,” said Chutt.

“My lord, make them believe you understand it was the weather that defeated them—that, and Bassas’ treachery. Make them hate Bassas, not you! That’ll make things so much easier for them. Chalk it all up to bad weather and treacherous Wallekki foreigners who betrayed both them and you, and sweeten it with a gold piece for every man.”

“That’s a lot of gold.” Chutt was feeling more like himself again.

“It’ll be money well spent, my lord. And you have

plenty more where that came from.”

Slowly a smile spread over Chutt’s face. He even barked out a laugh.

“It would seem that Bassas as a traitor will serve me much better than he ever did as a commander of my body-guard!” he said. “I never did get much good use of him.

“I’ll pardon them all—for the time being. I’ll reinstate Born, for which he’ll owe me his life, and honor that fool of a colonel who arrested him. And I’ll post a sweet reward for Bassas’ head. This whole disaster was all his fault. Ysbott, it was a happy day for me when I made you Judge of Obann!”

“And for me, too, my lord!” said Ysbott. He grinned: with his cheek disfigured by an ugly scar where Wytt had stabbed him with a pointed stick as he slept, it was not a pretty sight. “It gives me the greatest pleasure to serve a master after my own heart.”

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No one knows how secrets creep out from under cover and become known to a whole city. Maybe Gilvaethwy had discussed his message with someone before he had sent it on to Chutt. Whatever the case, Gallgoid heard of it before the day was out—heard it from Iva, who baked and vended sweets and rolls, who’d heard it from Jax, an old soldier, who had heard it in the barracks where he went to do chores and tell stories and pass the time: not that there were many chores to do with almost all the soldiers out on campaign. But somehow the secret had found its way into the barracks.

“There’ll be the devil to pay for this,” said the man who’d come in from the street with the news. “The whole army beaten! Couldn’t take a little town like Ninna-whatsit.

How could that happen?"

"No one but a cuss't fool marches out against a city in the winter," Jax said. "If they'd waited just a few more weeks, they would've had better weather. To be in such a hurry for such a little, no-account objective—well, Lord Gwyll would never have allowed it." Jax had served many years under Gwyll, the general who'd been killed defending the city from the Heathen.

"I still can't believe it happened!" the soldier said.

Gallgoid had warned him not to say too much, but Jax couldn't help himself.

"Have you forgotten all those prophets that they hanged for telling the truth about this city?" he snapped. "If I weren't old and half-crippled, and if it weren't blizzard season, I'd get out of here today. We've been warned again and again: God's judgment hangs over this city, and its army is not going to win any more battles."

The other man laughed, but not merrily. "Prester Jax! Now I've heard everything. You'd better keep those sermons to yourself, old man. Your words might get back to Ysbott, and then you'll have two bad legs instead of one."

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But there were people trickling out of the city. Gallgoid and his agents, secretly, were helping them. The army's absence made it easier.

Where could they go? To towns and villages up and down the river, a few to family farms—they went to wherever they might find food and shelter and some hope of earning a living.

Even so, most stayed. Come spring, Chutt's govern-

ment promised, there would be abundant, well-paid work for all who wanted it, clearing away the ruins of the Temple and the palace and beginning the construction of new and grander buildings to replace them, all paid for with the Thunder King's gold that Chutt had brought down from the mountains. And already Chutt had announced that he'd pay well for any ancient artifacts, and even better for inscriptions, so there were some who'd already begun searching for them—mostly in the foundations of houses and shops burned down by the Heathen when they broke into the city. That search would widen when warmer weather came.

Tonight one thing troubled Gallgoid. In light of the news of the army's failure, why had Lord Chutt not sent for him?

"By all means do your best to spread the bad news," he'd instructed Jilly, a maidservant who was his second-in-command. "But do it carefully. I need some time to consider our response. Chutt hasn't summoned me to ask for advice, and that's unusual."

"Ysbott went to him this afternoon," Jilly said. "He was seen. He spent the better part of two hours at Chutt's house."

Gallgoid nodded. Four hours had gone by since that meeting.

"Does that worry you?" he asked. He had learned to trust Jilly's instincts.

"Only if it worries you, sir."

"Too early to tell," he answered.

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Born's army, with its general under arrest, was by now past Cardigal and making good time back to Obann City—

much better time, Born reflected with some bitterness, than it had made on its way to Ninneburky.

“Chutt will hang the both of us, you know,” he said to Frowley, “me for a failure and you for a traitor. It’s folly to go back!”

“There’s no other place for all these men to go: they’re already on half-rations,” Frowley said. “We can’t abandon them out here. Not even if it costs us our lives. Do you want this army to turn into raiders and looters?”

“They’ll manage. Their officers know the way home! Great heavens, man! Do you want to die? He won’t kill me and spare you.”

“This campaign was finished when our cavalry deserted us, General. I will do my duty as a soldier.”

“And you’re a fool!” hissed Born. He’d promoted the man to colonel when, alone among an army brought very near to panic, it was Frowley who stood fast and killed the monstrous beast that had attacked the camp. “What could be worse,” he now asked himself, “than a fool who sacrifices himself—and me!—because he thinks it’s his duty?” Such a sense of honor had no place outside of fairy tales.

“I won’t argue with you,” Frowley said, and walked out of the tent.

All was peaceful in the camp, bedded down for the night with more sentries posted than Born had ever seen fit to authorize. Somewhere out there, King Ryons’ cavalry kept watch, making sure the army continued on its way to Obann City. They stayed out of sight, too wise to provoke a confrontation.

For the army had not been defeated in a stand-up battle, Frowley mused. He kept his ears open, always alert

to changes in the men's morale. They were frustrated, not beaten. They would welcome a chance to come to grips with any enemy. But they were also cold, weary, and on short rations. Come what may, he thought, it was time to bring them home.

# A Blizzard on the Plains

Orth's epistles to Jod and Constan had a long way to go, much longer than he knew. For the safety of the Scriptures, both had fled to Durmurot, as far west as anyone could go.

There Constan directed all the seminary students from Obann, a strong hundred of them, in making fresh copies of the Old Books to be sent to chamber houses all throughout the land.

"For God's own word has been set free," he would exhort them, "to be given to all His children in the world." This was the mission of the Temple—a Temple, as First Prester Orth had declared, made without hands, whose roof was the heavens, whose floor was the earth, whose fittings were all God's people everywhere, and within which dwelt God's spirit. "This great work will go on beyond our lifetimes: do not expect to see it finished. But it will bear good fruit even as we plant it, and that we can expect to see." It was the longest speech that anyone could remember hearing from him, and he gave it many times.

He left the worrying to Prester Jod.

"Sooner or later," Jod confided in General Hennen, "Chutt's hired clergy in Obann will try to stop us. We will be forced to disobey them, if we wish to remain faithful to

our calling.”

“I’m recruiting and training troops as best I can,” said Hennen, “but if Chutt comes here in force, well.” He shook his head. “And they can destroy the books faster than Constan’s scribes can copy them.”

“They will not be able to jail the Word of God, no matter what they do,” Jod said. “It may be the word will blossom in the East, and in little corners of Obann where they never thought to look for it. God will defend us, General.”

“He’ll have to,” Hennen said.

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Most of King Ryons’ army was already back in Lintum Forest before anyone noticed that Helki had slipped away from them.

“I wish I knew how he does that,” said Zekelesh, chief of the Fazzan. “A big man like him, you’d think he’d make a lot of noise, plowing through the underbrush.” He turned to Obst, the army’s teacher. “Did he say anything to you about going off on his own?”

“You ought to know by now—he wouldn’t.” Obst, the oldest man there, had been a hermit for more years than he could count, before he found himself called to guide Jack and Ellayne to Bell Mountain. He’d believed, at the time, that when the children rang the ancient bell atop the summit, it would ring in the end of the world. “The world’s still here,” he thought, “but God is changing it.”

“I know how Helki feels,” he said. “Do you know how many times I’ve wished I could go back to living as a hermit—no company but the Scriptures and my prayers?”

“We wouldn’t let you,” Zekelesh said. “There’s still too

much you have to teach us.”

“And too much more for the Scriptures to teach me,” said Obst. “But you can trust that Helki has a good reason for going ahead on his own. Whether he’ll tell us what it was, when he returns, is more than I know.”

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Not even to Helki would Lintum Forest yield up all its secrets. Even for him, who knew the forest better than any man had ever known it, there were places yet to be explored, and others that would never be explored.

Where he stood at the moment, the tall, straight oaks around him, leafless in the winter, might have suggested the pillars of a great cathedral, shrouded in shadow. But Helki had never been in such a building. And he saw, by a multitude of little signs that you would miss, that winter’s grip was broken: the trees would soon be coming into bud, then leaf. Already, a short distance away, blue bawns were calling, each staking a claim to nesting territory.

This was near the western limit of the forest, facing Obann City far across the grey and yellow plain that would soon be turning green. What exactly drew him here today, Helki would have been hard put to say, but any animal or bird would understand it. You stayed alive in the forest by heeding its unspoken promptings.

“Snow’s coming,” he thought, as he looked up to the sky, “and it’ll be heavy on the plains. Not quite so heavy here, but I hope someone will have the sense to tell King Ryons not to try to travel till it stops.”

He’d seen Obann, and now in his mind’s eye he saw it again, vast and high and brooding, held by Ryons’ ene-

mies—and under God’s stern judgment, all the prophets said. How far, he wondered, was far enough, to be safe from the evil that was hatching in that city? The west wind brought him just the faintest whiff of it. Anyone else would have dismissed that as imagination, but not Helki.

Something rustled in the underbrush, and out crept a little animal, grey with pale white stripes and a bristly black mane, like nothing more than a miniature horse no bigger than a fox. It saw Helki and froze, staring at him with shining brown eyes, and then, without a sound, retreated backward into shelter. He’d seen a few of them before, but only here and there: another of those strange animals that God had brought into the world in recent years. Helki knew its presence here meant people were absent from this part of the forest: no stray outlaws for him to hunt.

He would scout this area for another day or two. Everything you could learn about the forest had value. The snowstorm, when it came, had little chance of hurting him.

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“I don’t like the look of that sky,” said Heric.

Their sister having been swept out to sea by a storm she hadn’t expected, the boys had learned to pay closer attention to the weather. Shesh, too, had a weather eye.

“At sea this would be the time to shorten sail, tie everything down that might be moved, and pray for the best,” he said from the back of the wagon, where he sat bundled in his bedroll.

“It’ll snow soon,” Bolli agreed.

“Can we not take shelter somewhere in that hill?” Barseen asked. She pointed to a flat-topped hill that they would

otherwise pass by. "It's the only place that isn't flat and open, and it's close."

Herric turned the horses. They'd passed several hills like this without exploring any. If Shesh weren't sick, Herric would have chosen to bypass this one, too. But they had to get the man out of the weather, and there was nothing but the hill that offered any hope of doing it.

"I've always thought there was something strange about those hills," Barseen said. The wind had picked up and kept blowing her black hair into her face as she walked with Bolli beside the horses. "Why do they all have flat tops? The hills in Arachosia have round tops."

"We won't be going to the top," said Herric. "We must find a crack or a cave in the side—big enough, I pray, for all of us. But Bolli and I can pitch our tent outside, if need be."

The sky grew darker as they neared the hill. Now they saw, thankfully, that the hill was full of cracks and clefts. It would be easy to climb, Herric thought. He and Bolli were used to climbing rocky sea cliffs to gather gannet eggs.

"Are we traveling along what's left of a road?" said Barseen. In a few places the grass had worn away, revealing patches of black gravel, cracked and crumbling.

"If it is a road," said Shesh, "it may well lead us to just the kind of place we seek. By all means, follow it." Then his cough overcame him, and he said no more.

Had Perkin the wanderer been with them, he would have pointed to an area where centuries of rain had washed downhill, gradually laying bare the road. He would have seen where great chunks of earth had broken off, opening long-buried cavities. But up in the driver's seat, Herric saw those cavities, too, and, without knowing what they were,

urged the horses to a little greater speed, straight for what appeared to be the biggest one.

“There’s room for all of us in there—and for the cart and horses, too!” Barseen cried. The first of the snowflakes had just begun to fall. “Well done, Herric, to get us here in time.”

Rubble lay in heaps before the cave, and all the children, working hard enough to sweat despite the cold, only just managed to clear enough away for the cart to pass.

And then they were inside the cave—standing upon, of all things, a perfectly smooth and level floor.

The walls of the cave were tiled, and the ceiling rested on a host of straight, rectangular pillars.

“This is no natural cave!” Barseen said. “People made this floor and walls, long ages ago. Look—there’s writing on the walls, and on the pillars.” But it was in an ancient Obanese script, faint and mostly worn away, and none of them could read it.

Bolli peered into the darkness. “It looks like it goes a long way into the hill, this cave,” he said.

“But we won’t,” Herric said. “Let’s set up the tents before it gets too dark to see.”

It was already too dark to see much, Bolli thought. Once you passed through the opening, the space seemed to extend in all directions. Was the whole hill hollow? How could that be?

Up went the tents, and there was just time for Shesh to start a little fire with his tinderbox. The sticks and coals they carried in the cart were almost used up, and they’d had no chance to find more. Out came the rations, and down came the snow. They were close enough to the entrance to see it pouring down.

“We wouldn’t have gone too far in that,” said Herric, “but it’s nice to look at from in here.”

“It’s late in the season: this snow will melt soon,” Shesh said. “In the northern part of our country, this is the kind of snowstorm that they often get. It shouldn’t hold us up for long—”

But then he coughed again, and the echo of it was terrible. By the time the echo died away, it had compelled the travelers to silence.

Until the horses nickered uneasily.

“There’s something in here with us,” said Barseen. “The horses know. If they can’t hear it or see it, they can smell it.”

They all strained their ears, not daring to speak. Barseen thought she might have heard a deep breath drawn—“But it might be one of us.” Shesh drew his sailor’s knife from its sheath—a working knife, not really suited for a weapon. The brothers each had the little penknives all Fogo Islanders carry for cutting fishing lines and other small chores: not much use as weapons. “In short,” thought Herric, “we have nothing to defend ourselves!”

They all heard something move in the darkness.

“Who goes there!” Shesh cried.

“I was about to ask you that question,” came the answer.

# A Voice in the Darkness

It was just a voice in the darkness. There was no one to be seen.

Barseen spoke up. Her Obannese was better than her companions', so it had become their habit to let her speak for them. Whatever oddities might be heard in her speech could be put down to being from Durmurot.

"We are peaceful travelers taking shelter from the storm. Come and sit with us by the fire. We do no harm."

"Oh, well—why not?"

It was a woman. She had a throaty voice that might have belonged to a man. At first she looked elderly, but as she came into the light, Barseen saw that her face didn't quite go with her hair, a mop of greying curls. "She's no older than my mother," Barseen thought.

She sat down between Shesh and Heric, brought her hands out from under a woolen shawl, and said, "Aah! I don't mind telling you I'm glad of company. Been here for ages, all alone."

"We are going to Lintum Forest," said Barseen. She introduced them.

"Your accent is peculiar," said the woman, "and two of you are dark, and two are very fair. You are unusual! That makes you interesting."

“A woman alone in a cave is rather interesting, too,” Shesh said, with a slight cough.

“I came because I heard you coughing. That’s a nasty cough you have, and it’s providential that you’ve met me. My name is Tam. My father was a physician in Obann City, and he taught me all he knew before he died.”

“But isn’t Obann very far away?” Bolli couldn’t help asking. “What brought you all the way out here?”

She smiled. “The same thing that brought you, young man. I want to go to Lintum Forest. That’s where the king is, and I want to be with him. But the winter forced me to stop here.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, good lady, what is this place?” said Heric. He wasn’t sure how to address her politely. At home in Fogo, he would have called her “elder sister.” “It seems a strange sort of cave.”

“That’s because it’s not a cave,” Tam said. “It used to be a city, or part of a city. This hill is what’s left of it. I suppose it was ruined in the Day of Fire, a thousand years ago. It’s full of bones, and no one lives here but a lot of creatures that scuttle around in the dark and never let you see them. I think they must be the little hairy ones mentioned in the Scriptures.”

“I will give your cities to the hairy ones, and they shall dance therein.’ As Prophet Ika said,” Barseen quoted from the verse.

“A girl who knows the Scriptures!” Tam said. “Even more interesting. But you have not yet told me where you come from.”

The boys exchanged looks with Barseen. Both Prester Jod and General Hennen had warned them to be very care-

ful of what they said to people that they met. “You won’t be safe until you’re in Lintum Forest with your sister and the king.” Prester Jod had said that most emphatically.

But they hated to lie, having had so little practice in it.

“We come from Durmurot,” said Heric: not quite a lie, but not quite the truth, either. He was saved from having to make up a story by another coughing fit by Shesh.

“This won’t do,” said Tam. She made Shesh lean over so she could press an ear against his back. She tapped him with her fingers, listening for whatever there was for a healer to hear. Then she listened to his chest and peered intently into his open mouth.

“You’ll have to come with me,” she said. “There’s a draft here. My camp will be safer for you, and I’ve collected herbs that I can brew into a tonic for you to drink. That, and several days’ unbroken rest, should put you right. But you’ll have to sleep sitting up—no lying down. Come on, all of you. Bring torches, or you’ll bump into things. The horses can stay here for now.”

“Our rations—” Heric started to say.

“Never mind. I’ve collected plenty of food. The important thing is to get this man warm and rested and pour some tonic into him. Another day or two outdoors, and it would have been too late for him. Up now, all of you, and let’s go. We can come back for your tents later, but bring your bed-rolls with you now.”

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It was milder weather, east of the mountains, and Orth could hardly wait to start his journeys.

First, he would visit the Fazzan because he’d promised

them, and then, the Wallekki country in company with Allifar. He had high hopes for his enterprise.

“You had better cool your blood,” Foxblood said. “I think the Fazzan will be happy to see you again, but from what I hear, Wallekki-land is in turmoil. There are still mar-dars there, a few of them, hanging on to power, pretending that there’s still a Thunder King. And the clans are feuding as if to make up for lost time! There’s danger there and plenty of it. And meanwhile there’s more than enough work here for ten of you to do.”

This was friendship speaking, and Orth knew it.

“When I consented to come here to preach to the Abnaks as they fought for their freedom and their lands, there were those who thought I was insane for doing so—that I’d never come back, that I was throwing my life away.” Certainly Hlah had thought so, but Orth saw no need to mention that. “But God meant it for good, and has not great good been accomplished here? You and I are brothers now, and many of the people have heard the Word of God and embraced it.”

“That’s because we Abnaks are much more reasonable and open-minded than the Wallekki,” Foxblood said. It made Orth smile.

“According to most people in Obann,” he answered, “Abnaks are bloodthirsty savages. But we both know how wrong they are about that! As for what the Abnaks think of the Obannese—need we discuss it?”

“This is the time, my brother: the gift of God, a door made open for the preaching of His word throughout the East. Such a time has never been before and may not come again. I want to go through that door while it is open.”

Foxblood shrugged and said no more.

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Orth's epistles, carried by two disciples who were among Foxblood's most resourceful men, made their way west. By now, borne by the river on a stout canoe, they had already made their way to Ninneburky. And, held up by the weather, King Ryons and his escort were still there.

Instructed to present themselves to Roshay Bault and ask for his assistance, the messengers rejoiced to see the king again. But what they learned there troubled them.

"Jod and Constan have left Obann and fled to Durmurot?" they cried. "But where is that?" And when Roshay told them, one exclaimed, "But that's the very edge of the world!"

"Hardly," said Roshay, "but it is as far as you can go without running into the sea. Obann City isn't safe for them anymore, and it won't be safe for you. You'll have to give it a wide berth. But I'll provide you with a guide who's been to Durmurot—if I can find one."

The king and queen and all the baron's household were eager to learn how Lord Orth fared among the Abnaks. They brought the two messengers into Roshay's parlor, which was like nothing that those men had ever seen in all their lives. Polished hardwood floor, assorted furniture and decorations: they could have sat there all day without a word, marveling at their surroundings. But there were words that needed to be spoken, and they had just enough Obannese to speak them.

"Chieftain," said one, "we have word from Et-taa-naa-qiqu"—the name "Orth" is very hard for Abnaks to pronounce—"that you should read his letters because they are

very important. He thought maybe you might wish to write a letter, too.”

Roshay took the letters, unfolded them, and read them aloud. When he'd finished, the room was silent.

“If Orth doesn't know the meaning of this vision,” said Roshay, “I don't know what can be expected from any of us. No wonder he sends it on to Jod and Constan.”

Listening, King Ryons' mind raced. He himself had once experienced a vision—it seemed so long ago now, but really it wasn't—in which he'd met his ancestor, Ozias, the last rightful king of Obann, God's chosen, and feasted with him and all the great kings of ancient days in a great hall in the heart of Lintum Forest. He had a red streak in his hair to show for it, which Obst said was a sign from God confirming the vision.

Allifar's vision, described in the epistles, excited Ryons beyond words; and everyone in the parlor was looking at him now because they knew that something rather like this had happened to him, and they were waiting for him to speak of it—as if he could show them wisdom.

Gurun came to his rescue.

“When we went to the Thunder King's fortress of Kara Karram,” she said, “it was a messenger from heaven who showed us its destruction. That was a true vision, and we understood it.

“It seems to me that we must do everything we can to make sure that Prester Jod and Constan receive these messages, and pray that they will be able to tell us what the vision means. And the sooner, the better—although it is a long way from here to Durmurot.”

“For that we'll need riders, not walkers,” said Roshay,

“the best and hardiest riders we can find. Maybe a couple of Bassas’ men.”

Ryons found his voice. “My Ghols are the best riders in the world,” he said—they had to strain to hear him—“and if it can be done, they’ll do it.”

“Et-taa-naa-qiqu says we are to do whatever the chief Roshay commands,” an Abnak said. “He did not know the king and his men would be here, too.”

“What our father the king commands, we will do,” said Chagadai. It was meant as a hint.

Ryons hated to give commands. These were all grown men, and he was just a boy. But his chiefs loved to steer him into positions where he was forced to give commands. It was how they were training him to be a king.

“Our riders would have the best chance of getting there,” Chagadai said, “and no one could do it any faster.”

Besides, Ryons thought, Ghols know how to live off the land where anyone else would starve. And some of them were already known to Prester Jod, from when they’d served the king in Obann City.

“Let Kutchuk go—he speaks some Obannese,” Ryons said, “and let him choose his own companion. And they must take great care to come back to us!” He had only fifty Ghols, and every one of them was dear to him.

“We should make copies of the letters,” Roshay added; and to the Abnaks, “I’ll give you a letter to take back to Lord Orth. Much has happened in Obann that he will need to know.”

# How the Army Returned to Obann

Lord Chutt ordered the East Gate opened wide and declared a public holiday to welcome the army back to the city. In light of the failure of the campaign, this took Gallgoid by surprise.

It was not the first time Chutt had surprised him; and every time it happened, it reminded him that Chutt was not quite the fool that Lord Reesh had always made him out to be. He would have to be even more careful in his dealings with the man.

Each soldier in the army had already been paid a new gold coin as a bonus—the last thing anyone had expected. Chutt had sent out a cart full of money to meet the army a day's march from the city and the chief of the treasury to distribute it.

No one was more astonished than General Born when the treasurer read the order reinstating him as commander of the army and at the same time thanking Frowley for his services and confirming his promotion to colonel. So it was Born who led the army through the gate, with Frowley at his side.

“This is more of his politics,” he said to Frowley, as they passed through the gate. “We’re marked men, the both of us. The nooses for our hanging have already been tied.”

But the streets today were lined with citizens, cheering the safe return of husbands, fathers, and brothers, and relieved by Lord Chutt’s unexpected clemency.

“After this welcome,” Frowley said, “it would look exceedingly strange if the governor-general were to punish us.”

“He is an exceedingly strange man,” said Born. How strange, he’d never realized until now.

It is hard to cheer for an army that has been defeated, so there wasn’t much cheering in the streets. The army was to assemble on Government Plaza, there to be reviewed by the High Council, with the First Prester offering up a prayer of thanksgiving for its safe return and afterward a speech by Chutt. The councilors were waiting on a platform draped with flags. City officials, including Gallgoid, sat in a row in front of the platform.

“Could Chutt himself have possibly thought of this?” Gallgoid wondered. But who else could have, and to whom would Chutt have listened?

When the soldiers were lined up in companies, Lord Otvar rose and spoke his prayer. He made a point of omitting any mention of an enemy. Gallgoid wished he could see Chutt’s reaction to that, but from where he sat, it wasn’t possible.

The prayer was brief, and then Chutt rose to make his speech. Thousands wondered, intently, what he was going to say.

“Soldiers of Obann, welcome home!

“I have read the reports of your commanding officers, and I know it was the unseasonably harsh weather that kept you from reaching your objective. No men could have done more. And the nation thanks you, and I thank you, for your hard work and your courage.

“I was at fault for asking you to do what no one could do. Your general did everything in his power to carry out the mission, but no man can command the weather! I pray you will forgive me for my error.

“But even if we’d been granted better weather, you could not have expected, nor could I, that our cavalry, commanded by the traitor, Bassas, would have deserted us. Someday he will pay for that! And with his life. It was his treason, even more so than the weather, which caused your mission to fall short of success.

“Well, we shall raise and train new cavalry, three or four of ours to every one of theirs, and then we shall see how Bassas prospers!

“But for the time being, we shall enjoy the blessings of peace. I will soon have another kind of mission for you, one that will entail no hardship, no risk of wounds or death, and those who succeed in it will be well paid. Until then, rest, recuperate, and enjoy your bonus money. And again, we, the High Council of Obann, say thank you.”

For a long moment no one in the plaza seemed to know what to think. Chutt’s graciousness had utterly disarmed them: no one blamed or censured, no one demoted, no one executed. Well, Bassas had been blamed, but certainly no one would waste a thought on him. And bonuses! The men had the money in their pockets: Gallgoid saw a few of them feel to make sure it was still there.

And then Frowley stepped forward and saluted the council with his sword; and all the soldiers cheered, loudly and lustily. Whatever fears they might have had, Lord Chutt had banished. And the rest of the city now cheered with them.

Gallgoid caught a fleeting glimpse of Ysbott smirking, and knew whom Lord Chutt's adviser had been.

"Another man I must never underestimate," he thought.



With his Ghols to guard him and a detachment of the baron's mounted militia, King Ryons departed from Ninneburky. The blizzard Helki had expected had come and gone, steadily losing force as it moved east.

Ryons rode with Gurun and Fnaa. Jack and Ellayne came along on Martis' horse, Dulayl, to keep the king company for part of the way.

"He'll be a grown man sooner than you think," Roshay Bault counseled them, "and his greatest need, always, will be loyal and intelligent servants, faithful and true. I think that's what the two of you will be. You're growing up fast. I'll teach you everything I can, but it won't be enough. Pick up wisdom wherever you can find it."

To that end, he'd promised to let them visit Lintum Forest later in the spring. "And while you're there—listen! Listen to Obst, to Helki, and to the chieftains who advise the king. There is wisdom worth having! Worth even more than swords, I daresay."

Vannett quoted from Sychas the Mighty, in the Book of Royal Prophets: "By the wisdom and the faithfulness of many counselors is the throne upheld, and the king

instructed to do wisely.' King Ryons' advisers will grow old someday. You must be ready to take your place beside him."

The thought of people growing old, and having to yield place to younger men and women, was not one that the children found easy to grasp, nor comfortable.

"Imagine Martis as an old man in a rocking chair!" Ellayne said.

"Or Helki!" said Jack. "But I can't. I just can't."

"At least Obst's already old. But he seems stronger now than he did when we first met him." Obst had nearly died on the climb up Bell Mountain.

Ryons found the thought even more uncomfortable.

"What would I do without my chiefs?" he said. "They always know what to do! And I don't."

"Be of good cheer, my king," Gurun said. "If I can learn to ride a horse, you can learn to be a king. You'll have Jack and Ellayne, and Fnaa, and me to help you. And you'll always have the Scriptures. No one can say you've done badly so far!"

So they rode south together, and halfway to the forest, Jack and Ellayne and the militia men turned back to home, to Ninneburky.

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The morning came gleaming on a field of pure white snow. As Shesh had predicted, the weather was already getting warmer.

"It's as if the winter, having thrown one last snowstorm at us, is satisfied with its work and ready to move on," Tam said, and she and the children stood gazing at the landscape from the entrance of the cave. They'd fed and watered the

horses, struck and rolled up the tents, and were ready to return to Tam's camp, deeper inside the hill. There they'd left Shesh sleeping, wrapped in his bedroll and propped against a pillar. "If he lies down," Tam had explained, "the sickness will settle in his chest. We don't want that."

The tonic that she'd given him last night soon quieted his cough, once he'd won the struggle to drink it down. "I've never tasted anything so awful in my life!" he said. "Indeed, it's so horrible, it's almost good. And I can feel it already loosening my chest on its way down."

With the aid of a lamp, they threaded their way through a maze of pillars. "We can't go much farther than my camp," Tam said. "The ceiling's fallen in."

"Have you been here long?" Barseen asked.

"Long enough to feel a powerful desire to be somewhere else. When your uncle's well enough, we'll leave."

She had a goodly heap of firewood, but their campfire was just barely big enough to see by. Shesh still slept, and they took care not to wake him.

"I spend as much time as I can outside; otherwise, I mostly sit around in the dark. Mustn't waste fuel. I've tried to explore this place, but it's much too easy to get lost."

"If you don't mind my asking," Herric said, "why did you decide to go to Lintum Forest?"

Tam gave him a shrewd look. "I could ask the same of you," she said. "It's obvious you're keeping secrets from me, probably because you think you have to. I think we're better off trusting one another."

"I left Obann because the city's going bad, and a lot of its people with it. Prophets warned us, and the government hanged them for it. King Ryons rescued us all from

the Thunder King. It was a miracle, and everybody saw it. You'd think it would have made them change their ways, but it didn't. They didn't want the king God gave them, and so he had to leave.

"My husband died in the war, and my two daughters are married to money-grubbing louts who taught them to be as bad as they are. The king's enemies have set themselves up as our rulers. Oh, it's a long story! So when Prester Jod said it was God's will that His people leave the city, I took him at his word. I'm sure King Ryons won't turn away a healer—if I ever get there. With all of us traveling together, I think I will.

"And now I'd like to hear your story, having trusted you with mine. The truth, now! I'll be able to tell if you are lying."

With Hennen's warnings still fresh in their minds, Heric and Barseen exchanged troubled looks. But Bolli spoke up.

"I think the lady's right—we ought to trust her," he said. "But you will find the truth very hard to believe."

"Try me," said Tam.

Telling their stories took all day. At least it seemed like all day long to Bolli—hard to tell how much time had passed, just sitting in the shadows. They paused when Shesh woke up, and Tam gave him another dose of tonic and listened again to whatever she could hear inside his chest.

"You already sound a little better," she said. "We're telling stories, if you can stay awake. Are you hungry?"

"Not very."

"Then you can eat a little later, when we have our rations. For the time being, there's trappers' tea." This grows practically everywhere in Obann, and all you had to do was

crush the leaves and add boiling water. A soft, sweet fragrance drifted up from it.

Shesh helped with the story-telling. Tam had many questions and wanted to hear the travelers speak their own languages.

“Your talk sounds like some of the verses in the Old Books,” she said to the boys.

“It’s very like the old language of the Scriptures,” Barseen said. “If you can speak Old Obannese, Herric and Bolli can understand most of what you say.”

“Your Obannese is a little better than theirs,” Tam said, and to Shesh, “but yours is barbarous.

“Your land of Arachosia, the Scriptures tell us, lay far away across the sea and was friendly to Obann in days of old, but nothing has been heard of it since the Day of Fire. You certainly don’t look like anyone born in Obann, although you could be from somewhere in the East. The country’s full of Heathen stragglers—all that’s left of the great army that King Ryons chased away from the city.”

“You don’t believe us, then?” Barseen said.

“It’s possible you’re spies sent out by Lord Chutt to spy on the king in Lintum Forest.” Tam made a face. “But it seems more possible that you’ve told me nothing but the truth. Who would ever make up a story about coming here over the sea! So until I know otherwise, I will believe you. Besides, neither Chutt nor any of his sycophants have the wit to invent any of the tales you’ve told me.”

“What is a sycophant?” asked Bolli; and for some reason, that made her laugh.

# The Army's New Mission

Orth was alarmed when his messengers came back so soon, but it cheered him to know that two Ghols now carried his epistles much faster on horseback than the Abnaks could have gone on foot. A letter from Roshay Bault explained it.

The letter also contained other news that was not so heartening.

“Jod and Constan have had to flee all the way out to Durmurot, beside the sea,” Orth told Foxblood. “The king is safe in Lintum Forest with his army, but Lord Chutt has already tried once to capture Ninneburky. Bad weather forced his army to turn back, but the baron is sure he’ll try again.”

“We’ll send warriors to help the baron,” Foxblood said. “I’d be ashamed if less than a thousand men agreed to follow me. And you’ll come, too, to pray for us.”

Orth almost blurted out, “No! I will not go!” The violence of his feeling surprised him. He fought it down and said, “This is a time for planting, not pulling up: planting the seed of God’s word throughout the East. Why else has He brought me here?”

“But you have planted it—right here in Abnak country,” Foxblood said. “I know nothing about planting. We

gather what grows all around us. And I'm as a babe, compared to you, when it comes to knowing God. There, Et-taanaa-qiqu, it's you who are the chief. But I do think we ought to help the baron."

Orth shrugged. "Obann is in a bad way," Roshay had written. "They mean to rebuild the Temple and have everything back the way it was, and they have the gold to do it. They even have the Thunder King's mask, dug out, somehow, from the ruins of his hall at the Golden Pass. I fear for our country's future." Orth couldn't imagine how to answer that.

"My journey east will be a long one," he said, "and our preparations for it must be thorough. Now is not the time to put them off."

"If you say so," Foxblood answered, but his face showed that his heart wasn't in that answer.

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Kutchuk and his companion, Ogadai, rode like the wind across the plains. The Ghols' horses are bred for this, as are the Ghols themselves. They rode all day, eating and drinking in the saddle. They'd never been to Durmurot, but they knew that once they'd safely bypassed Obann City, all they had to do was follow the river into the West, and it would take them there. Both had learned enough Obannese to deliver Orth's epistles and explain the situation.

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In the great city of Obann, Lord Chutt had let it be known that he would pay gold for any ancient artifacts dating from before the Day of Fire. It would not be hard to

date these objects, because they were made of materials that were never used again after the destruction of the Empire. It was not uncommon to find little broken bits while digging in kitchen gardens or breaking up the foundation of an unwanted building. But to find a whole object was rare.

Suddenly there was no one who wanted to desert the city anymore—not when there were new gold pieces to be had, for anyone who was lucky in his search.

“Everybody’s digging!” Gallgoid wrote to Prester Jod. “You remember, Prester, how one of those ancient engines brought here by Goryk Gillow utterly destroyed the palace in a burst of flame. You were there; you saw it. We might have lost the whole city, if it hadn’t rained torrentially that day.

“It is as if a madness has descended on the people, a greed for gold that has blotted out their memory of that disaster.”

A summons from Lord Chutt kept him from finishing the letter that afternoon.

Born had been summoned, too—the general of Obann, unpunished, against all expectations, for his failure to capture Ninneburky. Chutt received them in his office at his home, behind closed doors.

“I’m sure you’ve both been wondering about the new mission I’ve selected for the army,” he said. He seemed utterly pleased with himself, Gallgoid thought. Born could not quite hide his own uneasiness, surely wondering, “What will it be this time?”

“Just across the river,” Chutt said, “in plain sight every day, as big as a mountain, lies the ruins of Old Obann, untouched and uninhabited. As great as our city is, this was

far greater. Not even the Day of Fire could erase it from the earth. And so it has sat for a thousand years, shunned for all this time.”

“There’s no reason for anyone to go there,” Born said. “The people have a superstitious dread of it.”

“That’s why it’s going to be the army’s next objective,” said Chutt, grinning. “Whatever might be found there has lain untouched for centuries.

“Not even Lord Reesh ever thought of mining Old Obann, sifting the rubble, digging out the ruins for secrets of the past—our mighty past, when the great men of Obann were like gods.” He laughed. “Reesh was content to pick up whatever little odds and ends might come his way, ignoring the likely treasure trove that’s just across the river. But if the ancient knowledge can’t be dug out of Old Obann, then it won’t be found anywhere. I wonder why the old man never thought of that! Eh, Gallgoid?”

“I don’t know, my lord.” Toward the end of his time in Obann, before the invasion of the Heathen swept aside every other consideration, Lord Reesh had been acutely interested in Old Obann. Someone had discovered something there, something of profound importance. What that was, and who had obtained it, Reesh had never said, not even to Gallgoid. But Chutt knew nothing of this, and Gallgoid chose not to enlighten him. “I think, maybe, he was afraid.”

“Well, I’m not!” said Chutt. “That’s why I’m going to send the army in to search the place from top to bottom. It is to be done systematically, and thoroughly, and as orderly as possible. Any soldier who finds an artifact, any artifact, will be rewarded. And any man who finds something and

tries to keep it for himself will be put to death. That, my lord general, is your army's new mission. You will see that it's carried out painstakingly. The High Council will issue a formal order in due course, but I want you to start organizing it today. Any questions?"

"What kind of artifacts will we be looking for?" was all that Born could think to say.

"Anything!" Chutt said. "Everything you find will be turned over to Lord Otvar and his scholars, who will study it intently." Gallgoid suppressed a smile: all the best scholars had followed Jod to Durmurot. "The past will yield up its secrets, if only we work hard enough to pry them out. Don't try to decide whether some object is important. You can leave that to the scholars."

Gallgoid could almost read Born's mind: "Tons and tons of worthless trash!" Even Lord Reesh's own collection, some might say, had been no more than an assortment of silly little curios. Reesh had had nothing in his collection that worked—that did anything.

But Goryk Gillow's artifact had blasted the whole palace into rubble.

Chutt dismissed them shortly afterward, and Gallgoid walked with Born a little ways.

"People say the old city's haunted," Born said. "I'm sure a lot of the troops believe it."

"Worry more about old stone structures falling down when they're disturbed," said Gallgoid.

"You knew Lord Reesh. Why was he so interested in those old things? What did he expect to get out of them?"

"Power," Gallgoid said. "And knowledge. But I was only one of his secretaries. He didn't share too many of his

thoughts with me.”

Which was a lie, but Born didn't know it.

# How Fnaa Went Down in History

As Shesh rested and got better, and Tam tended him, Heric announced a desire to explore. “What’s on top of the hill?” he asked. “Why is it so flat?”

“I’ve never been up there,” Tam said, “and it’s flat because it’s not a natural hill.”

“We want to climb it.”

“Be my guest.”

Barseen went with the two boys. It felt good just to be outside. The snow lay melting in the sun; the air was refreshingly cool but not too cold. Barseen’s experience in climbing cliffs was nil. “But this will be an easy climb,” said Heric, “and we’ll get you to the top. We ought to be able to see for miles and miles up there.”

She didn’t find it an easy climb at all, what with patches of ice and frozen snow, earth that crumbled when she put her weight on it, and clumps of grey grass that pulled right out when you tried to use it as a handhold. And it was steep, too. But Heric and Bolli went up as easily as flies on a wall, continually reaching down to pull her up the tricky spots. It wasn’t so bad, she thought, once you knew what you were

doing. She managed the last few yards without assistance, and soon all three stood at the brink of the cliff, peering out over the plain shining with reflected sunbeams.

“It’s beautiful!” Barseen said. “My uncle ought to climb up here when he’s all better. The view from here will help him plot our course.”

“If he doesn’t fall down,” said Bolli.

“Nonsense! Seamen are all good climbers. They have to be. How else would they get up to the masthead?” But Fogo Island boats are too small to have mastheads.

They turned around and saw a landscape of dried-out shrubbery and stunted trees, with here and there the fragment of a broken wall still standing.

“There really was a city here, long ago,” Herric said. “Let’s go on to the west side and see if we can see Lintum Forest in the distance.”

“It must have been a mighty city once,” Bolli said. “Like Durmurot, I guess.”

Chunks of rock littered the ground, all that remained of ancient buildings. “There are some very old buildings in Rakkis,” Barseen said, “made of the same kind of stone as this—if it really is stone. My father says it’s not really stone at all, but a special material that the ancients knew how to make. They could shape it as they pleased, he says. Those buildings are very, very old, and mostly crumbling. It’s not safe—”

A low growl interrupted her.

Crouched on a slab of smooth stone, just behind them, was a beast whose like they’d never seen before. At first they thought it was a dog, a fierce wild dog who didn’t like trespassers. But no dog they knew of had such heavy jaws, pale

stripes down the length of its body, and strange little toes with hooves, it appeared, instead of claws. It was as big as Bolli, plus a long, stiff tail lashing back and forth.

Had Ryons been there, he would have recognized it as a smaller example—much smaller!—of a beast he'd called the death-dog, which would have devoured both him and his hound, Cavall, when they'd encountered it during their trek across the plain. An even larger beast had frightened it away.

Herric knew nothing of that, but he did know a dangerous creature when he saw one. Without pausing to think, he bent over and picked up a stone and, with a cry, hurled it at the beast. The stone glanced off one side of the snarling face, turning the snarl into a high-pitched yelp. The beast turned and dove into a black hole between two fallen slabs of building stone.

Herric let out a deep breath. "I'm not inclined to follow it down there!" he said.

"Herric! What if you'd missed?" cried Barseen. "That was a very foolish thing to do!"

"I wouldn't miss. We've had a lot of practice throwing stones at birds when we want one for our supper."

"What was it?" Bolli said. "If there are any more like it up here, maybe we'd better go back down." There were no large land animals among the islands of the north, but hunters sometimes saw them on the mainland.

"Indeed we should!" said Barseen.

"One look into the west, and then we'll go," said Herric.

It was only a short walk from there to the western rim of the hill.

"That smudge on the horizon," Bolli said, "could that

be Lintum Forest?"

"My uncle will know, when he sees it," said Barseen, "but I wish we had a spear or two. I wouldn't like our journey to end up here, with us as dinner for some animal."

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Many miles away at Carbonek, in the heart of Lintum Forest, the old subchief Uduqu settled back into writing his account of King Ryons and his army and what they'd seen of the wonderful works of God.

"We all saw this, with our own eyes. A great beast came out of the river. Its head was higher than the city walls, and its limbs like mighty trees. It trampled the Heathen underfoot, all their host, their courage turned to water. They fled. They cut each other down like weeds in their haste to get away. No one could count the dead. The beast destroyed them like the fist of God.

"And clinging to its back we saw God's chosen, King Ryons. When the battle was done, the beast gently plucked him from its back and stood him on his feet, and the beast did obeisance to King Ryons and went away. This we all saw."

"I wish I had seen that!" Fnaa said. "But we were all hiding in the cellar."

"Obst says that some people won't believe it ever happened," Uduqu said. "That's why I must write it all down, just as it was, so that it can't be changed. Even when they're true, you know what happens to stories after they've kicked around a while. I hope I live long enough to write down everything we've seen."

Fnaa untied a cloth bag and poured out a clattering host of little wooden blocks. On a single face of each one, a

letter had been carved in high relief.

“My mother and Trout and Abgayle carved all these,” he said. “By and by there’ll be enough of them to make up a whole page in your book. See!” He selected five little blocks and set them in a row. “There’s your name—Uduqu. And Chief Hawk told me today that he and his brothers will carve some, too. They can’t read the letters, but he says the Hosa enjoy woodcarving and many of them are very good at it. We’ll have to think of some way we can use the letters over and over again, for all your different pages.”

Uduqu laughed. “You’ll think of something! You’re a very bright boy: you should’ve been an Abnak. Really, it seems strange that nobody ever thought of this before. It’s so simple, even I can understand how it will work.”

But of course the idea had been thought of before, some two thousand years before, only to have the knowledge lost and forgotten in the Day of Fire. Neither Fnaa nor Uduqu knew that, but Fnaa’s idea would bear more fruit than the labors and heroic deeds of many lords and chieftains.

“It’s a fearful amount of work, though,” Uduqu said, “to carve so many of those blocks—one for every letter on a page! I can’t even imagine how many it would take to make a whole book.”

“Thousands and thousands of them!” Fnaa said. “That’s why we’ll need to be able to use the same letters many times over. But there’ll be a way.”

Lord Reesh, had he lived to see it, would have gnashed his teeth for not having thought of it himself, for this was worth more than all the artifacts in his collection.

## The Dead City

Born's curiosity demanded that he see the Old City for himself before sending in his men. He took no one with him but Colonel Frowley, and they rowed across the river. "Now we're in the same boat in fact, and not just in a metaphor!" he thought.

"I ought to hate you for arresting me," he said, "but something tells me I can always trust you to do your duty as a soldier."

"I'm glad you think so, General."

"Have you ever been in there before?" Born pointed to the ruins towering above the river.

"Never, sir. Nor do I know anyone who has."

"There are a lot of fanciful stories about it," said Born, "although if no one who goes there ever comes back, I don't know who could've told the stories in the first place."

Born came from the north and, until Lord Chutt had brought him south, had little experience of cities. But Frowley was Obann-born and bred. He would have heard the stories at an early age.

"I've heard Judge Tombo once sent in a party of his men to capture some criminal hiding in the ruins," the colonel said. "And they all came back, albeit empty-handed. So there shouldn't be any danger to squads of armed men."

Each stroke of the oars brought them nearer, and Born thought he saw a shadow of unease flit across the colonel's face. That surprised him. It had been Frowley, all alone, who'd stood up to the rampaging beast that had attacked the army's camp by night, along the river. So there could be no question of his courage. Born decided to probe.

"Tell me, Colonel, some of the stories that they tell about this place. What's supposed to be in it that people are afraid of?"

"It's just stories," Frowley said, "mostly told to children, by children. When I was a little boy, I heard about the gawnks that fed on the blood of anyone foolish enough to go there. No one could say exactly what they were, or what they looked like—which only made them scarier. I had a few dreams about them that weren't pleasant.

"And there were stories about other creatures, too—like giant snakes, whole nests full of poisonous spiders, and madmen whose only joy was killing. Gangs of robbers hid their loot there, knowing that there they were safe from the hangman. But I think people dreamed up those stories to keep children from trying to explore the ruins. They did keep me from doing it, at least."

So Frowley, that brave man, was afraid of Old Obann. There would be other officers, Born thought, and many of the men, who were even more afraid, posing a tricky problem for morale.

"We'll send in whole squads, then," Born said. "They'll be safe enough. And as for gawnks, I very much doubt there's any such thing."

They pulled the boat onto the south bank of the river and stood gazing at the ruins.

It was a daunting sight, Born thought, even without imaginary terrors. Walls, broken and festooned with dried-out vines, towered high above their heads. Here and there, streets gave entrance into a wilderness of stone, but many of them turned out to be blocked by heaps of rubble. And on much of the stone, even after the passage of a thousand years, could still be seen the marks of burning.

No bird sang. No cart wheels rattled. No voice spoke.

"It's dead—all dead," said Frowley. "No life belongs here."

"I don't think all the armies in the world could clear away this mess," Born said. Trust Chutt, he thought, to dream up another impossible assignment. Now he believed what he'd been told, that Old Obann had been a far, far greater city than the one that bore its name today. "Let's go in a little ways and see what we can see."

They ventured up what seemed to be the clearest of the streets. They had to skirt a gaping pit that was in the middle of it. Far below, lost in impenetrable darkness, they heard water splash against some unknown obstacle. Born saw Frowley flinch.

"Steady, Colonel!"

"Something moved down there," Frowley said. "And I don't know how safe it is for us to stand here! What if the street gave way?"

"It's just the river being the river," Born said. "It must have seeped under the city in many places over the years. I don't think there's anyone around to repair the sewers."

On either hand, broken buildings loomed over them. Some of the walls were not quite perpendicular.

"The men will have to be careful. Some of this seems

ready to fall down,” Born said.

“I know Lord Chutt expects us to find secrets here,” said Frowley, “but need he be reminded it was God’s wrath that destroyed this place? Whatever lies buried here, God buried it! And maybe it ought to stay buried.”

“I hadn’t taken you for a religious man, Colonel.”

“It’s easy to believe in God’s judgment when you see what it can do. Maybe Prester Jod was right to warn us.”

“Don’t let Chutt hear you say that.”

They didn’t go much farther. Wherever you looked, it was the same. No wonder people who went here never came back, Born thought—“Much too easy to get lost!” The soldiers would have to be careful of that, too.

“I don’t suppose there are any maps of this place,” he muttered.

“If there were,” Frowley said, “they would have been in the Temple archives and been burned to ashes with everything else.”

“Then we’ll have to make maps as we proceed,” said Born. “Find us some men who can do that. And for the time being, I think we’ve seen enough.”

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They’d only been back in Carbonek a day when Helki sent the boy king into the forest to continue practicing his woodcraft. Ryons could have refused, but it never occurred to him to disobey Helki.

“Isn’t it a little hard on him?” Chagadai argued. “We’ve just come back from a long ride.”

“God set Ryons’ throne right here in the forest,” Helki said. “The forest will protect him and be good to him, if he

learns to know its ways. By the time he's a grown man, you and I might not be so strong as we are today."

"That's a tactful way of putting it!" Chagadai had grandchildren who were older than King Ryons. "To me your forest seems a fearful place, and every time you send the boy out there all alone, I worry."

"He won't be alone. He'll have his hawk, his hound, and an enormous killer bird to protect him. The squirrels and the jays will always warn of any danger that's approaching, if he can learn to understand their language. And the forest will always feed him, once he's learned where to look for food. But he can't learn these things by sitting around in Carbonek."

Chagadai snorted. "Oh, nothing but silly lessons here! Obst teaches him the Scriptures, and we Ghols teach him to ride well and to shoot straight with the bow. Hardly worth mentioning!"

"The boy does have a lot to learn," said Helki. "From all of us."

And so Ryons, after packing some provisions, again found himself following a narrow game trail through a vast tangle of winter-smitten blackberry bushes, to learn whatever he might learn. Angel the hawk had already flown on to the next rank of trees, while Cavall the hound trotted on ahead. Baby, with his head bobbing and his massive beak ready to snap up any small animal that dashed across his path, brought up the rear. He, too, was learning the ways of Lintum Forest.

Ryons remembered how timorous he used to be, doing this. There were animals here—bears, big cats, and creatures that had no name as yet, because no one had ever seen them

until recently—that could kill and eat a man, and he was not yet a man. But they preferred to avoid Baby and Cavall, and so far he'd never been attacked. Some tufts of coarse black hair clinging to the stickers told him that a bear had passed this way not long ago. But Cavall would have let him know if the bear were still in this area.

These explorations of the forest gave Ryons ample time to think on many things—his lessons from the Scriptures, the ever-present threat of war launched out of Obann City, and the many wonderful, and some terrible, things he'd experienced since he'd become a king. It would have been dangerous for him to allow himself to get lost in his thoughts—“Never stop looking, never stop listening,” Helki always said—but he'd learned not to do that.

The path he followed led him into the trees and then into a small clearing occupied by what was left of an ancient shrine. He'd never seen it before, although Helki probably had. It stood a little higher than Ryons himself, stones held together by crumbling cement. It had a niche for some object long since lost. Several paths converged on the site, one or two of them still showing traces of crushed gravel.

Obst might have made a good guess at its age, but Ryons couldn't. Maybe it went all the way back to King Ozias' time. Maybe his royal ancestor, born and raised in Lintum Forest, had once stood on this very spot and prayed.

“Any time is a good time to pray,” Obst said. He would pray when you least expected him to do it. So Ryons stood before the crumbling shrine and prayed, thanking God for he hardly knew what: for everything, perhaps.

And as he prayed, he felt an awareness of the mighty river of time that had flowed over this spot in Lintum

Forest, and over all the world. As a nameless slave among the Wallekki, he'd never looked further ahead in time than to his next morsel of food, wherever it might come from, his next little snatch of sleep, and he'd never looked backward at all. But now it seemed to him that all times, his own and King Ozias', the times when old things were new and new things had grown old, flowed on together, all under the eyes and hand of God, who alone, the Scriptures said, has no beginning and no end. And Ryons wondered where the next great river of time would bear him next.

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The river carried along Ysbott the Snake, too, but he was not aware of it.

His life had never been so good. He was Judge of Obann: all he had to do was keep Lord Chutt supplied with unsuccessful plotters, thwarted at the last minute by Ysbott and his men. In the cellar of the Justice Building, confessions were unfailingly extracted by torturers who knew their business, Grybb and Evrog. Chutt believed all the confessions. And on those occasions when someone had to be disposed of altogether, it was Ysbott who wound up with that person's property. He was on his way to becoming the richest man in Obann City, except for Chutt himself. Chutt had the Thunder King's gold; his wealth could not be measured.

Today there was no little stir among the people, because it had become known that the army was about to undertake the not-quite-imaginable task of ransacking the ruins of Old Obann, to dig up secrets of the past that would make Chutt all-powerful, invincible: maybe even immortal,

some whispered.

“It’s a lot of crazy talk,” one of Ysbott’s deputies reported to him in his office at the Justice Building. Ysbott had had a few holes drilled in the floor so he could hear the groans from down below. When interviewees heard those sounds, it moved them to take Ysbott seriously.

“Tell me,” he said.

“People are afraid the soldiers will disturb things that shouldn’t be disturbed—ghosts, ghouls, and gawnks. I heard someone say the ground will open up and swallow the soldiers alive.”

“That person should have been arrested,” Ysbott said. The deputy shuffled his feet nervously. He was a thug from the docks with a criminal record and a mind that functioned only slowly, if at all. Ysbott had recruited several dozen like him. “Never mind,” Ysbott said. “But next time, don’t let it pass. We can’t allow that kind of talk.” The deputy could not repress a sigh. He wouldn’t have been the first deputy to earn a visit to the cellar, and he knew it.

One thing that Ysbott knew disturbed his peace of mind. Chutt had the mask of the Thunder King, and Ysbott having possessed it himself—or rather, been possessed by it—for a little while knew what it could do. The mask had the power of command. He’d given it up because he’d grown afraid of it. He had tried, once, to get it back, but the mask had chosen Chutt. It mystified Ysbott that Chutt seemed to make no use of it. Well, maybe Chutt was afraid, too.

And yet this business of digging up the ruined city—could it be that the mask had directed Chutt to follow such an unexpected course? Surely it was not a thing that Chutt would ever have thought of on his own. Was it Chutt who

was looking for something in the ruins, or the mask? It had used Ysbott to get to Obann. Now it might be using Chutt.

Growing up in Lintum Forest—raised mostly by outlaws, having left his mother at an early age—Ysbott believed in imps and fairies and in the Little People of the forest, who could put a spell on you and take you underground, never to return. He didn't find it at all hard to believe in gawnks or whatever else might be lurking in the ruins—to say nothing of whatever the mask might be seeking there. It might be disastrous, were Chutt to find it.

Ysbott didn't know what to do about it, and that much uncertainty troubled him.

# How Gallgoid Stood in Need of Wisdom

Roshay Bault received a letter from Gallgoid. “I had to get out of the city by a tunnel,” said the rider who delivered it, “and go on foot until I could buy a horse from a farmer. Don’t expect too many messages from now on.”

“If you’re going back, I’ll send you with a reply,” the baron said.

“I’ll go back. The chief is running out of people he can trust.”

Roshay read the letter, and after supper, read it to his family in the parlor. He had Martis there, too.

He fixed a stern look on Ellayne and Jack. “If you were any other children,” he said, “I wouldn’t breathe a word of this to you. But you’ll be servants of the king when you’re a little older, and you’re already servants of the Lord. I must trust you to act accordingly, and as if you were already grown up. In this room are gathered the persons I trust the most in all the world, and I want to hear what you all have to say about this letter. I think that if Gallgoid were here in person, he would trust you, too.”

“It’s never been easy for him to trust me,” Martis said, for they’d been rivals in the service of Lord Reesh, and each knew what kind of crimes the other had committed in that service.

“But King Ryons trusts you both,” said Roshay, and then he read the letter.

“The state of affairs in this city is such that I miss the counsel of Lord Orth and Prester Jod, who are now at opposite ends of the earth. Both are badly needed in this city, where foolish—and I may say wicked—counsels prevail. The people are like sheep who are shepherded by wolves, and God’s warnings through the prophets are not heeded.

“Otvar has discontinued the preaching of God’s word and centered the people’s attention on the rebuilding of the Temple, which is to begin with the arrival of warm weather. Meanwhile, everyone is hunting up and down for objects from our imperial past, for which Chutt pays them. So far nothing of any importance has been found. But that will change.”

Gallgoid wrote of Chutt’s plan to use the army to scour Old Obann for artifacts. Jack, Ellayne, and Martis—and Wytt, too—had been there, recovering King Ozias’ lost book from the cellar beneath the cellar of the Empire Temple. It was not a place that any of them would have cared to visit again.

“It was Lord Reesh’s dream to make Obann as it was in the days of the Empire, with all the knowledge and the powers of the ancients. Chutt believes Lord Reesh himself instructed him to do this, in a dream; and at the time, I encouraged him in this belief, to divert him from his designs against you in Ninneburky. In this I have succeeded more than I wished.

“If at all possible, Baron, please try to inform Lord Orth of these developments. We need his wisdom, and his godliness. I have written in this same vein to Prester Jod in Durmurot. My own understanding is gravely insufficient for this time.”

“That’s all there is,” Roshay said.

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“I don’t like it,” said Martis, “when Gallgoid admits he doesn’t know what to do.”

“He’s stood alone for too long,” said the baroness. “It’s too heavy a burden for one man.”

Ellayne exchanged a look with Jack. They once had an ancient artifact, taken from a servant of the Thunder King. It gave off light and played strange music, until one evening, in a blinding flash, it utterly destroyed itself. And Jack and Martis had seen Goryk Gillow’s relic strike men blind, before it was brought to Obann and razed the palace.

“Yes, I know,” Roshay said, “those old things can be dangerous. King Ryons saw the total destruction of Kara Karram and the very cliff on which it stood. God help us all, if Chutt finds something like that buried in the Old City. Buried, but not yet dead.”

“I don’t know anything about this new First Prester, Otvar,” Vannett said. “Is he so foolish that he’ll ignore all this?”

“He was the Temple’s librarian under Lord Reesh,” said Martis. “Reesh thought him dull. Gallgoid thinks the only thing that matters to Otvar is to rebuild the Temple grander than it was before. I never heard anyone say he was a godly man.”

“But they’re turning the people away from God!” Ellayne spoke up. “That’s what Gallgoid’s saying. That’s why they need someone like Lord Orth or Prester Jod.”

“But you know what’ll happen if either of them ever comes back to the city,” Jack said. Yes, they all knew that.

“Well, by all means, this letter must be read by Lord Orth,” Roshay said, “and delivered to him by someone who can answer any questions he might have.”

“I’ll take it, sir,” said Martis.

“And let us go with Martis, Father—please!” Ellayne said. “We won’t be passing through any dangerous country, and both Jack and I have been to Obann City not too long ago. We can help explain to Lord Orth some of the things that have been going on there.”

“I just can’t keep you off the road, can I!” Roshay said.

“But Ellayne and Jack know the roads a lot better than we do,” Vannett said. “It may be useful for the First Prester to talk to them as well as Martis.” Once upon a time, she would have never said a thing like that.

“We’ll be serving King Ryons,” Jack said softly.

“And Wytt can come, too,” Ellayne said. “He knows things about the city that no one else knows.” For Wytt had hunted for Ellayne throughout the streets of Obann when Chutt abducted her, and Wytt had found her.

“I seem to be outnumbered,” Roshay said. “What do you say, Martis?”

“It won’t be a hard journey, Baron—and I’ll protect them. Although Wytt has always done that better than I have. And the more of us that Orth can question, the better.”

Roshay gave in. “Just try not to get yourselves snatched by any villains this time out,” he said. “You’re giving us all

more grey hairs than we deserve.”

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Another journey had already begun that same morning.

After three whole days and nights of sleeping upright, swallowing the foul-tasting tonic, and unbroken rest, Shesh thought he was fit to continue on to Lintum Forest. “I don’t hear anything in there anymore,” Tam said, when she examined him that morning. This time she made him lie down when she listened to his chest. “You’re strong. You’ve fought it off.”

“A life at sea is a healthy life,” he said.

After breakfast she allowed him to climb to the top of the hill, an easy feat for one who’d spent much of his life climbing ships’ rigging. Herric and Bolli scrambled up after him. “At the first sign of a cough, down you come,” Tam said, “and we’ll try again tomorrow.” But Shesh didn’t cough, and soon he and the boys were standing on the brink, peering into the east. And the menacing beast, whatever it was, didn’t show itself: both boys had stones ready in their hands, just in case.

“Can you see anything, Uncle?” Bolli asked.

“Unless my eyes deceive me,” Shesh said, “that darkish smudge, that thin line on the horizon, is the edge of Lintum Forest.”

“It’s not so far, then, if we can see it,” Herric said.

“It’s far enough. We won’t be getting there tomorrow! But if this good weather holds—and the sky tells me that it will—two or three more days should do it.”

After preparing the horses, who seemed eager to be on the way, they loaded the cart. With the provisions Tam had

gathered earlier, they wouldn't be going hungry anytime soon. She unrolled a heavy woolen cloak that served her as a bedroll, and put it on.

"That must have been hard on you, coming all this way without a tent," Shesh said.

"Plenty hard. I need hardly say I wasn't used to it. Keeping myself from getting chilled and sick required all my skill. It'll be a luxury for me to sleep in a tent. You'll have to move in with the boys. It'll be crowded, but it'll also be warmer. And you can go back to lying down."

"Once we're in the forest, I'll set up a hammock."

"Not without a roof over your head, you won't!"

Barseen drove the cart, and the others walked beside it. Most of the snow had melted by now; there was not enough left to be an impediment.

She wished they could have spent more time exploring the inside of the hill. The Day of Fire had fallen on her own country, Arachosia—although, it seemed, with something less than the total destruction visited upon Obann. For Arachosia that came a little later, as the plague. But there were ruins in Arachosia that resembled those in Obann, and scholars like her mother and father studied them: studied, but could not quite explain.

## Orth's Farewell Sermon

Prester Jod feared for the city of Obann. He'd read Gallgoid's letter several times, and then discussed it with Preceptor Constan, taking him away, briefly, from his busy young scribes copying the Scriptures. Here in Durmurot, there was no shortage of young men and women eager to undertake the work. They'd had to move the project to a cavernous warehouse that, providentially, was between owners.

"The work goes well," said Constan—you had to practically tug it out of him. "Still, it will have to go on for years after you and I have passed away."

"I believe Chutt and Otvar have corrupted the clergy in the city," Jod said, "and that eventually they will try to stop our work—by force, if necessary. There's no one left in Obann City who will stand up for God's word."

"That is why the Lord has given us a king," said Constan.

"It's in my mind to return to Obann and see what I can do."

"They'll lock you up. Or kill you. You'd best stay here, where God has put you."

It was sound reasoning, Jod granted. But to abandon that whole city to God's judgment—that was hard.

"There's no one there!" he said. "At least when Lord

Reesh was alive, he didn't have a mountain of gold with which to tempt the entire population. The people are giddy with the thought of it. God alone knows what calamity they'll bring upon themselves, looting Old Obann. I have friends in that city, Constan. And I think that they have need of us."

"You're needed here. You are the prester of the city's chamber house."

"I am Lord Orth's vicar."

"They have taken the first prestership away from him and given it to Otvar," Constan said.

"Against all law and precedent! And there is no one left in Obann who will speak for Orth."

Constan looked him in the eye for a long moment before he answered.

"The Holy Scriptures speak," he said, "and it's our calling to make them heard. And they will be heard, when every chamber house in Obann, and every family at home, has them. The books, Lord Prester, the books containing God's own word—it is the books that shall speak. Don't think you can go back to Obann and save it single-handedly."

"Somebody ought to," said Jod.

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With Martis on his wiry, tough Wallekki horse, Dulayl, and Jack and Ellayne leading their donkey, Ham, with Wytt perched atop Ham's baggage, sniffing the air, Gallgoid's message began its journey to Lord Orth in Abnak-land. They would cross the mountains by way of Silvertown. They'd all been that way before, and looked forward to seeing how far Silvertown had recovered from the hard times it had known

when it was held by traitors. From there it was only a little way over the pass to Abnak country.

“We haven’t really spent much time at home, have we?” Ellayne said. “But Ham is happy to be on the trail again, and so am I. Lord Orth will be glad to see us.”

“The news we bring won’t make him glad,” Jack said.

“He needs to hear it, though,” said Martis.

Wytt stood up, balanced on the swaying pack, and chattered.

“There’s one of those big birds not far from here,” Jack translated.

“That’s why I brought this,” said Martis, and tapped the crossbow dangling from his saddle. It seemed a small weapon for dealing with a giant predator, but Martis had been practicing with it and had great faith in its power. The bolt could penetrate a full six inches into a living tree trunk. Against flesh and bone, it would go in all the way. He hadn’t forgotten the time in Lintum Forest when one of the birds killed and ate his horse.

“Wytt says the bird can’t scent us; the wind’s blowing the wrong way,” Ellayne said.

“As long as he’s with us, we’ll have plenty of warning,” Martis said.

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Orth was surprised—indeed, astonished—when a thousand Abnaks came to Foxblood’s camp to hear him preach God’s word. It was the biggest gathering of Abnaks since the end of the war.

“What’s brought so many people here today?” he asked Hlah. Except on great holidays, the First Prester in the

Temple itself rarely saw so many worshippers.

“I think people want a chance to see and hear you before you go to the Wallekki,” Hlah said. “They’re afraid you might never come back.”

“Of course I’ll come back, if God wills it.”

Hlah shrugged. “It’s a long way to go, to dangerous country,” he said. “But, Sunfish, I see you have set your heart on it, and who can turn you aside?”

“Look at all those people,” Orth said. They were gathered just outside the camp, in the only space large enough to hold them. Foxblood’s men had piled and packed an earthen platform for Orth to stand upon, so everyone could see him. More people continued to straggle in, some from small camps many miles away.

“Think of it, Hlah! If God will bless our labors, we will see such gatherings as this among the Wallekki, too. The whole wide East lies open to God’s word, and I am called to sow it. Who knows but that the Lord will bring me all the way out to the Great Lakes?”

Hlah gave him a peculiar look. It would have distressed Orth to know what the young man, his son begotten in the faith, was thinking. “I? ‘Me’?” thought Hlah. “He doesn’t sound like Sunfish! What is all this ‘I’ and ‘me’?” But out of deference to Orth, whom he honored as a father, Hlah held his peace.

At mid-afternoon Orth mounted the platform and preached his sermon. Standing with him were Hlah, Foxblood, and Allifar, the young Wallekki who had had the vision. By now Orth spoke Abnak well enough to need no interpreter. He spoke with grace and passion, not knowing when he would next preach to such a multitude in Abnak country.

“At this time, a year ago,” he said, “the armies of the Thunder King occupied much of your country. Many of your warriors sent their families over the mountains to find refuge in King Ryons’ land, because the enemy was waging a cruel war of extermination.

“But now those armies are gone, because the Lord your God, who is God of all nations, drove them out before you. He lent strength to your arms and courage to your hearts, and performed such a great deliverance as has never been seen before in our time. You are here because of Him.”

The Abnaks remembered that war, which touched them all and was like nothing that had ever happened to them before in all their history. They remembered King Ryons returning home from the Lakes with the news that the Thunder King had been destroyed by God’s own hand. “Our people have long memories,” Foxblood said. “They will never forget any of these things.”

Orth continued: “Why did God do this for you? Because He loves you. As a father loves his children, as a mother loves the baby from her womb, so God loves you. What does He ask of you, His children? Only that you love Him in return, and love one another. What can you do to show Him that you love Him? Hunt and fish and gather food in the good land He has given you. Marry, have children, and raise them lovingly and to know Him as their God. Be kind to one another, take care of the sick, and help the weak. And if you do those things, God will know you love Him. For those are His commandments.”

It was preaching that moved its audience, first to tears, then to loud cries of rejoicing. Dancing broke out among the young, men and women, boys and girls. No feast had

been planned, but they wound up having one.

Foxblood pretended to be angry. “You made even me to shed tears!” he scolded Orth. “What if some of my warriors had seen that?” But in truth, Abnaks are not ashamed to cry when tears are called for. “It is a mark of a man,” any one of them would say.

“Everyone who heard you today will remember your words,” said Hlah. “Surely it was God who gave them to you, that you might speak them to the people.”

“I’m glad!” said Orth. A thought passed fleetingly through his mind, that so much praise belonged to God, not him. The thought didn’t stay long. “I think I’ll go down now and dance with some of the people. It will fortify me for my mission to the Wallekki. Ah, but this is a good time for us, my brothers! I can hardly wait to set out on my journey. In another week or two, the weather ought to be good enough to permit it. First to the Fazzan, as I promised them—and then the Wallekki.”

But the next day came the message from Gallgoid, with Martis and the children, which spoiled everything.

## Visitors for Lord Orth

Jax spent most of every day with the soldiers, doing small chores at the barracks, running an errand here and there, and telling the young men stories of the old days when he was young and marched behind famous men to famous victories. No one in the city knew these young men better than Jax; and whatever Jax knew, Gallgoid knew.

“No, they don’t like their new assignment, not a bit,” Jax told the chief spy, as they sipped cheap ale at an unpopular ale-house. Ysbott’s deputies ignored the place, and criminals would find no one here worth robbing. The owner’s daughter, a plain young woman with her own ideas, not very good ones, about how to do her hair, from time to time sat on a stool upon a raised dais and sang romantic ballads with sad endings. Between verses, she played the melody on a flute that sometimes wheezed. It was during these performances that patrons tended to leave the premises, but she was the apple of her father’s eye, and he would never say or do anything to discourage her. She, too, worked for Gallgoid. She sang a little worse when he was there, to deter eavesdroppers.

“The boys at my barracks are to go in tomorrow,” Jax said. “They’ve been told by their legate that there’s absolutely nothing to fear, as long as no one wanders off alone.

But they don't believe him."

"Do they blame Chutt?" asked Gallgoid.

"Too right they do. Oh, they look forward to earning a bonus every time they find something, but they've begun to think Lord Chutt might be a little crazy. First that winter march—a total fatz-festival from start to finish—and now this. They're beginning to wonder if he even knows what an army is for."

The girl, Hana, crossed the room and perched on her stool. She blew a few unpromising warm-up notes on her flute. Two men put their money on the table and got up and left.

"I've got a heart that breaks for you,  
Because of all the things you do ..."

"Merciful heavens!" Jax muttered.

Gallgoid smiled. Hana had a gift for getting men to talk to her about things better kept to themselves. He'd found it very useful.

"What do the men expect to encounter in the ruins?"

"They laugh off ghosts and gawnks and such, but what they don't laugh off is curses. The whole place has a great curse on it, the curse of God's wrath, but they reckon there must be a lot of smaller curses on it, too. Bad luck for all, and more than enough of it to go around."

"Keep careful track of what they say when they come back. I want to know what they're thinking."

"If they come back!" Jax said. "They're not sure they will."

The flute hit a sour note or two, and it was time for Jax to go home.

“The bell was to ring in the end of all the world,” said Tam. “That’s what our prester told us. But as we all can see, the world just kept on going. And eventually most of the people thought it must have been one of the bells in the Temple, with someone ringing it who had no business doing so.”

“But there are no bells on Fogo Island,” Herric said, “and yet we all heard it, too. We didn’t know what it was. That was the only bell I’d ever heard, until we came to Durrurot.”

They were talking, as they marched across the plain, of King Ozias’ bell on the summit of Bell Mountain, which he’d placed there in ancient times because the prophet told him God would hear it when it rang. It was Jack and Ellayne who’d finally climbed the mountain and rung the bell, but none of the travelers knew that, and only Tam had ever heard of the legend of King Ozias and his bell. Even in Obann, most people hadn’t.

“We have plenty of bells in Rakkis,” said Barseen, “but it was none of ours that rang that morning.”

Shesh snorted. “I was at sea when I heard it,” he said. “It scared the daylights out of the whole ship’s company. We were miles and miles from the nearest land, and yet we’d heard a bell. Was there a rocky isle out there that no one knew about? Was our ship to run aground on it? And of course there wasn’t—that’s what scared us so. Not something I’ll ever forget!”

“I’d never read Batha the Seer,” Barseen said. “Even my mother and my father didn’t know that Scripture.”

“No one in Obann was reading or preaching any Scrip-

ture until Lord Orth became First Prester,” Tam said. “That’s when I started reading it. But I never got the chance to read it all. And then Lord Orth went away out East, and all the preaching stopped. I hope it’s not the same in Lintum Forest.”

“Not if our sister has anything to say about it,” Bolli said, “and she’s the queen.”

Tam smiled. “I know! I saw her once or twice, when she was in the city. I look forward to seeing her again.”

Shesh estimated they were two days’ journey from the forest. “Whoever is in there with your sister,” he said, “I think they’ll find us before we find them. Once we’re in among all those trees, don’t look to me to find the way.”

“God will show us the way,” said Bolli.

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“I can hardly imagine that man Gallgoid needing anyone’s advice, least of all mine,” Orth said. “He always seemed so resourceful.”

Orth had taken the letter from Martis’ hand and read it twice, along with a note that Roshay Bault had added: “With God’s help we can fight Chutt’s armies. But I think lies and false hopes will hurt us more than those armies. Chutt has driven out of the city anyone who tells the truth. There is no one here, First Prester, who cannot use your guidance.”

“And on top of it all,” Martis said, “Ysbott the Snake, the worst of Lintum Forest outlaws, has been made Judge of Obann.”

They were meeting in the only chamber house east of the mountains. Orth had Hlah and Foxblood with him to advise him.

"I've heard of Ysbott," Foxblood said. "I'd give much to know how he ever wound up in Obann as a judge."

"But that's not the worst of it," Martis said. "If they go digging up the ruins of Old Obann, there's no telling what they'll find, and what damage it will do. These two children and I, we've been there. It truly must be left alone! But there's no one in Obann who dares to say so."

Orth spread his hands. He felt helpless and confused. "I'm about to leave on a long mission to the East," he said, "to preach God's word to the Wallekki. What can I do for Obann? What is it that you want of me?" But what they wanted, he thought, was for him to abandon his mission and return to Obann—where he was no longer First Prester, and couldn't enter the city without being locked up and silenced. What preaching could he do in a prison cell, and who would hear him if he tried? And who, if not him, would deliver God's word to the Wallekki?

"We aren't here to tell you what you ought to do, my lord," said Martis. "But you need to know how things are in your own country and to take them into consideration."

"They had no right to appoint a new First Prester!" Ellayne said. "Couldn't you at least go back to Lintum Forest, where King Ryons would protect you?"

"This is hard," said Hlah, "and can't be decided all at once. Surely there remains much to know, and much to think and talk about. You can stay a few more days, can't you?"

"For as long as you need us," Martis said.

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Wytt was not going to let himself be seen by anyone in Foxblood's camp. He knew none of the strong but starkly

inaccurate beliefs held by the Abnaks regarding Omah, the Little People. This high up in the foothills, there were no Little People; the Omah love the ruins of ancient cities, and also dwell in forests, but the high country is not to their liking. Even so, the Abnaks have tales they tell their children to keep them from wandering too far from camp—tales of the Little People who capture children and take them underground, never to see the sun again. In truth, few humans ever see the Omah. Big People are unpredictable, and Omah prefer to avoid them. Foxblood's folk would have been appalled to learn that one of these fairy-tale creatures prowled around their camp by night.

Wytt knew nothing about the reasons that had brought Jack and Ellayne to this place. It never occurred to him to ask. Where they went, he went, to protect them. Over the past few years, they'd needed a great deal of protection.

He soon decided that the Abnak camp was safe for them and contented himself with exploring it in secret. Abnak cooking pots and meat-drying racks yielded many tasty tidbits.

Wytt understood that Martis and the children had come here to see the big man with the beard, whose scent was more like theirs than any Abnak's. He watched this man as he slept and knew that he was deeply troubled by some matter incomprehensible to any Omah. His senses told him that this was a good man, much honored and well-loved—a man whom Jack and Ellayne would want him to protect, if he could. But what was there to protect him from, except whatever it was that tormented him in his sleep?

And he heard Martis say to Jack, as they prepared for bed that first night, "He doesn't know what to do."

# The Dead City, and the Living

“I must be mad,” Jax thought, as the two strongest men on the team pulled the boat onto the riverbank.

They’d invited him to come along, and Jax had agreed: Gallgoid would find an eyewitness report invaluable. Besides, it was flattering to discover that these young men looked up to him and found their nerves steadied by his presence.

“Watch your step, old-timer. Here, let us help you.”

So Jax, with some assistance, set foot ashore in Old Obann, where God’s curse hung over its colossal ruin. Colonel Frowley had taken personal command of the expedition, three full companies of infantry in some fifty small boats, with picks, shovels, and crowbars in abundance. He would have brought more, but that was all the boats the army had. Tomorrow it would be three other companies.

Once landed, the colonel assembled them along the shore behind their legates and their sergeants.

“Men,” he addressed them, “I want you to take it slow at first, safe and slow, because we’ll need plenty of time to know this place better. Don’t go inside any of the buildings

or into any passage leading underground.”

“As if he needs to tell us that!” muttered the soldier standing next to Jax.

“Above all, keep your twelve-man teams together. No one is to go anywhere or do anything alone! Keep your team members in sight at all times.

“You may dig into heaps of rubble and pry up loose stones, wherever your corporals deem it safe to do so. You’re bound to find some little artifacts or broken pieces. Collect everything you find—it’ll be sorted out later. Bonuses will be paid when we return. Don’t try to decide for yourselves whether any piece is worth collecting: we want it all. And at three in the afternoon, stop work and come back here. We’ll return to the city at four. Any questions?”

“Colonel, sir! How far into this place are we supposed to go?”

“Use your own best judgment, Sergeant,” Frowley said. “I think you’ll find you can’t go very far without encountering some obstacles. For the time being, don’t take on any challenges. Go only as far as you can go easily. And keep digging, wherever you can: wherever it’s safe.”

Each company went up a different street, selecting the ones least choked by rubble. “It’ll take years and years to dig this out!” thought Jax. He was amazed by how soon the towering, broken walls cut each company off from the others, out of sight and earshot. Their own Obann was the greatest city in the world, as far as they knew; but Old Obann, before God destroyed it, must have been many times greater.

Jax’s team began picking at a modest heap of shattered stone, shaded by a high wall pierced by empty windows. “Like eyes peering down on us!” said a soldier. “I don’t like it.”

“A lot of old windows won’t hurt you,” said the corporal. “Dig.”

To everyone’s surprise, the mound was full of bits and pieces from the ancient world. The first few pick and shovel strokes revealed it.

“Look at all the colors!” someone said, and Jax peered over his shoulder.

Red, blue, yellow, green, white, and orange: how, he wondered, could so much color have survived so long? It should have faded.

“It’s just a lot of little chips, though,” said the digger. “Like a smashed eggshell or a lot of different-colored eggshells. It’s junk.”

“Collect it all,” the corporal said.

A few men kept digging; the rest bent down to pick up pieces with their fingers and toss them into a canvas bag. Jax joined in, fascinated.

He picked up a piece a little smaller than his hand, slightly curved, just like a piece of eggshell would be, of a beautiful sky-blue color, slightly smeared with soot and caked with dirt that came off when he rubbed it. If you looked along the broken edge, you could see it wasn’t painted but was solid blue, clear through.

“We don’t have anything like this,” he said, showing it to the corporal. The piece weighed next to nothing, and yet it had survived a thousand years without its color fading. “It doesn’t feel like any kind of metal or anything else. What could it be made of?”

“That’s what they want to find out,” said the corporal.

Into the bag it all went, scores of little broken chips in many colors. The bag was a long way from being filled when

one of the diggers stepped backward with a muffled yelp. Everybody froze.

“Yah! What’s that?” the digger cried.

“It’s a face!”

The corporal knelt for a closer look, the men gathering around him. A face peered up at them, out of the dirt: a face with wide blue eyes, pink skin, and a puckered little mouth with red lips.

“You’ll get a bonus for this one, Barty,” said the corporal. “Here, somebody give me a whisk broom.” He whisked all around it, carefully, but there was nothing to it but the face. When he pried it loose, you could see that the head—if it had ever been a head—was hollow.

“I swear it’s looking at us,” said a soldier.

“Bah! Haven’t you ever seen a baby doll? That’s what this was—a little girl’s toy from long ago. My sister must’ve had a dozen of them when we were kids: only hers were made of wood. Look, the eyes are painted on, some of the color’s chipped away. But the pink color goes all the way through. What it’s made of, though, beats me.”

Jax didn’t like to think of helpless children caught up in the Day of Fire. He liked it even less when the next few whisks brought a few little bones to light.

“That’s what’s left of the girl,” said Barty, with a shudder. He wasn’t the only one who shuddered.

“Take it easy,” the corporal said. “This whole city’s full of bones, I guess. We’ll see a lot of them before we’re through.”

He was right.

“It’s awful,” Jax told Gallgoid, late that night. Disguised as a laborer, Gallgoid had come to see him at his room. No one else was living in the building. “The whole place is full of bones. It’s a city of the dead.”

“Do you think the men will get used to it?” Gallgoid asked. “They’re soldiers, after all.”

Jax shook his head. “The only soldiering most of them have ever done was on that march to Ninneburky. That was different. Soldiers know they might be killed if there’s any fighting. You just decide it won’t happen to you and don’t think about it anymore. But a whole great city wiped out by the wrath of God—” He frowned. “That’s different.”

Gallgoid wondered what Prester Jod would say about it, if only he were here to give advice.

“He’d try to stop it!” Jax said. He’d been a guest at Jod’s table, when the prester used to invite the city’s needy people to supper at his house. He and Jod had become friends. “Digging up what God has buried—it’s impious, he wouldn’t stand for it. But no one’s heard a word from Prester Otvar. He’s in Lord Chutt’s pocket.”

“Maybe not as deep as Lord Chutt supposes,” thought Gallgoid. Otvar had a very high opinion of himself, and Chutt had learned to doubt his loyalty.

But there would be no bringing Jod back to Obann. Gallgoid himself would advise against it, strongly. Cut off from Jod’s wisdom, and from Orth’s, Gallgoid felt like a driver without reins, carried wherever the horses chose to carry him.

Obst would have told him, “Do your best, and pray that God will provide good counsel when you need it most.

I think He will.”

But Obst was far away in Lintum Forest.

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Hennen rode alone to a hill overlooking the sea. Since meeting the castaways of Arachosia and Gurun’s brothers, he’d come here several times. The sea stretched an infinite distance into the west. Today being cloudy, the sea was grey. Hennen had also seen it blue or green. It changed, and kept on changing. The waves came on without an end to them. It was hard to believe that people had ever come across the sea. But Hennen himself had spoken to everyone who’d ever done it in his lifetime and lived.

He looked out over the sea: easy to believe it had no other shore. A little distance to the south lay the vast marshes that cloaked the mouth of the Imperial River. It was all a grey haze, this early in the season. Farther up the river, Durmurot harvested paper-reed, the finest in Obann. Trappers ventured into the fens, returning with the pelts of otter, muskrat, and mink.

Hennen watched for sails. If there was one ship—and he’d seen its wreckage himself—someday there would be others. He watched as a military man responsible for defending a place that was sure to come under attack, by and by, by an enemy much stronger than any force that he could ever hope to raise.

He prayed for help from overseas.

He’d been informed of Lord Chutt’s failed attempt to conquer Ninneburky. “They’ll be coming here next,” he said to Prester Jod—and to Redegger, who’d left behind in Obann his host of mildly illegal enterprises, but not his gift

for organizing things. Redegger advised the city's mayor, its chief prester, and its general.

"It was the winter weather that kept them from marching all the way to Ninneburky," Hennen said, "but our Durmurot weather can't do that. And our city is too spread out to wall in successfully. Obann was built for defense and has stood off many enemies. But Durmurot is built for peace."

"The wickedness in Obann must be contended with in Obann, not here," Jod said. "But Constan won't let me go back and see what I can do."

"Send me," said Redegger.

Jod and Hennen stared at him.

"Do you propose to save the city through illicit gambling?" Jod wondered aloud.

"Among other things, Lord Prester. Chutt has nothing against me, and there are many who served me before and will be happy to serve me again. So why not?" Redegger smiled. "I've thought it over, and it's the most practical solution to our problem. Gallgoid needs help, and I can give it to him. Obann will soon be awash with money and full of people looking to fritter it away. For me, that means opportunity. But if either of you went, my lords, it would only mean a one-way trip to prison."

"That's true," Hennen muttered. But Jod didn't know whether to laugh or to protest. He finally chose to laugh.

"A great city is sliding into sin," he said, "and we propose to save it by exporting crime—and with my personal approval, no less! I would passionately hate trying to explain that to my fellow clergy! How can I justify it?"

"You won't have to," Redegger said. "I've already decided to go, with or without your approval—but not, I

hope, without your prayers. I think it can be done quickly, bringing my organization back to life. Its purpose used to be to make me rich, which it did quite admirably. Now it will be to serve the king by helping Gallgoid.”

“You have done much good in this city and no evil,” Jod said. In Durmurot, Redegger’s money and wits had gone to benefit the public infirmary, repair the sewers, and feed the hungry. “I hate to think of you going back to a life of crime.”

“The crime will be what Lord Chutt sees,” said Redegger. “My real work will be what he does not see.”

So Redegger made ready to return to Obann, and Hennen watched the sea. What a crime baron could do to bring down Lord Chutt, the general didn’t know, but surely Redegger and Gallgoid, together, could do something.

Hennen looked for sails on the horizon, but none appeared.

## Lord Orth's Dilemma

It took more than a day for Orth to hear all that Martis and the children had to tell. And at night he could not sleep, pushed here, pulled there, by the conflict in his soul. God was calling him back to Obann. No! God was calling him into the East.

"I am sure the Lord wants me to preach to the Wallekki," he confided to Allifar, early in the morning. "Whole nations wait to hear His word, most of them for the very first time. How can I not go?"

Allifar was young enough to be his grandson, but it was Allifar who'd had the vision of the angels on the stairway. Orth hoped, a little desperately, that the young man would advise him.

"Teacher," said Allifar, "my twelve companions and I came to see you because I was on fire to learn how it could be that the God of Obann had saved the Abnaks from the Thunder King. Everyone said that God was with the Abnaks because the chief of all His holy men was there. I am a chief, the son of a chief, but most of my people thought I was a fool for wanting to know this. Twelve of my good friends came with me, I think to protect me. I think they are ready to go home now. But I wish to stay with you, wherever you go."

He could not say whether or not his tribe was hungry for God's word. Orth rejected any thought of sending Allifar back to them as a missionary. "No," he thought, "it's either me or no one. Allifar wouldn't know what to say, even if I sent Hlah along to help him. It has to be me."

Foxblood disagreed.

"We brought you here because God meant it to be," he said. "We took you away from your own work in your own country, when it was far from finished. Don't you think you ought to go back and finish it? The Wallekki will still be there when you come back to us. I don't like to think of Ysbott the Snake, and all those other villains, tearing down everything you tried to build. And I don't think God likes it, either."

Both ways seemed right, very right, to Orth, but the two roads ran in opposite directions, and he couldn't take them both.

"He can't decide," Jack said to Ellayne. They'd just come back from fishing with some Abnak children, early that morning. "We've told him all we know about how badly things are going in Obann, and he still can't make up his mind."

"I don't see what's so hard about it. He's still the First Prester, no matter what they say, and he's needed in Obann. Lord Chutt is a criminal, and he's got Ysbott set up as a judge!"

"Only in the city," Jack said.

"It'll spread from there. Like rot."

Jack had a feeling she was right.

The travelers had a bad moment when Herric happened to look back.

“One of those giant birds is trotting after us,” he said. They’d seen them before, but only at a distance. Now they all looked back and saw it coming: as tall as a horse and much faster than a cart, with a beak powerful enough to crush a horse’s skull, the flightless bird, without exerting itself, was gaining on them.

“You children, climb up onto the cart!” Shesh said. “You, too, Tam.”

“And you’ll do what?” Tam snapped. “Has it escaped your notice that we haven’t any weapons?”

“If it kills me, it might let the rest of you go.”

“Uncle!” cried Barseen, who was driving. “No!”

“It’s only a bird, even if it is a big one,” Herric said. He spoke boldly for his brother’s sake and Barseen’s, but his legs now trembled so violently, they could barely hold him up. “If we all yell and throw things at it, it’ll go away.”

“Obey me, all of you!” Shesh said. Now he spoke as the mate of a great ship, with authority. “There’s no time for argument. Tam, take care of these children.”

“Sir, we won’t leave you!” Bolli said. He bent over for a stone, but couldn’t find one. They were out on the plain and there was nowhere to hide.

The bird slowed a little, sure of easy prey. It opened its beak and made a noise like a woman being torn to pieces—which was, Herric thought, exactly what it meant to do to them. There were no creatures like this, anything like this, in all the northern islands. You could almost refuse to believe in it.

He was just about to pray when the bird shrieked again and toppled over sideways, kicked a few times, gasped loudly, and then lay still.

They all stared at it. Tam took one step forward.

“Arrows?” she said, for two little arrows protruded from its breast.

A man’s voice said something unintelligible. They turned again.

Two small men stood where they hadn’t stood before, as if summoned out of the ground by magic, with bows in their hands, wearing leather leggings and short woolen cloaks to protect them from the cold: yellow-skinned with wrinkly faces and wiry hair.

“You’ve saved us, whoever you are!” said Heric. “We’re on our way to Lintum Forest, and we come in peace.” He displayed his empty hands.

One of the men made a speech in a strange language—Tribe-talk, if they but knew it. None of the travelers understood a word of it.

“Please,” said Heric, “we don’t speak your language, but try to understand us.” He did the best he could to speak in modern Obannese. “We’ve come a long way to get to Lintum Forest, to see the king and Gurun. Gurun is our sister.”

The other man grinned and answered in Obannese.

“Oh! Gurun! Gurun our queen; we King Ryons’ men.” He thumped his chest. “Attakotts! We take you to King Ryons.” For these were two of Ryons’ Attakott scouts who patrolled the approaches to the forest north and west.

“Thank you, Lord, for this good news—the best we ever heard!” Bolli cried.

“We take meat now,” said the other Attakott. They went to the fallen bird, drew sharp knives, and calmly cut steaks from the carcass.

“I won’t forget what you meant to do for us—you old fool,” Tam said to Shesh.

He let out a great sigh. “I’m glad I didn’t have to!”

# Of the Righteous Servant

First Prester Otvar, who had no interest in Obann's past and hardly any in its future, beyond the rebuilding of the Temple, was to assign scholars to study the relics of Old Obann. He had no idea which of his presters, reciters, or archivists had any scholarly ability. Until his elevation to the First Prestership—arranged and paid for by Lord Chutt—he'd only been the Temple's chief librarian, and all his books and documents had burned to ashes with the Temple itself.

"If he can't keep his own presters from hatching plots against the government," Chutt said, "maybe this at least will keep him busy." Not so long ago, Ysbott had convinced him that one of those presters, Brocken, had hired men to impersonate trumpeters from heaven as a sign against Chutt's government and had helped Roshay Bault to expose Ysbott as an outlaw and a murderer. Chutt had wanted to include Otvar in the ensuing treason trial, but Gallgoid had talked him out of going that far. "You can't suppress politics, my lord. Let Otvar be," he said. "It's much too soon to bring in another new First Prester. It'll breed disorder in the city."

"Someday I'll find a First Prester who'll be loyal to me," Chutt said, "and that'll be the end of Otvar." He resented Otvar's constantly badgering him for funds for the new Temple.

This evening Gallgoid joined the First Prester and his scholars at a warehouse. Tables had been set up to clean and sort the loot from Old Obann. Otvar's handpicked team of scholars looked almost as unhappy and confused as Otvar himself. All the real scholars had followed Jod to Durmurot.

"All of this is trash," said Otvar, taking in the whole interior with a sweeping gesture of his hand. "How is this supposed to benefit us at all?"

"Lord Reesh would have given much," Gallgoid said, "to know what this material was and how it was made. The ancients could shape it into anything they wanted, and it doesn't rust away like metal. It's a mystery."

"But it's all just broken pieces!"

A few of the pieces bore letters and numbers that no one there could read. Constan could have read them, Gallgoid thought. But more than likely, such short fragments of messages would have made no sense even to him.

One of the brighter scholars soon discovered that this material would melt if exposed to a flame, and yet still retain its color.

"So what?" Otvar said.

"It has a peculiar smell when you melt it, First Prester." They had also discovered that molten drops of different colors would blend and harden into one, sometimes of another color altogether.

"How is any of this going to get us any further along toward a new Temple?" Otvar said. "Now, if they could find some ancient device that could clear away a million tons of rubble, that would be something. But all of this is nothing."

Some kind of device—that was just what Chutt hoped to find, thought Gallgoid: "And God help us if he does!" Gall-

goid remembered the destruction of the Palace. The whole city might have gone with it, if it hadn't rained so heavily. It was one of those devices from the ancient world, brought to Obann by the traitor, Goryk Gillow, who had it from the Thunder King. Just a little box that a man could carry in his hands—Gallgoid had had a fleeting glimpse of it—and yet in an instant it had devoured the Palace in a hurricane of fire.

He comforted himself with the thought that no one in Obann had ever found anything like that. But he had heard that another such device had taken down the Thunder King's fortress of Kara Karram and the very cliff on which it stood. King Thunder's empire fell with it.

And Otvar didn't know that every word he spoke against this project brought him one step closer to Ysbott's torture chamber.

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At last the king's two weary Ghols arrived in Durmurot. No men of their nation had ever been that far west before.

They'd crossed the plain without encountering Gurun's brothers and come up the River Road, passing Boss Redegger, whom they did not know, on his way back to Obann. They'd traveled at a pace that no one in the West could match. Even the horses of the Wallekki fail before a Ghol's horse thinks of slowing down.

No one in Durmurot, except for Hennen, Jod, and Constan had ever seen a Ghol before.

"They stare," said Kutchuk to Ogadai, as a soldier led them through the streets, "but it's only that they're curious.

They don't glare at us like those people in Obann."

"I thought they were captivated by your handsome face," Ogadai teased.

Hennen remembered them from when he used to march with Ryons' army and sit among the king's chiefs as commander of the spearmen.

"You've learned your Obannese since I saw you last," the general said. "Come, I'll take you to Prester Jod. He should be the first to read Lord Orth's epistle."

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The Ghols feasted at Jod's table, became excited over the news that the queen's brothers had been guests in that house, and were with some difficulty packed off to bed. But Jod and Constan stayed up late.

"A stairway to heaven—with angels!" Jod mused, sipping wine to soothe his spirit. "If the First Prester can't interpret it, then how can we? No man living knows the Scriptures better than Lord Orth."

Constan, who was always calm, required no wine.

"If God is giving prophetic visions to the Heathen," he said, "it's only what some of the ancient prophets told us to expect. Not that this young Wallekki chieftain is a heathen anymore."

"Surely it's our duty to make his vision known, at least among our fellow clergy."

"And to our congregations, too," said Constan.

"Then you believe it?"

"It's hardly the sort of thing that any Wallekki would invent."

"And Orth believes it."

Constan paused to think, a long pause, then spoke again. "In the latter days," he said, "whenever they might be, the Lord Our God will send his righteous servant to take away the sins of the world. So wrote King Ozias, by direction of God's spirit, under the ruins of the First Temple. That righteous servant will be of King Ozias' lineage. We do believe that."

"Several of the prophets spoke of it in ancient times," said Jod. "If we don't believe them, then we have no business ministering to God's people."

Constan permitted himself the shadow of a smile. "We speak of a thing that might not happen until a thousand years from now. Or tomorrow! Either way, the powers that be in Obann won't like it."

Jod sighed and shook his head. "I find it very hard to understand them!" he said. "They're perfectly capable of saying we made up the vision, you and I and Orth, for some wicked purpose of our own. They'll say we're only trying to stop them from rebuilding the Temple."

"Because they want all things to be the way they used to be. They don't want a Temple not made by human hands. They want a Temple they can see." He paused, then added, "A Temple they can own."

"In which God's word is kept a prisoner," said Jod, "never to see the light of day and never to be heard."

"We will publish this Wallekki's vision," Constan said, "and trust in God to do the rest."

"Amen! But I wish Lord Orth were with us."

The preceptor, who never began a sentence with the words "I wish," made no reply to that.

# A Night in the Forest

The city was too quiet for Ysbott's liking.

While the army dug up Old Obann, Chutt had a gaggle of fools dawdling over how to go about the business with the Temple—how much it would cost, how many men would have to be hired to clear the site, how much to pay them, how many different architectural plans to draw up before choosing one of them, and what to do with the rubble of the old Temple: no end to all the foolishness. And because he was so preoccupied with these things, Chutt was losing interest in some of the various plots that were being hatched against him—some real, others the products of Ysbott's lying tongue.

"The whole city knows by now that you were a Lintum Forest outlaw, my lord," a deputy reported. Which was why Ysbott could hardly walk the streets these days without people looking like they wished to stone him. That was one of the things that Chutt was learning to ignore. "They don't have to love you," he would say, "as long as they fear you."

"Someone did try to set my house on fire not too long ago, my lord."

"But no one's tried it since," said Chutt. "Be content, Ysbott. It may be to our advantage that people know you were once a murderer. The city's settling down."

“Thanks in no small part to me!” thought Ysbott, but deemed it wiser not to say so.

First Prester Otvar was on his list. But the man lived frugally; his house and all its contents weren’t worth as much as the golden buckles on Ysbott’s shoes. “Plenty of pleasure, but not much profit, in taking him down,” Ysbott thought.

He was interrupted in these meditations by two more deputies who came in with a soldier. They hadn’t done any violence to the soldier yet, but he was afraid.

“What’s this?”

“Show Lord Ysbott what you found today, Soldier.”

The man reached into his scrip, and Ysbott wondered why the deputies hadn’t taken it from him. He was about to chide them for it when he realized that whatever was in the scrip, these men were afraid to touch it.

The soldier brought out a small rectangular piece, white with black trim.

“I thought General Born ordered death to any man who found something and tried to keep it for himself,” said Ysbott.

“I wasn’t going to keep it, my lord! It’s just that no one saw me pick it up, and I was afraid of another man who might try to say he saw it first, he always picks on me, and he might do me out of my bonus, so next time I’d pretend to find it, and I’d say, ‘Hey, look at this,’ and make a fuss about it—”

Ysbott shushed him before he ran out of breath. Sweat shone on the man’s forehead.

“Why should I be interested in this?”

“We spotted him all alone in an alley, fiddling with it,

my lord.” The deputy nudged the soldier, none too gently. “Show Lord Ysbott what it does.”

Ysbott almost leaped back from his desk in a panic. The last time someone had shown him what one of these ancient things could do—Roshay Bault’s accursed daughter, and her witchcraft—it had very nearly scorched the eyes out of his head and left him blind for hours afterward. But to show fear to his men could mean disaster; it usually meant death for any outlaw chief, as there was always someone eager to take one’s place. By a costly effort, he remained seated.

“Some of these things burst into flame when you play with them!” he said. “Do you want to burn down my office?”

“Oh, it’s perfectly safe, my lord!” the soldier stammered. “I mean, it did almost scare me out of my boots at first, but nothing happened.”

“It’s very strange, my lord,” said the other deputy. “We’ve seen it for ourselves, but can’t make head nor tail of it.”

“All right, then. Let’s see.”

The man squeezed the edges of the object. Instantly, in the middle of the blank white space, appeared a dull green face with staring black eyes and a toothy white grin, accompanied by a feeble hissing noise. When the man released the pressure, the image abruptly disappeared.

It left Ysbott breathless for a full minute.

His mind began to race. Maybe Chutt wasn’t wasting his time, after all. Chutt was a fool, but the mask was wise. Maybe it knew of something hidden in the ruins and had directed Chutt to seek it out.

“Put it back in your scrip and leave it with me for safe-keeping,” Ysbott said, when he’d found his voice.

At that moment a shrill scream shot up from the cellar, succeeded by a wave of racking sobs that died away in a string of muffled groans. The soldier froze into a statue. But this, of course, was why Ysbott had had holes drilled in his office floor.

“Hear that?” he said. “Down there is where you’ll go, my friend, if you don’t do as I say. From now on I want to know about the things they find in the old city. Someone might find something important. One of my sharpest deputies will be watching you.” Not these two clods, he added silently to himself. “Make sure you spend some time on the street every evening. My man will find you; don’t try to find him. And you’ll tell him everything you’ve seen and heard that day.” Ysbott gave the man a penny. “Buy yourself a drink. There’ll be more, if you do good work for me.”

“Thank you, my lord.” The man flinched as he took the coin. Ysbott tossed two more pennies to the deputies. “One last thing: what’s your name, fellow?”

“Kinner, my lord.”

“I never forget a name or a face, Kinner. Let him go now, boys.”

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The Attakotts brought them into Lintum Forest, and the boys couldn’t help expecting to see their sister waiting for them at each turn of the path. The scouts followed what appeared to be a maze of paths, avoiding bogs and bramble patches.

“The forest of Kizzuwatna is much worse,” said Shesh, “but I confess I would’ve lost my way in here by now.”

“Uncle, we haven’t even been in here a full day,” said

Barseen.

“They have to lead us on such a roundabout way,” Herric said, “or we’d never get our cart through.” None of the travelers knew that, centuries ago, there were modest roads in Lintum Forest, serving knights’ castles and nobles’ hunting lodges. Helki’s scouts had learned enough to draw a map, but no one had yet tried to.

By nightfall they were all weary—except for the Attakotts, who went out to lay snares in hope of fresh meat for breakfast. The others retreated early to their tents. They’d had big bird steaks for supper; and although she wished to stay awake and listen to the sounds of the forest by night, all new and exciting to her, Barseen fell sound asleep before she knew it.

Another sound, not of the forest, woke her suddenly, just before daybreak: a choked-back sob from Tam. It was a shock to hear it from her.

“Tam! What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, child. Go back to sleep.”

“But you were crying. Why?” Barseen couldn’t see Tam in the dark, and could only wait for her to answer. That answer didn’t come quickly.

“It was just a dream that made me happy,” Tam said, “and then a realization that made me so terribly sad.”

“Tell me,” said Barseen.

“You’re much too young to understand. So I might as well tell you, rather than keep it to myself and fret over it.

“I dreamed about my family, all of them alive and well and young, all the way it used to be. We were having supper together at my mother’s table. Then I woke, and then it came to me: all gone, all of them, and all their places with them,

the people and places of my life. My father's house belongs to someone else; I can't go there anymore. My children have grown up into strangers to me, and everyone else has died. And here I am, in this forest of all places! I can never go back home. There is no home. Everything has changed. Everything's lost. There's only me, Barseen. I'm all that's left of those times, those places. Alone."

That was indeed hard to understand. Barseen had never heard anyone say such things before. She'd thought of Tam as strong and sure, someone who'd always know what to do. Barseen wasn't used to adults feeling lost, forsaken, sad.

She had to say something.

"You're not alone, Tam. Not really. You have us now, and soon we'll be with King Ryons and Gurun, and there'll be a lot of good people there. It's better than nothing, isn't it?"

"Oh, a far sight better!" said Tam. "I know that in my mind, but haven't learned how to feel it yet. My heart hasn't caught up to my head. That will only come with time."

"We will learn to love you, Tam."

"And I you," Tam said. "Maybe you do understand, after all."

"God is with us," Barseen said. She couldn't think of anything else.

Tam felt for and found her hand, and held it.

"Let's try to get a little more sleep," she said. "We'll need it."

# How Orth Made Up His Mind

“I will go east,” Orth said to himself, but not to anyone else.  
“There is no one who can go in my place.”

They were all saying, “Go back to Obann!” Even Allifar. “Teacher, your own people need you, that’s why they sent for you. And I will go with you, if you’ll have me. I will learn from what I see.” The only one who didn’t say “Go west” was Martis, who used to serve Lord Reesh. He must have a reason, Orth thought, for keeping his opinion to himself. Had he known that Martis had served the old First Prester as an assassin, Orth would have put his silence down to shame, and he would have told Martis, “God has forgiven you—and my own sins were even worse than yours.” But he had only known Martis as a minor clerk and saw no need to probe further into Martis’ thoughts.

Orth prayed for guidance, but God gave him none. “Well, why should He?” he reasoned with himself. “He has already made clear His will for me, in bringing me out of Obann in the first place.” Obst would have answered, “God is speaking to you now through all these others, His servants.” But Obst was not there.

“I will go alone,” Orth decided, “before anyone can say any more to stop me. And anyone who follows me will understand that my mind is made up, and I will carry out the mission that the Lord has given me.”

“Or is it a mission that you have given yourself?” his heart asked. But he dismissed the question.

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He left by night. He knew most, but not all, of the whole camp would be asleep, that someone would be bound to see him go. But he also knew that Abnaks consider it very bad manners to interfere with any adult who was going about his business. Not even a great chief like Foxblood could do that.

He packed what he thought would be ample provisions for two or three days on the trail and wrapped himself in the warm furs that Foxblood had given him. He carried but a little water, expecting to find all he needed on the way. A nip of winter still lingered in the night air, but spring was coming fast. Besides, he'd gotten used to what anyone in Obann City would call rude and uncomfortable living conditions.

As he'd promised to visit the Fazzan first—and there he could be sure of a friendly reception—Orth set out due east. Rather, it was what he thought was due east. The last time he went, he'd had an Abnak escort and let them find the way, while he concentrated on mastering their language. And so, in fact, Orth didn't know the way. It had never occurred to him to learn how he ought to travel in countries where they had no roads, nor had the Abnaks any towns where he might stop and get his bearings.

He did miss having anyone to talk to. Hlah's wife, May, would be furious that he'd left without saying a farewell to her and her baby. "You're jolly right we'd try to stop you, Sunfish!" she would say, if she were here. "Are you going all daft on us again, as you were when Hlah first found you? It's much too dangerous to travel all alone!"

"Well, I won't be alone for very long," he said, in an imaginary conversation. Even his own voice, by itself, was preferable to silence. "Someone's bound to catch up in the next day or two, and then I'll have protection. I can't be any worse off than I was when Hlah found me in the swamp, a gibbering lunatic, and God protected me then, as I pray He will protect me now."

The giant birds didn't venture into the highlands, but there were bears and other predators. For a weapon he had only a sturdy walking stick to lean on. "It doesn't matter," he said to himself. "I've never handled any kind of weapon, anyhow. No living thing has anything to fear from me."

But one of those other predators was already following his scent—a creature he would have mistaken for a kind of wolf, although it had dull stripes on its flanks, round ears, and jaws much heavier than any wolf's. It was one of those strange animals that had crept into the country in recent years and had not yet been given a name by the Abnaks. Their hunters had only killed a few of them and feared it as a creature that could take a man's arm off with a single bite. They'd been careful not to let that happen yet—although who knew the fate of the odd hunter or two who went out one morning and never came back?

Orth plodded on, trying to cover as much ground as he could before fatigue set in. He wouldn't have gotten far,

but for the moon and stars lighting his way. His old acquaintances in the city would have marveled, could they see him now—a dainty man, famous for his formal dinners and his penchant for the best of everything, stumbling through the wilderness by night. The thought made him smile.

He stopped smiling when he heard a low growl just behind him.

In truth the beast was more curious than hungry, although Orth had no way of knowing that. It had never before seen a lone human being walking in the dark, and wild animals who ignore unusual things are unlikely to enjoy long lives.

Orth turned slowly and saw a pair of wicked eyes gleaming palely with reflected moonlight, and the dark mass of the beast's forequarters bunched up to spring. Knowing nothing of such creatures and their ways, he could only think he was about to be attacked, and he was too terrified to offer up a silent prayer. Indeed, fear fell on him like a sudden gush of ice-cold water, drowning every thought. Had he had a drawn sword in his hand, he wouldn't have remembered it was there.

The dark shape twitched, breathed heavily, a stinking carrion breath that Orth barely noticed—

And then a shrill shriek rang out in the darkness, a dreadful cry that pierced Orth to his bones, and the beast snarled, spun around, and galloped off.

Orth stood, trembling, waiting to see what worse and more ferocious creature had made that awful sound, waiting for it to spring out of nowhere and tear him to pieces. How long he waited, he couldn't possibly have said. But whatever it was, it didn't shriek again; it didn't show itself, and silence,

except for the pounding of Orth's heart, now reigned. And by and by his knees stopped trembling and consented to take him on his way again, whenever he chose to begin. His lungs blew out a very loud sigh of relief.

"It seems I am to be spared!" he said, and looked up to the sky, adding aloud, "Thank you, My Lord, for preserving my life."

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"Stupid human!" Wytt thought. They were so helpless, even this big man armed with a big stick. He would have just stood there and let the predator bite off his head. He hadn't been alert enough to see that the beast had been even more nervous than he was, and needed only a good startle to snap its nerve altogether and send it on its way. As helpless as pink and hairless Omah babies in the nest, humans needed constant looking after.

Wytt looked after this one because he knew the man was dear to his humans, Jack, Ellayne, and Martis, and they would be grieved if he were killed. But Wytt didn't come out of hiding, lest the big man die of fright when he saw him.

It never crossed his mind that an Omah of such colossal size would have nothing to fear in all the world.

When the man finally moved on again, Wytt followed.

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The next morning, Jax's company was back in Old Obann, their second visit. This one was more eventful than the first.

Some of the broken stone that had fallen into heaps had turned to dust by now. There were also piles of mostly

dust that centuries of rain had hardened back into a layer of stone. No one understood how that could happen. “It’s another one of those things that they knew about in ancient times, that we don’t know today,” said the corporal. “Let’s bring some chunks of this stuff back with us, in case they want to study it—for all the good that’ll do.”

They had to break it up with picks, raising puffs of white dust tossed here and there by random breezes. One of the men sneezed. Jax took his red bandana out of his pocket and tied it loosely across his lower face. Something told him it wouldn’t do, to breathe the dust of Old Obann.

The hardened layer was several inches thick, mixed with heavy chunks that hadn’t eroded into dust. A man thrust the nose of his pick under one of the larger slabs and grunted as he tried to pry it loose. It was too heavy for him, but when another soldier helped, the slab came free and slid down the slope of the heap.

In its place gaped a black hole.

“Now what do you suppose is down there?” the first digger said.

“Stick your head in and find out,” the corporal said. No one, of course, felt inclined to do that.

“We can at least see how deep it is.” The digger laid down his pick and took up a long-handled shovel. Grasping it just below the blade, he stuck the handle into the hole. It went in about halfway. “Well, it won’t lead us down to Hell,” he said.

But then Hell came up to meet him.

Before he could even cry out or drop the shovel, a red swarm raced up the handle and onto his hands and forearms. Then he dropped the shovel; then he screamed.

They came pouring out of the hole, an uncountable multitude, and everyone yelled and tried to get away. Men stamped their boots, doing crazed dances, as the swarm attacked their feet and legs. The first man, mad with fear, flailed his arms, trying in vain to brush them clean. "Get 'em off me, get 'em off me! Oh, it hurts!"

"Get that rock back on the hole!" the corporal bellowed. One man was brave enough to help him do it. They dropped the big slab over the hole, cutting off the flow of vermin, then swatted at their hands and arms. Everyone stamped wildly, crushing hundreds of the creatures at a time.

"Spiders!" someone cried. "They're spiders!"

It was all over in only a minute or two. Half of the team had been bitten, and the first digger was in a bad way. Angry red sores covered his hands and arms, with several on his face and neck. He sat down on the pavement, gasping.

"It burns!" he said. "It burns like fire!"

"You're telling me!" grunted another man who'd been bitten half a dozen times.

"Back to the infirmary, all of us!" the corporal ordered. But the first man's arms and hands were swelling dreadfully, and he had to be helped along by two others.

Jax had not been bitten, and he'd gotten a look at the spiders. No bigger than the ants that a housewife might find in her pantry, they were bright red, easily crushed by the pressure of a finger. That a little thing like that could be so terrible!

"Find the colonel and tell him what's happened," the corporal ordered a man, as they retreated to the riverside. "And tell him to order all the troops, for the love of God, not to go poking into any holes!"

The first man was unconscious by the time they'd rowed their boat across the river, and had to be carried to the infirmary. He'd no sooner been laid in a bed than he died. His red swellings began to turn black. Four others had to be bedded down, pleading for water. Two more had to be content with a slathering of ointment. Jax did what little he could to help, inexpressibly grateful to God that he himself had not been bitten.

"It's God's curse on that place, and on us!" a soldier said. "And all for a lot of ancient garbage that's not worth anything at all!"

# How Gurun Met Her Brothers

Barseen was already learning Tribe-talk from the Attakotts. Their names were Khooah and Kwi, and she made friends with them as they guided the cart through Lintum Forest.

“Be there by now, if no cart to bring,” Khooah said, in his labored Obannese—which he was very proud of and always liked to exercise.

“It’s not really our cart,” Bolli said, “and we’ll want to give it back someday, so we can’t just leave it behind.” No one on Fogo Island had a cart as fine as this. Having no draft animals, the islanders made do with wheelbarrows. The cart, the horses, and the tents—all of which their friends in Durmurot had freely given them—together would be of more value than all their father’s herds and boats combined, Bolli reflected, and their father Bertig was accounted a wealthy and important man. Great care ought to be taken with such things, in Bolli’s view.

The Attakotts tried, without quite succeeding, to tell the travelers of the great and heroic things done by King Ryons and Queen Gurun, with the indispensable assistance

of their Attakott scouts. It dazzled Shesh and Barseen that there could be such wide lands, so many different peoples, in the world: who could even make a list of them? Arachosia was a big island, but it was still an island. It might have fitted into Lintum Forest with room to spare, Barseen thought.

“All the way out to Kara Karram, your sister went!” Tam said to the boys. “And even that faraway place was part of Obann’s Empire, long ago—before the Day of Fire.”

“Gurun will tell us all about it when we see her,” Heric said. “I wonder if she has a crown and queenly robes.”

“She has no need of them,” said Tam. “I’ve seen her.”

It took many days to get the cart to Carbonek, and on the day they arrived, neither queen nor king was there to greet them, because the Attakotts had sent no word of their coming.

Even so, the boys stood in awe of what they saw there: log cabins everywhere, men with dark skins tilling fields, horses, and Heathen chiefs and warriors from a score of nations—tattooed Abnaks, tall Wallekki in their feathered headdresses, kilted Dahai, long-legged Griffs with their black hair heaped up in elaborate coiffures, Attakotts and Ghols, with Obannese women and children everywhere; it was almost too much to take in. And over it towered the high stone castle, much of it in ruins, but still a symbol of majesty and might. If you were to find a king anywhere, Heric thought, you’d find him in a place like this.

A tall old man with a grey beard flecked with black came out to greet them.

“Welcome to Carbonek, King Ryons’ seat, chosen for him by God. My name is Obst.”

Barseen would have introduced them, but Bolli

couldn't wait.

"Where is Gurun, our sister?" he cried. "We are her brothers, come all the way from Fogo Island to see her. Where is she?"

Herric gripped his brother's shoulder to try to quiet him—not that he was feeling all that calm himself.

"Sir," he said, "it was General Hennen in Durmurot who helped us on our way and Prester Jod. Both of them mentioned you and send their greetings to you. I am Herric, and this is my brother, Bolli. And these are Barseen and her uncle, Shesh, who came by sea from a place called Arachosia, and Tam, our friend, a healer from the city of Obann. We have come to see King Ryons and our sister, who is queen." Herric remembered his manners, and it was a comfort to him.

Obst's mouth opened but no words came out; he was too astonished to speak. But others were already gathering round. It wasn't every day that strangers came to Carbonek.

"Welcome and thrice welcome!" Obst said at last. "Young man, no one here knew you were coming, or else we would have prepared a royal welcome for you. Your sister Queen Gurun is very well and will be surprised to see you. She and King Ryons will be with us before the day is done.

"But Arachosia! Known to us only from the Scriptures. I hardly know what to say! And of course we are glad to have a healer from Obann among us. All of you will be feasted this evening—it will be a holiday for everyone. But it will be more time than I can guess, before we all run out of questions for you!"

"Tam healed Uncle Shesh when he was sick," said Bolli. Tam nudged him to be quiet, but had a smile on her face as

she did it—and a blush.

The questions would have started then and there, an avalanche of questions, but Obst would not permit it. He seated the travelers on a hand-carved wooden bench and commanded refreshments to be brought and for the horses to be unhitched and watered.

And then someone shouted, “Here they are!”

The boys stood up. People moved out of the way.

Gurun came, sitting tall on horseback, every inch a queen. Heric and Bolli marveled at her. It had been a thousand years since anyone from Fogo Island had ridden on a horse. Truly, she hadn’t changed at all—only now she seemed taller, straighter, her eyes brighter, her hair shining gloriously in the late afternoon sun. This queen, this vision, was their sister? The boys stood speechless. Heric felt like a toddler again, a foolish little child who knew nothing, a baby for his sister to hold in her arms—

And then Gurun fell off the horse.

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If there was one thing Gurun feared, it was to fall off her horse in front of all these men. She was up again in a moment, too amazed to be embarrassed, and couldn’t take her eyes off her brothers. Of all the things she’d seen since the storm blew her in her father’s skiff all the way down to Obann, this was the most miraculous of all. Heric and Bolli! She’d know them anywhere, but here was the last place she’d ever expected to see them.

Heric hadn’t failed to notice that there was also a boy riding on a horse beside Gurun, a black-haired boy in leather leggings, and a great shaggy hound, red tongue loll-

ing, standing beside his horse. A little hawk perched on the boy's shoulder. Behind him rode several weather-beaten men with swarthy skins and dark eyes. The boy on the horse looked wonderingly at his guests, but didn't speak.

"My lord the king!" said Obst. His voice rang amid the stones of the castle. "We have been blessed today. For these two boys are Gurun's brothers, along with travelers from Arachosia across the sea, and this lady is a healer from the city. My friends, this is Ryons, King of Obann by God's election."

Another thing Gurun would have rather not done was to break down and cry in front of all these people, but she couldn't help it. Heric and Bolli! It was as if her home itself, Fogo Island, had come to see her. So flowed her tears, and they were tears of joy. What could she do but stretch out her arms to them? And the boys came running into her embrace.

"You rascals! You scamps!" she cried, hugging them hard and being kissed. "What of Father and Mother? What of them? You left them! Are they well? Do they live?"

"Oh, Gurun, they're all right; they're fine!" Heric answered. "And Uncle Shesh"—he pointed at the man from Arachosia—"he knows how to build a ship and sail it, too! We can go home again, someday!"

"My last ship was wrecked," Shesh muttered, but no one heard him.

Ryons, too stunned to come down from his horse, couldn't fight off the thought, "I'm going to lose my queen; she'll leave me; she'll go home." He knew he couldn't go with her. He was the king, and this was his place. He'd have to stay behind. He ought to be joyful, for Gurun's sake, but he wasn't.

Then Gurun remembered him.

“My lord the king, come down and meet my brothers.” She held out her hand to him. Half-dazed, he dismounted. She took his hand and drew him in.

“We’ve never seen a king before, Your Majesty, but we’ve heard all about you,” Heric said. It surprised him to discover he was taller than the king. Ryons was only Bolli’s size. No crown of gold, no royal robes, no great stature as a mighty man of war—but a king no less, just like all the kings of ancient times whose words and deeds were recorded in the Scriptures: and here he was. Heric could say no more.

A tall Wallekki with a hard face and a resplendent feathered headdress broke the spell.

“What is everybody waiting for?” he said. “Prepare a feast for the brothers of the queen and these our other guests. Get busy, all of you!”

And Tam, for no reason she could think of, started crying, too—silently. Barseen took her hand and said, “It’s wonderful!”

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Vella, the maid, and his other servants had kept his house in order for him, and Redegger settled into it as soon as he arrived from Durmurot. But his first order of business was to present himself to the governor-general. He and Lord Chutt had had many dealings together over the years. Most would have called those corrupt dealings.

“So you’re back,” Chutt said. “I thought you’d deserted us for Durmurot.”

Redegger smiled and shrugged. “You know I’m always looking to expand my business. I wanted to set up shop in

Durmurot, but I'm afraid that was a miscalculation. The love of cards and dice and prize fights is, I thought, universal. How wrong I was! Out there in Durmurot, it's all piety and prayers and honest work. It made me terribly homesick. Besides, Obann is where the money is. Always was, and always will be."

"We also boast a gloomy, restive army," said Chutt, "and citizens whose only pleasure is to hatch out plots against the government."

"All the more need for popular entertainments, Governor! Tell me the truth—since I've been away, has anyone shown himself able to fill my place?" Redegger already knew the answer to that question.

"There's been precious little entertainment to be had around here," Chutt said. It had never occurred to him that this was largely his fault. "The ale-houses are about all there is, and all that means is too many people doing too much drinking." He might have added that the whole populace was too afraid of Ysbott and his deputies to do much of anything, but he didn't. "I don't approve of so much public drunkenness. No one seems to know how to operate an illegal lottery, and it's been months since anyone has been able to bet on anything like a decent prize fight. Maybe your man Yergen ought to come out of retirement and crack a few heads."

"I'm sorry to say he's no longer with me, Governor. He didn't want to go to Durmurot, and no one seems to know what's become of him." Having helped rescue Ellayne from her imprisonment in Chutt's house, Yergen had moved on to Ninneburky, where he'd helped defeat Born's raiders. That was a secret Redegger would keep. "I'm sure I'll be able to

replace him, though. I left my organization intact, in case I chose to return someday. And I hardly need say that my old understanding with the city authorities shall be renewed, to our mutual profit." This meant paying bribes to Chutt, and not for the first time.

"Do you think you'll be fully back in business soon?" Chutt asked.

"As long as I have your good will, my lord, and can rely on your protection, I'm entirely sure I can."

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That night a beggar came to Redegger's cellar door and was let in for a meal. It was Redegger's custom to allow it. But this beggar wasn't fed at the servants' table.

"Your disguise would surely fool me on the street, Gallgoid." The ragged beggar was seated in the rich man's drawing room: it made Redegger smile.

"Why have you come back?" Gallgoid asked. "I didn't expect you."

"To help you, of course. Neither Jod nor Constan could come, but I'll be safe enough."

"If Ysbott doesn't get you first," said Gallgoid. "He's only a cutthroat from the back of beyond, but I'm finding it hard to move against him. He doesn't use subtlety when plain murder will do. I thought it would weaken him if the whole city knew what he was, but it's only made the people fear him more."

Redegger passed the spy a cup of expensive wine from Durmurot. Gallgoid sipped it gratefully.

"You and I ought to be a match for him," Redegger said. "I already have several of my men serving as his deputies,

whose first loyalty will always be to me. Ysbott hired them himself.”

“The streets are full of his thugs, and everybody knows the thugs are watching them.”

“We’ll find a way,” said Redegger.

## How Orth Met Wytt

In the morning everyone noticed Orth was gone.

“And Wytt’s gone, too,” Ellayne told Martis. “He must have followed him.”

“Thank God for that,” said Martis.

What they couldn’t do, to their surprise, was get Foxblood to follow him.

“He’s made up his mind, and there’s nothing I can do about it,” the chief said. “All I can do is ask a couple of warriors to go along with him and keep him safe. Hlah has already offered to do that.”

“But you’re the chief!” Ellayne said. “Can’t you make him come back—at least for long enough to think it over?”

“Not against his will,” said Foxblood. “Our chiefs don’t tell grown men what to do. Besides, he’s the First Prester, and I’m only his disciple.”

“But Obann needs him!” Jack said.

“I know that, and so does he. He has decided the Wallekki need him more.”

“I’ll go with Hlah,” Martis said. “Maybe together we can convince him to change his mind.”

“And we’ll go, too,” Ellayne said. “You’ll need us to talk to Wytt.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Martis said.

“Not with you and several warriors to protect us.”

“We can prevent children from doing unsafe things,” said Foxblood.

“Not these children,” Martis said, smiling at him. “I’ve learned that lesson the hard way.”

“Then go,” said Foxblood, “and God go with you.”

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Hlah and two warriors, Redwing and Fisher, had no difficulty following Orth’s trail. “He goes very slowly for a big, strong man,” Redwing said. “We’ll catch up to him tomorrow.”

They found the place where Orth had stopped to sleep. Fisher shook his head. “Poor Sunfish—doesn’t know how to make a fire. See? He tried, but couldn’t do it. He won’t last long if we don’t find him.” They’d also found the tracks of the hunting beast that had followed Orth, then turned away. The Abnaks wondered about them, but concluded that God must be protecting the holy man.

“He’ll keep God busy,” Fisher said.

“God has protected him from more than this,” said Hlah.

Martis left the tracking to the Abnaks. Gallgoid’s plea for help now worried him: things in Obann City must be very bad indeed. But he couldn’t imagine what an innocent like Orth could do to put them right.

Jack and Ellayne kept their eyes peeled for Wyt. “He knows we’ll come after him,” Ellayne said, “and I’m sure he understands that Lord Orth is almost helpless in the wild.”

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Orth's old friends in the city, the guests at his dinners, would have been amazed to see him sleeping on bare ground, wrapped up in furs, and getting up at dawn to plod on and on all day, eating bits of smoked venison as he walked. They would not have been surprised to know he'd inadvertently veered south of his intended course, away from the Fazzan country on the Green Snake River. Orth didn't realize it himself. Any Abnak could have told him he was headed for a sparsely wooded and even more sparsely inhabited country, between the lands of the Fazzan and the Wallekki—and advised him to avoid it.

Wytt followed closely after him, always keeping out of sight, constantly sniffing the air for unfamiliar scents, of which there were plenty. He found no sign of other Omah living in this country, but from time to time he caught the scent of human beings and found horses' hoofprints almost worn away. It had been his experience that humans encountered in such places were unlikely to be anything but dangerous. But the big stupid man was oblivious to all that.

"There are Wallekki in that country who've been cast out by their clans," Foxblood would have said, "and a few Fazzan, too. They live by raiding settlements and ambushing small trading parties. When they come too close to our lands, it's best to kill them."

Before the day was out, two of those riders encountered Orth.

He stopped and raised his staff in salutation, addressing them in Tribe-talk. "Greetings! I seek the land of the Fazzan and the Green Snake River. My name is Orth. Will you stop and share a drink of water with me? I'm sorry I

have nothing better to offer you.”

These men bore the signs of rough living: unwashed faces, ragged clothes, and horses that badly needed grooming. They spoke to one another in Wallekki, which Orth didn't understand.

“Nice furs. We could use them.”

“And his boots might fit me, with a little stuffing.”

“Kill him or sell him?”

“We can always kill him later, if no one wants to buy him.”

They favored Orth with smiles and dismounted.

Wytt watched it all from hiding, and although he didn't speak the language, to him the riders' intentions seemed obvious.

So he shrieked.

“What the devil was that!”

Brandishing his sharpened stick, Wytt dashed out from under a bush, screaming insults. “Insects! Vermin! Sons of flies!” The men drew short swords and swung them at him, but Wytt dodged easily. His movements were too sudden and erratic for the men to hit him.

Orth could only stand and stare. He'd never seen an Omah before. Neither had the Wallekki.

“Kill the man, take his stuff, and let's be out of here!” cried one, and took a step toward Orth, ignoring the small beast that darted around his ankles. He shouldn't have. He was only wearing moccasins and Wytt stabbed him in the back of his ankle, breaking off the point of his stick. The man cried out in sudden pain.

“It is a jinn, and the big man is a sorcerer!” shouted the second Wallekki. “They'll put a spell on us!” Without wait-

ing for his partner, he threw himself back into the saddle and fled. Hissing curses at him, the first man did the same and galloped after him, leaving Orth to stand and wonder.

Wytt, no bigger than a squirrel standing on his hind legs, planted himself in front of Orth and let him have a skinning.

“Feeble, helpless, witless thing! Boy and girl fear for you; they know you’re too stupid to live very long.” He would have added that he couldn’t imagine why Ellayne and Jack cared for such a foolish creature, but Omah rarely try to imagine such things. “Go back to place where you belong! Back to your mother’s nesting burrow!”

To Orth it was just a lot of squeals and chattering. He was trying as hard as he could to make sense of what he saw: a little, tailless, manlike thing covered in reddish fur from head to foot—only it had tiny hands, like human hands, and eyes that were neither animal nor human. And it had fearlessly attacked two full-grown men and driven them away in a panic. If they’d been so afraid of it, shouldn’t he be, too?

Strangest of all, he had the oddest impression that the creature was talking to him: that what he was hearing was not just animal sounds, but some non-human form of language.

“What are you?” Orth said.

And a line of Scripture, from the prophet Ika, floated through his mind. “Behold, your cities shall be heaps, and desolation; and I will give them to the owl and to the bittern, and the hairy ones shall dance therein.” And he remembered, too, from his childhood, fairy tales about the Little People, the skraelings, who did magic.

Orth held up his hand for silence, and Wytt, not know-

ing why he did so, obeyed.

“Hear me,” Orth said. “Whatever you are, I know you for a creature of God, created by Him. And I think it was your loud shriek, last night, that frightened off that wolf-beast that was stalking me. I believe it’s God’s providence that has sent you to me and protected me: for I suppose that those two men, although I didn’t know it, were enemies who would have done me harm. I accept you, therefore, as a friend, and I thank you.” And he bowed: probably the first man ever to bow to an Omah.

Wytt understood but little of the words, but the bow impressed him and he understood the man’s tone. He’d learned enough from Jack and Ellayne to bob his head up and down, energetically, to signal his agreement.

But however hard he tried, he couldn’t get Orth to turn back. All he could do for now was to pick up a new stick and sharpen it with his teeth as he followed after the man.

# A Discovery in Old Obann

Jax's team was held back from duty for a few days and paid a hazard bonus. Except for the one man who'd died, those who had been bitten by the spiders recovered—more or less. Two were left with hardened nodules under the skin where the bites had been. The army physicians had never seen it before and knew not what to make of it.

But other teams had other experiences; and soldiers being soldiers, it was never long before a tale had made the rounds of all the barracks. Jax soon heard one that he had to bring to Gallgoid—heard it from men who'd been there and seen for themselves.

“We were picking away at one of those hard piles on the street, this one harder than most. You really had to swing the pick to make a dent in it,” the tale began. Jax listened intently, trying to remember all the details.

Noon approaching, and the sun being warm for this early in the spring, the crew found it sweaty work and began to sing to raise their spirits. The next team, some twenty yards away with a heap of their own, lent their voices to the song. The chorus echoed up and down the rubbly street, bouncing off the walls of hollow buildings. It was an old army song, and they all knew the words.

The lustiest of the singers belted out the last two lines

of the last verse:

“I want no more of army chow, no matter what they say,  
O Sergeant, I won’t change my mind, I’m signing out  
today!”

It was the last “today” that did it. Without warning, the whole front wall of the nearest building came crashing down with a noise like thunder and a storm of dust that for several minutes engulfed the street and blinded the entire company. Men coughed and cursed and rubbed their eyes, but nothing worse happened to them, and soon enough the wind dispersed the cloud.

When they had collected their wits, they all stood staring, in awed silence, at the gaping interior of the building.

“I think we’d better not sing it again,” somebody said.

The captain came and halted in front of the building, peering into it but not daring to venture another step closer. Men gathered around behind him.

What they saw was a vast, shadowy space with a level floor and three large objects lined up in a row.

“What are they, Captain?”

“How the blazes should I know!”

“They must be some kind of ancient wagon,” said a corporal. “Look, they’ve got wheels.”

“But no place to hitch a horse.”

“Six wheels,” said the captain. “Who ever heard of a wagon with six wheels and no pole for horses? Someone go fetch Colonel Frowley. He’ll want to see this.”

They waited for the colonel, but no one made a move to go inside the building. The colonel came at a run to join them.

Frowley spent more than a few moments deciding what to do.

“I think it’s safe to go in for a closer look,” he said at last. “Corporal, follow me. Six men, no more. The rest of you wait out here.”

No one in Obann, for a thousand years, had ever seen anything like these horseless wagons. Frowley examined one from several angles. Most of the interior was taken up with seats for, he guessed, a dozen passengers. Where the driver ought to be, there was a small wheel.

“This is steel, I guess,” Frowley said. He turned to the corporal. “Get some long ropes, and we’ll haul it outside so we can see it in the sun.”

The corporal went out and came back with a heavy coil of strong hemp rope. “Tie it to the front,” the colonel said. “There’s a kind of bar. Tie it to that.”

Two men cautiously went about fastening the rope. But one of them slipped, and, reaching out to correct for that, leaned with both hands on the front part of the wagon.

The whole thing crumbled into rust and dust. Everyone jumped back from it, fearful of the ceiling falling down on their heads. But only the vehicle, whatever it might once have been, was ruined.

“Let it alone!” Frowley said. “If Otvar’s scholars want to study this, they’ll have to study it in place. Everybody, back outside.” That order was obeyed with some alacrity.

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“I don’t see how heaven could be much better than this!” said Bolli. He sat on a horse, in a saddle, with one of King Ryons’ Ghols to catch him if he fell, and help him down if he didn’t.

Every minute in Lintum Forest brought something

new. That the king was just a boy, as they were, made Gurun's brothers want to be his friends. That he had another boy who looked just like him, and at need impersonated him, only made the whole thing even more fascinating.

Herric would never forget the first time he saw a great big man step out from the midst of a little stand of birches, a piece of the woods he'd happened to be looking at and yet had never seen the man, who must have been there for several minutes looking back at him. The big man came out as if summoned out of thin air by a magic word—an extraordinary fellow with a staff, a ragged garment of patches in every color of the forest and other colors that should have made him stand out, but didn't, and a wild thatch of straw-colored hair with bits of leaf caught in it. Herric couldn't suppress a startle, and the king's double, Fnaa, laughed at him.

"Don't be afraid—it's only Helki," said Fnaa, "and you're not the first to think he was invisible! Helki the Rod, he's called. And what he doesn't know about the forest, no one knows, not even the squirrels."

"Queen Gurun's brothers, well met!" Helki said. "She talks about you all the time, but she never dreamed you'd ever find your way here. Welcome to Lintum Forest."

"Helki takes us into the woods and teaches us how to get along out there," Fnaa said. "And he also killed a giant, once. I wish I'd seen that!"

There were people here with Gurun who were like the heroes in the Scriptures. The boys could hardly sleep at night, for all there was to see and hear and talk about. But Barseen spent much of her time with Obst, the teacher.

"You were brought here by God for a reason, depend

upon it," Obst said. "As Prophet Ika wrote, 'The isles of the sea shall awaken to my word.'"

"The whole world's waking up again," said Barseen, "and it's God who is waking it."

Uduqu's book excited her, although she found the man himself, with his scars and his tattoos, a bit intimidating.

"All those things you've seen and done!" she said to him. "I'd love to bring your book back with me to Arachosia, if I could translate it into our language."

"I'll have to live long enough to finish writing it first," Uduqu said. "Making war is child's play, next to this."

That saying worried Barseen, and she begged Tam to see what she could do for him.

"I'm not sick," Uduqu said, when Tam came to see him, "so why should I need a healer?"

"Please, sir! My uncle was very sick indeed, and Tam healed him."

"Excuse the child's zeal on your behalf," said Tam. "I can tell by looking at you what's wrong with you."

"Oh?" Uduqu challenged her with a glare. "And what might that be?"

"Nothing that a little less food and a little more moving about won't cure," Tam said. "You sit and write all day, every day, and I expect you never refuse a second helping of your supper. Get up and do more, and you'll have more energy for writing. It'll soon come easier to you."

"Aren't you going to make him drink a tonic?" Barseen asked. She'd learned to have great faith in Tam's tonics.

"Not for this old rascal."

Uduqu laughed: Abnaks are fond of insults meant in jest. "If that's what this skinny old bird wants me to do, then

that's what I'll do," he said. "I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of her."

Tam smiled. "You already are," she said.

"Spoken like an Abnak wife!" Uduqu said.

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Hlah and Fisher, with evening quickly coming on, knelt and studied the ground. "This is rather strange," Hlah said.

"Show me," Martis said, and knelt beside him.

"I'm sure you can follow Sunfish's track easily enough. He couldn't conceal it if he tried."

"I can follow it," said Martis. Orth, indeed, was blundering along. And that afternoon they'd found a place where two horsemen had met him and then ridden away in haste. It couldn't be because they were afraid of Orth, Martis thought.

"Someone, or some animal, is following Sunfish very closely," Hlah said, "and sometimes pausing to make these little gouges in the earth. See?" He pointed. "I can't imagine Sunfish doing it himself."

But Jack, peering over Martis' shoulder, laughed.

"It's Wytt!" he said. "That's his way of letting us know he's looking after Orth. He knew we'd follow him."

"Wytt?" Hlah had never seen the Omah.

"One of the Little People, and our friend," Ellayne said. "He's been with us a long time, and wherever we go, he comes with us."

"He's the best help we could have, Hlah," Martis said. "He'll keep Orth safe."

"Couldn't keep him from getting lost, though," Redwing said. "Everybody knows Et-taa-naa-qiqu promised

the Fazzan he'd come and visit them again, but he's way off course. That doesn't surprise me."

"He won't be able to understand what Wytt tries to say to him," Ellayne said.

"But we can," Jack added.

"Well, we ought to catch up to him tomorrow morning, if we get an early start," Hlah said. "He oughtn't to be wandering around this country. It's neither Fazzan nor Wallekki territory, and it's full of outlaws. Those two horsemen who met him, I'm surprised they didn't rob him or even kill him."

"I'll bet Wytt scared them off," Ellayne said. "The Wallekki are very superstitious. They'd be afraid of an Omah if they saw one."

"That's likely," Martis said, "but I hope we can find him before any more outlaws do."

"Amen," said Hlah: for he well knew the dangers of this land.

# How the Oligarchs Visited the Ruins

It was time for the High Council to cross the river and visit Old Obann. The story of the spiders had grown swiftly in the telling, especially among the soldiers.

“Morale is suffering,” General Born said.

“Anyone would think they were getting beaten in a battle,” Lord Chutt grumbled. He agreed with Born that an inspection by the council might at least help keep the fear from spreading into the civilian population.

So they all crossed over at noon the next day—Chutt, Born, Otvar, and two newly appointed members of the ruling council: Lord Fay, a river transport magnate, now in charge of commerce and trade; and in the position once occupied by Chutt, Taxes and Revenue, Lord Esges, a very rich dealer in cut stone and baked brick, who’d paid Chutt handsomely for that seat on the council and was determined to get a good return on it. The sixth seat, Law and Justice, remained vacant: Chutt deemed it unwise to raise Ysbott the Judge that high. Some instinct told him public opinion wouldn’t stand for it, so he maintained a fiction that the council was still looking for a proper candidate.

Five companies of soldiers were working in the ruins that day. “And it’s important,” said Chutt, “that we be seen by all of them and show them that there’s nothing much to be afraid of.”

Indeed, Chutt was anxious to visit the ruins in person. There must be something hidden there, he reasoned, that the mask greatly desired to be found. But as usual, Lord Otvar was muttering against it.

“It’s all just trash that’s no good to anyone,” he said, as their boat neared the opposite shore.

“I’d like to see those ancient wagons that they found the other day,” Lord Fay said.

“The one just crumbled into dust when someone touched it,” Otvar said. “My idiot scholars have been staring at the others ever since, but learning nothing. The army ought to be marching to Durmurot by now, to put a stop to all that business with their so-called Scriptures. Or at least carting away the rubble of the Temple! At the rate it’s going, we’ll all be dead of old age before the first new stone is laid.”

“Everything’s proceeding as it should, First Prester,” Chutt said. “The clearing of the Temple site will provide paying work for a thousand men now unemployed.”

“Who will then be paying taxes,” Esges added.

Lord Fay got his wish, and soon the ruling oligarchs were inspecting the ancient six-wheeled carriages. By now there was little fear of the ceiling falling in on anyone who went inside the building—provided no one sang or shouted.

“There was power here, before the Day of Fire,” Chutt thought, “but what kind of power? How did they make these wagons go without horses? And how can we learn to do the same?”

“What good are these,” Otvar said aloud, “if we can’t lay hands on them to study them? We can’t take it apart to see how it works.”

“But if we keep searching, my lord,” Fay said, “we may find writings that explain how some of these things worked.”

Otvar snorted. “Writings! Do you mean writings like that supposed Lost Book of King Ozias that some charlatan cooked up and which that gullible ass Jod publishes as Scripture?”

“Jod is a nuisance,” said Born, “but he’s a man with a high reputation for integrity.”

“He’s been hoaxed,” said Otvar. “What kind of writings would survive the Day of Fire?”

Chutt interposed. “My lords,” he said, “we have many more things to see today, and the men need to see us. Let’s move on.”

Colonel Frowley led the councilors from place to place. The work had not advanced very far into the old city. Before that could happen, more men would have to be brought in to clear the streets.

Chutt admired the towering walls that remained of Old Obann. How high they must have stood before destruction visited the city, he could only imagine, but surely taller than anything in the Obann that he knew. Now he understood; now he saw that Lord Reesh had been right. This was greatness. This had once been the grandest city in the world, its people the wisest and most powerful. It seemed impossible that such greatness could ever have been brought down. “But it was!” his very eyes insisted. “It was! And by the wrath of God.”

But had God truly done it? He had a feeling that Lord

Reesh hadn't thought so. Obann's Empire had had many enemies. Suppose some of them had had the same kind of power. Even suppose Obann's own power had been turned against itself. Sometimes Reesh used to speak as if he didn't believe in God at all—and who was wiser than Lord Reesh?

The golden mask had power. Chutt felt it every time he put it on. What would he see, what would he know, if he were wearing it now? Very much more, he thought, than just a lot of soldiers digging in the rubble.

But as yet he dared not wear the mask in public.

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Ysbott heard about the six-wheeled carts with no hitch for horses, but took no interest in it. If that sort of thing kept Lord Chutt amused, he was welcome to it.

But he was interested in a new house of public entertainment that would feature gambling. There was precious little gambling in Lintum Forest. For most people, and especially for outlaws, it was enough of a gamble just to live through the day. Ysbott had never played any kind of card game in his life and barely knew the use of dice.

"They're going to have a prize fight there tonight, my lord," one of his deputies told him. "It's been a long time since I've seen one. You should go. Have a little flutter—you know?"

"You mean bet on who will win the fight?"

"I've picked a winner now and then," said the deputy. "It's fun."

So Ysbott found himself that evening at a place called Maglin's House of Pleasure, among a crowd that had flowed out to a backyard to see the fight. Ysbott went alone and

wore a hood to hide the scar on his face. If people recognized him, they'd be afraid and wouldn't behave naturally.

He watched two louts clumsily batter one another while coins clinked, bets were offered and accepted, and drunken patrons cheered. It struck him as the height of foolishness to fight with fists when knives were so much better. The boxers seemed incapable of damaging each other in any meaningful way, and the cheers turned into jeers, which added to the crowd's enjoyment.

And while Ysbott watched the fight, someone else watched Ysbott.

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Redegger, content to be no more than another face in the crowd, had never seen Ysbott before but knew him from descriptions provided by a couple of Ysbott's deputies. These men had worked for Redegger before and now worked for him again. Ysbott was not well loved, but was abundantly feared, by his deputies. They would assassinate him if Redegger gave the word.

"But not yet," thought Redegger. There was much to be learned before that. And it would be better, he thought, for Ysbott to be lawfully hanged for his crimes. Redegger had never ordered killings in the old days and was averse to changing his methods now.

He noticed Ysbott didn't bet. Redegger never gambled, either. It was why he was rich and those who patronized his gaming tables weren't. That Ysbott didn't bet indicated a certain amount of intelligence.

"He's not like us," Gallgoid said, when Redegger met him that morning. "He will kill at the drop of a hat, without

a moment's hesitation." Redegger didn't know that Gallgoid, in Lord Reesh's service, had been a poisoner. But he wasn't anymore. "This is a man without an ounce of sympathy for any creature on the earth. If you have any dealings with him face-to-face, be careful."

"I pay Lord Chutt for license to run my little business. I pay him well. He would be genuinely sorry, and not a little peeved, if Ysbott were to cut my throat."

Gallgoid grinned. "Hard to imagine you and Prester Jod hitting it off!"

For the time being, Redegger was content to watch and study Ysbott. He would need time to reestablish his gambling network, set up his payroll, and recruit better boxers than these two hapless specimens. To set Chutt and Ysbott against each other, and to undermine Chutt's position in the city, it might take the rest of the year to do that. And there were people who would have to be protected.

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The Abnaks at Carbonek had scoured this part of the forest clean of outlaws, but Helki, when he could, still went out alone, looking for signs of trouble that anyone else would miss.

This time he took Cavall and Baby with him. They were good company because they never talked. The hound understood that any unusual scent along the trail, Helki would want to know about, and trusted Helki not to ignore him. The big bird, never entirely at his ease in dense woods, had a sense of smell every bit as acute as the dog's, and predators would go far out of their way to avoid him. Birds, Helki knew, were quite intelligent, more so than most ani-

mals. But stupid animals didn't live very long.

Baby stood taller than a man and picked up scents that even a dog might miss, because they were carried in the air above the ground. Between his two companions, and his own woodcraft, Helki could expect not to be surprised by any enemy.

They'd gone a day's journey southward to a pile of ruins that had once been a noble's hunting lodge. Baby didn't like such places. If he could have talked, he would have said they were unwholesome, but he couldn't have told you why. He had not yet mastered the art of communicating with humans other than Perkin, who had raised him from a chick. He stalked around the tumbled stones and the few hardwood posts left standing by the centuries, bobbing his head back and forth, his beak ready to snap shut on he knew not what. Cavall picked up on the bird's uneasiness and raised his head, trying to catch whatever scent was yet out of his reach.

"Don't like it here, do you?" Helki said softly. "Well, I don't, either. I've been here before, and it never made me feel like this."

Cavall went into the ruin, sniffed at something on the ground, and whined. Helki came in and knelt beside him.

"Someone had a little fire here, not too long ago," he said. It had rained two days ago and washed away most of the ashes, but there were still a few dark streaks and charred bits of wood. "Doesn't look like a fire anyone would build who knew or cared what he was doing."

Baby stalked back and forth, ruffling the feathers on his neck. Helki stood up to watch him. The bird seemed puzzled.

And in fact he was. Every kind of human had its own kind of scent, each subtly different from the others. It was because of what they ate, what materials they used to make their clothes, and what they did or didn't do to keep themselves clean. This scent was new to him.

"Let's find out who's been here," Helki said. "Trail them, Cavall."

Cavall barked once, eager for a chase and to show he understood, trotted out of the ruin, searched the ground in ever-widening circles until he found the scent, and took off on a narrow path that led southeastward. Baby hissed once and followed him, and Helki followed the bird.

# How They Found Lord Orth

Wytt had his hands full with the big man, who would surely walk right off a cliff if you didn't keep an eye on him. He almost stepped on an ugly brown snake that could have killed him with a single bite. There was no scaring off the snake, so Wytt had to screech at the man and jab his feet to turn him out of harm's way. He didn't even see the snake until Wytt threw several twigs at it and it finally wriggled off into the underbrush.

"No eyes! No ears! No nose!" Wytt shrilled at the rightful First Prester of Obann.

Having seen the snake, once it moved, Orth answered, "Friend, you've saved me once again, and bless the Lord's providence in sending you to help me. I thought I'd learned a thing or two about traveling in the wilderness, but it seems I've fooled myself about that. I am sorry!"

Wytt was angrier than he'd ever been with Jack or Ellayne: he couldn't find words for it even if he had any. All that came out was a furious stream of chatter. If he could have lectured the man, he would have told him that no such helpless fool could ever hope to get through this country

alive—poisonous snakes, large and hungry predators, nests full of ground-hornets that had better not be stepped on, and human beings with evil hearts. But all he could do was chatter until he was out of breath.

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Wytt had been making gouges in the earth with his sharp stick, and even Jack and Ellayne could follow that trail. They ran on ahead of the men a little ways, competing with each other to see who could find the next sign.

“I’ll see them first!” Ellayne cried. Hlah said Orth and Wytt couldn’t be very far ahead of them now.

“Show-off!” Jack answered.

“Don’t get out of sight!” Martis called after them.

“We won’t let them,” Hlah said.

“Besides,” Redwing said, “we’ve just about caught up to Sunfish. These tracks are fresh. He can’t be more than an hour ahead of us by now.”

Evening was bearing down on them when Jack shouted, “There he is! Lord Orth, wait for us!”

“Wytt!” Ellayne called. “Here we are!”

Orth stopped and turned to see them, and Wytt came dashing back to join his friends. He leaped into Ellayne’s arms. Martis and the Abnaks came up at a trot.

“He’s really mad,” Ellayne said, as Wytt chattered fiercely into her ear. “I won’t tell you all the names he’s calling Lord Orth. They’re not polite.”

Orth stood waiting for them. “He ought to be ashamed of himself,” Jack thought, then thought again: “He came out here all alone to serve God—just like we did, when we climbed Bell Mountain. It’s the same thing.” And it was

Jack's turn to feel ashamed.

"Hlah, my son," said Orth, "I am sorry for the trouble that you've had on my behalf. But I promised the Fazzan that I would visit them again and promised our Lord that I would visit the Wallekki."

Fisher laughed at him. "In the direction you've been going, Sunfish, you won't be keeping either of those promises."

"What?"

"It's true," said Hlah. "You've gone the wrong way."

"In more ways than one!" Ellayne muttered. Martis nudged her into silence.

"We've just enough time to make camp before it's dark," he said.

The Abnaks agreed. They had no time to seek a better campsite, preferably beside a stream, and had to be content with where they were. Everyone gathered firewood, and the Abnaks set up windbreaks, and all three of them couldn't stop staring at Wytt.

"Yes, he's one of the Little People," Ellayne said, "and no, he won't put a spell on you. Be glad. No one can sneak up on us as long as he's here."

"Three times he saved my life," said Orth. By the time he'd finished telling those stories, the Abnaks had a good fire going, and they all sat down to eat.

Orth was quiet. Bad enough he'd gone the wrong way and quickly gotten lost. But he'd heard Ellayne say "in more ways than one" and was thinking hard about it. For more than once the Scriptures said that out of the mouths of babes came wisdom.

The Abnaks told him the two men he'd met were rob-

bers who might have killed him. What if there had been more robbers—seven or eight of them, on horseback? Orth wondered now: these friends of his, who'd gone to so much trouble to protect him—they might have encountered such a band of felons. They might have been killed, trying to help him. And they might yet all be in danger.

“Because of me,” thought Orth.

“Sunfish,” said Hlah, as they finished their rations, “I wish you'd reconsider. God's people in your own country have cried out for you to come and help them. Someone else, someday, will carry God's word to the Wallekki. But only you are the First Prester of Obann.”

“Let him be,” said Martis. Because of his own past, he felt unworthy to take part in religious discussions. “It's dangerous to go back to Obann. Sooner or later Chutt will send the army out again”—just as Lord Otvar was urging him to do—“and this time there won't be winter weather to stop it. He holds the city tightly in his hand, along with the towns whose oligarchs owe their position to him. If you come back, my lord, be assured your enemies will seek your life. Chutt will hire assassins.” In this last, he spoke as one who knew: Lord Reesh's favorite assassin, not so long ago.

“Allifar's friends are preparing to go back home,” said Hlah. “Surely they won't fail to tell the Wallekki of all the things they've seen and heard while they were with us. That will be a start, won't it?”

“Would it be so bad to let the Wallekki marinate a little longer?” Ellayne said. It was one of her mother's pet expressions. As a former gourmet, Orth smiled to hear it.

Surprising himself, he made a decision.

“My friends, I yield!” he said. “I'll return to Obann with

you. I believe it's God's will."

And Martis thought, "What have we done?"

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As the day drew to a close, Baby and Cavall went faster. Helki was hard put to keep up with them. "The trail is getting hot!" he thought.

Cavall began to bark and dashed ahead of Baby, who was too big to go quietly and crashed through the underbrush behind him. "So much for surprising our prey," Helki said to himself. "Well, they wouldn't be making so much noise if they'd detected any danger."

In a clearing that barely accommodated the three of them, Helki found something he didn't expect.

A man stood buried in the ground up to his waist, helpless and defenseless, with Cavall's jaws six inches from his face, barking fit to wake the dead. All the man could do was flail his arms and clap his hands over his eyes. Baby towered over him, head cocked to one side, feathers ruffled, as if preparing to bite off the man's head.

"No, Baby, hold—we've got to talk to him!" Helki pushed the bird aside. Baby hissed and snapped at the air with a loud clack, but made no other protest. Only Helki and Perkin would have been allowed to handle him so roughly.

"Quiet, Cavall. Sit." Cavall whined once, and obeyed.

It took the man in the hole a moment to realize it was quiet now. He was a small man with a bushy grey beard and clothes that could rightly be called rags. At last his hands fell from his eyes, and he looked up fearfully.

"Mercy! Helki the Rod!" he said. "Please don't kill me! I've never done your people any harm."

“So you know me, but I don’t know you,” Helki said. “What’s your name, and who planted you in that hole? Don’t be afraid. I’ll do you no harm.”

“My name is Gibb—Gibb the Stoat, they call me. And I hardly know how to tell you who did this to me, or why, because I don’t know their language. Strangers from the south, savages—horrible men who don’t even know how to make fire. They took me prisoner, made me their slave. I think they wanted me to guide them through the forest and make their fires for them, and I guess they didn’t like the way I did it. I had a couple of mates, but the strangers killed them.”

Helki grunted. A tiny band of outlaws living hand to mouth—that’s what they must have been. There were no settlements in this part of the forest. Outlaws had to rob each other.

But strangers from the south, too ignorant to make their own fire—who could they be? Helki drew his knife, and Gibb flinched.

“Relax, I’m going to dig you out of there. Help me, Cavall.”

Between the man and the dog, they freed Gibb from the earth. Baby watched impatiently, occasionally hissing.

“That’s one of those big birds from the plains,” said Gibb. “What’s it doing here?”

“Helping me to scout the territory,” Helki said. “Make no sudden movements, and he won’t bother you. He’s kind of used to people by now.” He stressed “kind of.” “Now tell me more about these strangers.”

Gibb shrugged, unable to take his eyes off Baby.

“I don’t know anything much about them,” he said,

“except they’re ugly, they have spears and these wicked throwing sticks that did it for my mates, and they’re stronger than any men I ever saw. They go practically naked, but they’re so hairy, they hardly need clothes. They sound like gabbling geese when they talk, but they don’t talk much.” He stared harder at Baby, who was staring at him. He talked too fast, thought Helki. “You’re going to feed me to that thing, aren’t you?”

“What makes you think so?” Helki wondered.

“Well, you’re Helki the Rod, aren’t you? Everybody’s heard of you. You killed Latt Squint-eye. You hunt the free men of Lintum Forest”—that was what the outlaws liked to call themselves—“like beasts, and hang them like polecats. Your Abnaks take their scalps. You’ll kill us all, if you can catch us.”

“I won’t kill you,” Helki answered, not troubling to defend his reputation to an outlaw, “but I do need to get a look at these strangers of yours, and I want you to come along in case I need you. How many of them are there?”

“Don’t know why you’d need me,” Gibb muttered. “There are eight of them. Too many for you to tackle.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Helki. That time he’d saved Martis, he’d routed ten of Latt’s men, and that was without Baby and Cavall to help him.

## How Lord Chutt Dreamed of Empire

Bassas often rode out on patrol with his men, sometimes as far west as Cardigal. Few people from Cardigal visited Ninneburky now, and trade along the river had suffered.

“You be careful, Bassas,” Baroness Vannett said. “That oligarch in Cardigal is Lord Chutt’s creature, and he’ll catch you if he can. Chutt would reward him for that.”

Bassas was under no illusions as to what Chutt would do to him if he were captured. But no one in Obann City had ever expressed any concern for his welfare, and he appreciated it.

“I will, my lady,” he promised.

He was under orders from the baron not to hurt anyone he met along the way. That didn’t mean he couldn’t stop them for questioning. News that trickled out of Obann City was valuable and hard to come by. And travelers between Obann and Cardigal, confronted by a band of armed Wallekki on horseback, were easily persuaded to pass on anything they’d heard.

The whole army was busy digging up the old city, they

reported, in search of secrets of the past that could be used against Chutt's enemies. There was also an expectation of finding treasure.

"But that won't do us any good if the curse comes down on us," said a man who was coming home from selling cheese in the city. He warmed to his tale. "Why, just a few days ago, a whole company of soldiers got wiped out by a swarm of huge spiders that came rushing out of a hole in the ground. And there was a voice, too, that came up from the hole, and it said 'So perish all, so perish all, who do the same!'"

Bassas was glad his men couldn't speak Obannese. He understood it well enough for the hairs to stand up on his neck. It was not sane to trespass into places inhabited by jinns.

Bassas had promised King Ryons that he would believe in, love, and honor the true God from now on, but as yet he knew very little of that God, other than that He was far more powerful than any Heathen god and had carried Ryons and his men through perils that would otherwise have swallowed them without a burp. This matter of jinns being disturbed in the old city greatly troubled Bassas. When he returned from that patrol, he went to see old Ashrof, the prester in Ninneburky's chamber house.

"I must know if God can protect us from jinns when they are stirred up to anger," he said.

Ashrof fidgeted with his beard, not at all sure what a jinn was.

"They are evil spirits that inhabit certain places," Bassas explained. "They work magic and can put terrible curses on whosoever they please."

Ashrof had, for much of his long life, taken lightly the miracles described in Scripture. Since Jack and Ellayne miraculously had climbed Bell Mountain and rung King Ozias' bell, which Ashrof had heard with his own ears here in Ninneburky—indeed, which every living soul had heard, all the way out to the great sea and beyond—he had become a wiser man.

“My son,” he said, “I know nothing of jinns, but I do know that whatever spirits there be, good or evil, they are subject to the sovereign will of God. That means they can do nothing against His will, and whom He chooses to protect, is protected.”

“I was afraid of some destroying horror breaking loose from Old Obann and spreading all over the country,” said Bassas.

Ashrof shuddered. “I fear it too, my son. But I put my trust in God, and you should, too.”

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Roshay Bault had heard from Martis and from Obst that the Day of Fire had left a few things from the ancient world that had great power to do harm. He himself had narrowly escaped from Obann on that disastrous Coronation Day, when fire devoured the palace. He'd seen, from miles away, the billowing black smoke of that blaze and had heard from other witnesses that the fire had burst out of a kind of box lent to Goryk Gillow by the Thunder King.

Winter was well and truly dead—winter, that had kept Chutt's army from the walls of Ninneburky. The trees were all in bud by now, and the Baroness' butterbushes sported yellow flowers. The plains had gone from grey to green, and

the pair of goldies that had nested in the branches of the linden tree by Roshay's office window for the past five years were home from their sojourn in the south.

There was nothing to stop Chutt's army from coming east again. If he put forth all his strength against Ninneburky, the town would fall. There could be no way to save it.

Roshay would have liked to write to Gallgoid, pleading for news, but he needed a more pressing reason for asking a man to smuggle such a letter into the city.

Maybe Orth would come back, he thought, with the children and Martis. What the First Prester could do, Roshay didn't know, but it would be good to have him back.

For the time being, there was nothing to be done but wait.

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When he was alone in his office—which was most of the time, because few people had any desire to see him—Ysbott liked to toy with the ancient relic he'd confiscated from the soldier. He kept it in the top drawer of his desk and took it out when no one was looking. But thanks to Redegger, Ysbott was watched more closely than he knew. So Redegger knew that Ysbott had an ancient thing that was not quite dead, and Gallgoid knew it, too.

That greenish face with the big eyes, that appeared when you pressed a certain way, and that feeble buzzing noise it made—what could it be? Roshay Bault's daughter, curse her for a witch, had had an object that exploded. Naturally, Ysbott feared that his would do the same, and if it did, surely this time it would kill him. All the same, he couldn't keep his hands off it.

Up until now he'd never known there'd ever been an ancient world so very different from his own. The thought unsettled him. Imagine not knowing that the world you lived in, day to day, had once been so alien, so strange, as to be unrecognizable. It was a thought too big for Ysbott. He couldn't get a grip on it.

"But how," was the only question he could think to ask, "can it help me?" Help him to gain riches, although he already had more wealth than he knew what to do with. Help him to gain more power in the city, although he already had that, too. "Why should it all go to Chutt?" Although Chutt had already raised him higher than he'd ever dreamed was possible, Ysbott was beginning to feel jealous. "He has the mask—isn't that enough? Why should he have everything?"

He requested, and received, permission from Lord Chutt to accompany him on a visit to the warehouse where they cleaned, sorted, and studied—so far, fruitlessly—the loot recovered from Old Obann: countless objects, most of them little more than fragments, laid out on countless tables.

"Obann had an empire, once," said Chutt, "so why not have an empire once again? Here, if we could only find it, is the key to empire! We might succeed in doing what the Thunder King almost did—if only we could find the key!"

"An empire?" Ysbott said.

"Before the old city was destroyed, Obann's rule reached from the western sea all the way out to the Great Lakes," Chutt said. "The Heathen say there is another sea, just as great, far out in the east. The empire of the Thunder King reached almost to that eastern shore, and almost to the west. Why shouldn't ours extend from sea to sea? What

he nearly did, I can do! If only these ancient things would yield their secrets to us.”

“You couldn’t even conquer Ninneburky,” Ysbott thought, but didn’t say. He did wonder, then, why the Thunder King had fallen short of his goal. They all said he had the biggest army ever seen. With it he’d conquered all the East. And yet when he’d tried to push his rule across the mountains, over Obann, he’d failed. Why? And here was Chutt, who’d be lucky to survive two minutes as an outlaw chief in Lintum Forest, prattling away about becoming master of the world. Was his mind going?

“But he has the mask,” Ysbott thought. “How can I know what the mask has been saying to him?” For Ysbott had learned this lesson: “You don’t wear the mask; the mask wears you.” Only a wily fellow like Ysbott the Snake, he told himself, was slippery enough to escape its power. Chutt, he thought, had kept it long enough to be a slave to it by now.

Armed guards stood by one table in the farthest corner of the building. Three of Otvar’s scholars peered and timorously prodded at a very few small objects.

“Come and see these,” said Chutt.

The scholars stepped aside for Chutt and Ysbott. Chutt picked up a square, featureless sheet of something colored a pale red through and through.

“What does it do?” said Ysbott.

By way of an answer, Chutt slammed it against the edge of the table, almost hard enough to overturn the table, with a loud crack. The scholars flinched.

“See?” he said. “It’s almost as light as a sheet of paper, but I can’t break it. You can’t cut it, either, even with a saw. Nor can it be bent. But we know that this material can be

melted rather easily, and we're sure it can be cut if you heat the blade.

"If we knew how to make this material, whatever it is, and learned how to shape it, we could have impenetrable armor for our soldiers. Anything we made from it would be stronger than steel. But so far no one has been able to unravel its secret."

The other objects were a small spring, coated with a soft white material, that still sprung after a thousand years in the ground; a round thing that clicked loudly when he pressed it; and a little black box that defied all efforts to open it.

Ysbott was too wise to say, "But what good is any of this?" Clearly Chutt was captivated by these things.

A racking cough from one of the scholars interrupted Ysbott's train of thought.

"What's the matter with you, fellow?" Chutt snapped.

"Nothing, really, my lord—just a little weary today. I need to sit down for a minute." Another scholar slid a stool to him. He almost slipped off when he sat on it. "Coming down with a cold, I think."

"Can't you fools find out what any of this stuff is made of? I thought you were supposed to be clever men!" Chutt glared at the scholars.

One of them spoke up, in little more than a whisper. "Some of the soldiers have been feeling sick, too, my lord."

"A little hard work never made anyone sick," said Chutt, who was a stranger to manual labor of any kind. Born had told him that he'd heard men complaining that the sun was too hot for their comfort lately. Chutt wrote them off as shirkers: Obann was a long way from its summer.

“Maybe I ought to let you wise men dig,” he said, “and have the soldiers study what you find. Then we might make some progress.”

The scholars pretended to be amused.

# How the Omah Danced

The Omah have no holy books and no ability to read. They cannot know that God, in the Scriptures, promises to give them the ruins of Obann's greatest cities to belong to them forever. Nevertheless, they know these places are theirs by right. How they know, they wouldn't even try to say. They do not know God by name, but He has provided them with other ways of knowing Him.

There were no gawnks prowling the ruins of Obann because gawnks do not exist, despite the fact that more than a few people believe in them and fear them. But there were Omah in the ruins, whole tribes of them, but only Ellayne and Jack and Martis had ever seen them. Maybe some of those persons who'd fled into the ruins to escape the hangman had also met the Omah, but none of them had ever returned to tell the tale.

The army's trespass into Old Obann was an extraordinary event—enough so as to move the Omah to assemble in a secret place in the center of the city, underground, so that the elders of the tribes could discuss what they ought to do. No human would have recognized it as any kind of discussion at all—just an intolerable cacophony of chattering, squealing, growling, and harsh whistling. But if anyone could have put it into words as we know them, it would have been something like this:

“The Big People will keep on coming until they find our nests and kill our young. There are too many of them for us to fight, and many more where they came from. How can we drive them out so that they never come again?”

“There are snake-beasts whose bite will kill a man, but they are very few, and they are afraid of all the noise the big men make. There are the little red spiders, but how many men can they kill? We cannot get much help from them.

“Even so, there are places that can kill! We know how to stay away from those places, where the very air is poison—secret poison. We cannot smell it, taste it, see it, or feel it. We know where all those places are. If the Big People go to those places, they will die. So we must find out how to bring them to those places, and when enough of them die, the rest will go away.”

There were elders who feared that if the poison places were disturbed, the poison would seep out into other places and kill the Omah, too. But the Omah were not made in such a way that such misgivings would ever stop them from doing what needed to be done. In much less time than it would have taken humans, the elders all agreed to act.

And then they danced.

Omah do not pray. They dance. And when they danced in silence, that was their prayer.

Thousands of them swarmed up from underground to a wide, deserted, empty city square and filled it with their dance, under the faint light of a waning moon and an innumerable host of stars. The square itself, had any human been there to see it, seemed to crawl and quiver. They danced until the sky turned grey with dawn, then dispersed to their respective tribal territories.

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Interested as she was by Uduqu's book, it wasn't long before Barseen heard of Fnaa's plan to carve enough lettered blocks to duplicate a whole page at a time. He proudly showed her his collection of blocks, by now totaling some two hundred. "Soon we'll have enough to do the first page of the book," he said.

Barseen's family owned an ancient book of Oziah's Sacred Songs, created by some method long ago forgotten but obviously not copied by hand. Few such books remained.

"Now I see!" she cried, clapping her hands. "This must be how the ancients used to make their books. I've always wondered how the letters in my family's book had been made to look exactly the same from page to page. We thought the copyists must have had some secret way of doing it. How did you ever think of it?"

Fnaa blushed. "By accident, to tell the truth," he said. "It all started with some inky fingerprints. And I thought, why not letters instead of finger smudges? It's an awful lot of work to carve all these letters, but it'd be just as hard to carve out a whole page, and you could always use the same letters for another page."

"Well, it's been a thousand years since anybody thought of doing that! Someday whole books can be created in a fraction of the time it would take to copy them by hand." She kissed Fnaa loudly on the cheek. "When I think of all the sages who have puzzled over this for ages!"

"A good carver ought to be able to do pictures, too," Fnaa said.

"I wish Prester Jod knew about this! Imagine all the books of Scripture he could turn out, once he had enough

letters. He could fill the whole world with God's word!"

Fnaa froze for a moment.

"There's an idea!" he said. "Why not use the blocks we already have to make a letter to him and send it—along with a few of the blocks—so he can see how we did it?"

"That would be a very important letter, Fnaa."

"Then I guess we ought to get to work on it," Fnaa said.

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Shesh, Obst, and Gurun were talking about building a ship.

"We'd have to go back to Durmurot and build it there," Shesh said. "And maybe we'd have to build some kind of port, too, while we were at it."

"Could you really do it?" Gurun asked.

"I never built a ship from scratch before, my lady, but yes, I think I could. There must be plenty of skilled carpenters in Durmurot who can learn the craft, if someone shows them what to do. Then it'd be a matter of finding a crew and training them to be sailors."

"Easier said than done," said Obst. "Our people fear the sea."

"Brave and intelligent men can be found everywhere," said Gurun. "King Ryons' army is full of them."

"Even so," said Obst, "Shesh had a ship full of experienced sailors, and still it was wrecked."

"No one says the sea isn't dangerous," Shesh answered. "But those two boys, the queen's brothers, came all the way here in just a little boat—as you did, too, my lady. If the Lord so wills it, I'll build a ship in Durmurot someday and sail it home to Arachosia. And no one there would think it was a

miraculous achievement.”

Gurun was thinking hard—indeed, she was thinking of it all the time—of going back to Fogo Island, to her mother and father. How she longed to see them! “And won’t they be angry with me!” she thought. “They won’t have words for it.” But to bring back to them their lost daughter, and Herric and Bolli, too—Gurun had no words for that.

But to leave King Ryons? Him, and all these people who called her their queen. Her sixteen Blays, who looked to her to teach them to know God?

“Oh, but there are others who can do the things I do!” she argued with herself.

She caught sight then of Jiharr, a chieftain of the Zeph, passing from one place to another with the giant’s sword on his shoulder—heavy, a burden, but he never went without it—Jiharr, struck down with that very same sword by Uduqu when they’d dueled, who should have died on the spot had God not healed him by the means of Gurun’s touch. He was her sworn champion, and the king’s, too, since Uduqu had passed the honor on to him. The shock of that healing was still with her, as were so many things she’d seen and done. How could she possibly leave her king? How could that not tear her heart?

“Can it truly be so wrong,” she wondered, “to want to feel my father’s arms around me once again and my mother’s kisses? And just to see the cliffs of Fogo Island one more time?”

To those questions Gurun had no answer.

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Bolli and Herric sat entranced as Ryons told them how the great beast, as big as a mountain, picked him up in its

mouth and sat him on its shoulders to carry him into the battle at Obann. No one on Fogo Island had ever seen a battle, and the boys could hardly imagine one. But to imagine that beast was even harder.

“Oh, I would have loved to see that!” Herric said.

“The beast went away after the battle was over,” said Ryons, “and no one has ever seen it again.”

“Weren’t you afraid?” Bolli asked.

Ryons laughed. “Afraid? I don’t know what I was! It was just all happening, all so fast, and I was in it. I still have dreams about it. The whole thing was like a dream. Sometimes I wonder if it really happened. But everybody saw it.”

“But how big was the beast, really? Was it as big as a whale?” Bolli said.

Ryons pointed to the castle. “See that pointed window, way up there—the one with all the dried-up vines around it? If the beast were standing here right now, he could look through that window.”

Bolli whistled. Neither he nor his brother would have chosen to go back home just now—not on the biggest, finest ship in Arachosia.

# Strangers from the South

Wytt, who'd been out scouting since before the sun came up, pronounced the neighborhood clear of enemies, at least for now, so the humans had their breakfast. They planned to travel all day, taking the most direct route back to Foxblood's camp in Abnak country.

"From there we ought to have an easy trip to Lintum Forest," Martis said.

"But I don't mean to go to Lintum Forest," Orth said. That surprised everyone.

"I mean," he added, "to go back to the city. After all, what could I do from Lintum Forest? I might as well be here as there. It's Obann itself where everything is going wrong and needs to be put right—if possible. I can't do anything unless I'm in the city."

"But you'll be safe in Lintum Forest," Ellayne said. "King Ryons' people will protect you."

"If I wanted protection, I could stay with Chief Foxblood."

"Be reasonable, First Prester," Martis said. "The city isn't safe for anyone, these days."

"But that's what needs to be put right," said Orth, "and it can't be done from Lintum Forest."

"Sunfish, those wicked men in the city will kill you,"

Hlah said. "Foxblood won't let you leave if you're going to your death."

"He'll have to, my son. He can't keep me against my will." ("Oh, yes, he can!" thought Jack.) "I'm ready to give my life, if the Lord asks it of me. He has a right to it: a small enough price to pay for my betrayal of the city." Orth had been Lord Reesh's confederate in opening the secret gates to the Heathen. He'd confessed that in front of the conclave that had elected him First Prester—an action that he could only attribute to the Spirit of God. "It may be," he added, "the only thing I have to offer."

The two Abnak warriors exchanged glances.

"You are a very brave man, Lord Sunfish," Redwing said.

"Or else a very foolish one," said Fisher.

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Helki found the invaders from the south eating the carcass of a deer—raw, without a fire. They cut into it with stone knives that appeared to be unusually sharp.

He'd come this close to them alone, leaving his companions several hundred yards behind and carefully positioned upwind, lest their quarry should detect their scent. It would be up to Cavall to keep them there.

"If you run away," he told Gibb, "don't expect me to waste time looking for you. Besides, Baby will chase you and you'll have only yourself to blame for what happens when he catches you."

"Whatever you say, Helki! I'll stay put right here. But don't you get too close to those creatures, whatever they are. They'll kill you for sure."

Gibb called them creatures, but they were men, thought Helki. They'd smeared various plant juices all over their bodies, probably to repel insects, maybe to confuse prey. But under it all was the unmistakable scent of man.

Even so, he didn't blame Gibb for doubting their humanity. "Looks like they're trying to conceal it," Helki thought.

They were exceedingly hairy, just as Gibb had said, curly and coarse black hair sprouting in tufts from unwashed, weather-darkened skin. They were very broad of chest and shoulders, which made them seem a little shorter than they really were, and muscled, thought Helki, like wild boars.

They chewed their meat with heavy jaws, no one speaking, no one even grunting. Hideous scars disfigured their faces—scars that Helki thought had been carefully inflicted for a purpose. Some Abnaks tattooed their faces; maybe the scars were a similar custom. People did have some very strange customs, Helki thought.

They had short spears with stone points, and heavy sticks, flattened and carved for a true flight when you threw them. Helki agreed with Gibb that those looked dangerous. And as for clothing, they had none, unless you counted hair, plant juices, daubs of animal fat, and dirt as clothing.

"Now what are you boys doing in Lintum Forest?" Helki wondered. "And where have you come from?" He'd never seen or heard of any men like these before. The only way to find out was to question them, and they didn't look like people one could question safely.

As silent as a puff of smoke, Helki retreated back to where he'd left his companions. Not even Cavall heard him coming, but the dog knew better than to bark when Helki

emerged from the trees.

Gibb startled badly, but had the sense to clap a hand over his mouth to keep from crying out.

“Great globs!” he whispered harshly. “How the blazes do you do that! Anyone would think you were a ghost.”

“Not so loud. I don’t know how keen their hearing is.”

“You saw them, then? You found them? What do you think of them?”

“They’re men, not beasts,” Helki said, “and I need to find out what they’re doing here. We’ll have to capture one and bring him back to Carbonek.”

“Are you crazy! You might as well try to catch and tame a wild bull. No, we’ve got to get out of here before they catch one of us.”

“Cavall and I can do it. Sooner or later one of them will be alone, and then we’ll have him.”

“But what’ll you do then?” Gibb said. “You can’t talk to those people. Believe me, I tried! They don’t even talk to each other.”

“Feel free to leave, if you’d like.”

“No, thank you! My outlaw days are over, so you don’t have to hang me, Helki.” Gibb’s beard wagged up and down. Helki didn’t know why, but the man reminded him of a chipmunk. “No, sir, I’m sticking with you, if you don’t mind. I can cook, you know. I’ll cook for you.”

“I thought you said the strangers didn’t like your cooking.”

“Well, what else would you expect from the likes of them?”

The man was simply terrified to be on his own within miles of the strangers. How he’d survived so long as an

outlaw, Helki couldn't guess.

"You can stay," he said, "but don't get in my way."

"Not for a minute, Helki," Gibb promised.

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Asha's All-New House of Pleasure—owned by Redegger, with Asha merely playing the part: Gallgoid visited it that night. So did many others.

The main attraction was a Wheel of Fortune. You placed your bet on the table, a pretty girl spun the wheel, and if it stopped on your number, you won all the money on the table; but if it stopped on a red space, Asha won. The game was illegal, strictly speaking. That it was openly played here showed that Redegger had paid Chutt and was under his protection. Anyone else who tried to run the game would be closed down. As Redegger practiced the art, bettors won often enough to keep them coming back for more. The house won often enough to make a profit.

Someone jostled Gallgoid's elbow.

"Say! Aren't you with the Temple?" It was portly little Asha, going around the room with a drink in his hand, being friendly. His words to Gallgoid were a prearranged signal, Redegger's way of telling him that if he needed to pass on an urgent message, he could trust Asha to do it.

"No, not me. I'm with the treasury." That was Gallgoid's signal that he understood and accepted the arrangement.

"Well, whoever you are, enjoy yourself!" Asha moved on to greet another customer.

It was all for show. Redegger's business would boom, as it always had; Lord Chutt would be happy with his share of the take; and behind the camouflage, Redegger would

work with Gallgoid to undermine Chutt's power—soon, hoped Gallgoid—by ridding the city of Ysbott.

"It's a proper, lawful hanging that we want for him," said Redegger, "with Chutt himself pronouncing the sentence." How they'd manage that, they'd not yet agreed. "We must play to Ysbott's favorite vice," said Redegger, "once we find out what it is."

"Ysbott's favorite vice is cruelty," said Gallgoid.

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In the ruins of Old Obann, in the dark of night, the Omah collected things that they thought the Big People would desire and used them as bait to lay a trail. They themselves had no interest in these things; but having carefully observed the soldiers, without the soldiers seeing them, they thought they knew what was wanted.

Coins, of course—gold and silver coins, often joined together in a melted mass that then solidified, could be found in abundance, if you knew where to look. The Omah knew. The soldiers also wanted other things that made no sense at all to the Omah and had no value for them: insignificant pieces of a vanished world. Why such things should be so exciting to humans, the Omah did not try to imagine.

The trails they laid down would lead to places that were dangerous. The Omah took care not to venture into them or even come too close. Centuries of experience had taught them that.

While the soldiers rested, ate, drank, and visited the new gaming houses to spend their bonus money, the Omah worked as they had never worked before. They were small, but they were many, and their work went speedily.

# How Helki's Hunting Fared

Getting back to Abnak country should have been easy, for Orth had not gone very far beyond its bounds. But before their first day's trek was over, eight horsemen overtook them, seven Wallekki and a man of the Fazzan. He didn't have a wolf's-head helmet, Jack noticed.

"They take it away from you if they expel you from the clan," Martis said.

"That's him!" cried one of the Wallekki, pointing to Orth. "Be careful—he travels in company with an evil spirit."

The evil spirit was Wytt, at the moment nowhere in sight. He hadn't warned his humans because they were already going as fast as they could and there was nowhere to hide. Even if they ran—and Wytt doubted Orth could run swiftly—they couldn't escape horsemen. So Wytt had separated himself from the party to see what he could do.

The walkers halted, and the outlaws slowly rode around them assessing the situation.

"Those two young ones will fetch a nice price," said the Fazzan.

Orth spoke up. "In the name of the living God," he said, "I call on you to turn aside from doing evil. We are under His protection. Turn away."

The outlaws had Wallekki swords with rusty blades

and a few javelins. Hlah had only his knife, and Redwing and Fisher had stout hunting spears: their defense would not leave their enemies unscathed, and the outlaws knew it.

“There’s no need for a fight,” said the Fazzan. “Give us the young ones, and the rest of you may go your way unharmed.”

Wytt shrieked.

The moment of surprise was all that Martis needed. As if by magic, a sharp skewer made its way from inside his sleeve to his hand, and in the same instant, he threw it. One of the Wallekki fell backward off his horse with the skewer in his chest.

The robbers threw their javelins, but their horses acted up and they missed. The Abnaks further disconcerted the horses by thrusting with their spears and loudly bellowing.

“Hellfire!” swore the Fazzan, who wrenched his horse around and galloped off. The fight was over before Orth could speak another word.

Fisher kicked the body of the dead outlaw. “His scalp belongs to you, Martis.”

“Martis doesn’t take scalps!” Ellayne put in quickly.

“We don’t do it in Obann,” Jack said. This was not the first battle they’d ever seen, but Jack’s stomach still wasn’t used to it. Nor were Ellayne’s knees. But they were used to hiding such things.

“We should bury him,” said Orth.

“Sunfish, this ground is hard and stony and it would take us all day to dig a grave with just our knives,” Hlah said. “Pray for him, and let’s be on our way. His friends will come back for him when they’re sure we’re gone. They won’t want rival bands of outlaws to know they’ve lost a man.”

Orth accepted Hlah's reasoning, knelt by the body, and said a prayer for the dead.

"Too bad his horse ran away," Redwing said.

Wytt came back and hopped into Ellayne's arms, chattering at Martis.

"He says you did well, Martis. Thank you for saving us again."

"Men like those prey on the defenseless," Redwing said. "They lose heart if you stand up to them."

"Let's move on," said Hlah. He helped Orth up, and Orth was thinking, "Now a man is dead because of me, because I wouldn't listen. Dead without a chance to repent. Alas, he brought it on himself. So be it, Lord."

---

King Ryons, who had already seen more of the world than any boy his age in all Obann, found much fascination in Barseen's story of her voyage over the sea from Arachosia and from her description of her homeland—especially the gardens and the fountains that they had in their cities. As far as he'd traveled, he'd never seen a fountain.

Obst, who knew of Arachosia only from the Scriptures, listened, too, but Barseen found his and Ryons' stories even more fascinating than they found hers.

"Bolli and Herric and I want to see all of the world that we can," she said, "even those wide lands across the mountains."

Obst laughed gently. "There's more of it than any of us can ever hope to see," he said. "When Jack and Ellayne and I were on our way to the mountains, we discovered something in the foothills. It was a giant, sprawling ruin from

ancient times. Ellayne got lost inside it and couldn't find her way out. By God's grace, and Wytt's keen nose, Jack and I found her.

"We also found, in the very heart of the labyrinth, a vast open space; and painted on its floor was a picture of, I think, the whole world, and all its lands and seas, of which all Obann was but a small part. Since you came here, Barseen, I've been thinking of it. Remembering what a sight it really was."

"A map? You found a map of all the world?"

"I suppose that's what it was," said Obst. "You had to stand up on top of the wall—the roof is all gone—to see it all. And it was quite a thing to see."

"Oh, I'd love to see it, too!" cried Barseen. "Could you take us there? We have maps in Arachosia, old maps, but they only show us the lands and seas we already know."

"I would like to see it, Obst," Ryons said. "Is it very far away? We could go there with the Ghols. They'd keep us safe."

Now Obst had been thinking of that very thing. He'd seen and heard a lot more of the world since he'd been in that place with Jack and Ellayne. Would it not be valuable to study the map? Barseen said the world was waking up—shaken and roused by God Himself. Obst saw wisdom in that saying.

But could he find the place again? At the time he'd seen it, there were Heathen raiders in the area and his chief concern had been to get the children up into the wooded mountain slopes where they'd be safer. He hadn't devoted anything like his full attention to the find.

"Now may not be the best time for you to leave Car-

bonek, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, Obst! It would only be for a few days. The Ghols travel fast.”

“It would be important to see this thing,” Barseen said. “There may be no other map like it anywhere. Our maps no longer show the way to Obann. We might have had a safer voyage with a map. I’m sure my uncle would say so. Obst, we could make copies of it!”

He hadn’t thought of doing that. He should have. How that ancient building had come to have no roof, he didn’t know. But snow and ice and rain had now had several years to erode the map away. Even now it might be too late.

“We shall surely make copies, if there’s anything left to copy!” He stood up suddenly. “Your Majesty is wise: the Ghols can swiftly and safely take us there and back.” He smiled at Barseen. “But some of us will have to learn in a hurry how to ride a horse.”

---

Helki spied on the strangers with all the care at his command and only Cavall to help him. Baby made too much noise, and Gibb was no use at all.

The strangers seemed to have no particular purpose in mind as they wandered about the forest, and very little woodcraft. They made no effort to conceal their tracks, and when they made a kill, they sat down and ate it, strewing skin and bones. Helki came close enough to overhear them if they talked, but there was precious little of that: a grunt here and there, with plenty of hand gestures and raised eyebrows. If they thought they were being stealthy, they were very much mistaken.

He learned that their throwing sticks were accurate and deadly, their stone knives sharp, and their appetite for meat prodigious. They seldom strayed out of one another's sight. As he observed their hunting technique, he concluded they relied on both scent and keen observation of the signs left by their prey. No one but Helki could have come so close to them without detection.

"Let's give it up," said Gibb one evening as they camped. He'd cooked them three rabbits snared by Helki in the morning, flavoring them with herbs. Not bad, Helki admitted to himself. "They're too careful to let us catch one of them alone." Helki smiled at the word "us."

"Sooner or later one of them will make that mistake, and I'll be ready for him," Helki said. A stunning blow with his rod, a gag, and leather thongs to bind the victim's hands behind his back—that's all it would take. If he had to carry an unconscious man back to camp on his shoulders, he could do that.

"You aren't going to be able to question a man who can't talk, anyhow," Gibb said.

"All men talk," said Helki.

His chance came sooner than expected. The very next day, early in the afternoon, the strangers attacked a doe and her two half-grown fawns. The deer fled before any sticks could be thrown and the hunters chased them, crashing loudly through the underbrush. Their mistake was in trying to catch all three: as the deer separated in a panic, so did their pursuers.

One of the fawns ran right past Helki's hiding place. Cavall stiffened, almost barked, but was too wise to give them away. Close behind the fawn came a lone hunter, ter-

ribly fast for such a bulky man. “Now!” Helki said—and Cavall sprang out from cover, directly in the hunter’s path. Astonished, the man stumbled, and Helki’s staff took him in the back of his head. He fell on his face.

Helki bound him swiftly, tightly, with the thongs and stuffed his mouth with a wad of rabbit skin, using a leather strap to keep the gag in place. He thrust the man’s throwing stick into his belt and gave Cavall the spear to carry in his jaws. With a stifled grunt he raised the man and slung him over his shoulders. “Heavy!” he thought.

“Back to camp, Cavall—hurry!”

He didn’t know for how long the strangers would be chasing the deer, or how long it would take them to find the place where their friend had been felled. Maybe they wouldn’t find it, but Helki dared not count on that. They weren’t good at hiding their own tracks, but they would know how to follow his. The man was all dead weight, but it would be some time before Helki’s legs gave out.

It took him over an hour to get back to his camp, and by then his captive was beginning to stir. Helki dumped him on the ground. Baby squawked and flapped his flightless wings, and Gibb leaped to his feet.

“By thunder, you got one!” he cried. “And now the rest of ’em will come for us!”

“We won’t be here,” Helki said. “We’re already on our way out.”

The man was conscious now. Helki tied a long leather strap around his neck, to lead him. The stranger’s eyes fell on Gibb and burned with hate: he recognized him. Gibb made sure to keep his distance.

“If he gets out of hand,” said Helki, “Baby and Cavall

will see to it." He prodded the captive with his rod and pointed down the path. "Let's go—no time to waste."

And the man glared at him—and spoke.

Helki didn't understand a word of it, and there were many words, a rattling torrent of them. They were sorely muffled by the gag, but still words. Helki grinned at Gibb.

"I told you they could talk," he said. Gibb just stared. Helki prodded the man again, and they were under way.

# Finders Keepers

The men on Jax's team were excited because someone had found a cache of silver coins. They were melted together in a mass, but some of the images stamped on them and the round shapes themselves had survived. Before another day was out, the tale of the find had circulated all throughout the army.

Lord Chutt soon heard of it. He went up to his room and put on the Thunder King's mask.

Sometimes he just sat on his bed, waiting for the mask to speak to him. Sometimes he put it on, then stood and looked out the window. Anyone who chanced to look up at just the right moment would see something to unsettle him, but so far no one had.

Today, as he had often done before, Chutt looked into the mirror. Sometimes, when he did this, he couldn't see his own eyes looking back through the holes in the mask. He could never remember what else he saw at those times. He thought perhaps the power in the mask might be giving him visions and then burying them too deeply in his mind for him to see. But someday he would see them. The mask would show him what he would have to do.

How long he stood before the mirror, this time, he could not have said. The day was waning; his room was getting dark.

A servant startled him out of it by knocking on his door.

“My lord, General Born is here to see you.” Chutt recognized the voice as belonging to a young footman he’d only just hired. He snatched off the mask.

“Blast your eyes!” He’d forgotten the fellow’s name. “What do you think I have a butler for? I am not to be disturbed!” He heard the fool blurt out an apology and scuttle away.

Soon enough he went downstairs to meet Born.

“What are your instructions for the silver coins that were found?” Born asked.

Chutt was just about to tear into him for disturbing him for such a trivial matter and forgetting to say “my lord,” when his anger vanished instantly. And to Born’s astonishment, Chutt grinned.

“Why, what else, General, but finders keepers!” he said. “There’s more than enough money in the treasury.” Born was even more astonished. “Let the man who found the silver keep it! And let that be the rule for any other money that they find—even gold. Finders keepers!”

Born didn’t know what to say. Chutt found that richly amusing.

“Come, come, General—why not? With this rule in place, the men will work twice as hard. And we’ll recover twice as many artifacts. It will be good for the army’s morale.”

Born muttered, “As you wish, my lord.”

“And now that you’re here, you might as well stay for supper—jellied eels fresh-caught from the river, washed down with the best wine from my cellar.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“That was what the mask was telling me today!” Chutt thought. “I wish I’d thought of it sooner. Finders keepers!”

The mask, he now felt sure, would lead him all the way along the same road upon which the Thunder King had faltered: the road to empire, with himself as emperor. For the mask had chosen him.

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Obst’s plan was to get to the maze with all speed, make copies of the giant map, and be back in just a week or two. The country between Lintum Forest and the foothills was at peace. The Ghols could cross it quickly and without fear of attack.

“But everybody wants to go!” Fnaa said to Obst. “I can’t think of anyone who doesn’t. And that’ll make the trip take much longer.”

Obst sighed. He’d had in mind an excursion, not a migration. The king had already told Gurun’s brothers they could come, and Gurun wouldn’t think of being left behind. They would need Shesh, because he would be able to read the map, and Barseen would go with him. And Obst had to go because he knew the way.

“If I have to walk alone after you, I will,” was Tam’s promise. “Don’t think I can’t. Even I could follow the trail of fifty horsemen. And you’ll be glad to have me when you fall off your horse and break your leg.”

Ryons appealed to his council of chiefs to settle the matter.

“Your Majesty must decide,” said Shaffur, “and then you can leave it to us to arrange it.” Ryons knew he’d say that, and wished he wouldn’t.

Assured by both Obst and Gurun that the original plan was best, Ryons decided to take only the Ghols, his queen, and their guests. Fnaa didn't like it, and said so.

"There are times when even the king's best friend has to do as the king says," Obst said. "Otherwise he isn't a king."

"Don't blame me if something happens and you need me," Fnaa said.

The Ghols equipped the king's guests with horses, and Jandra, with her toothed bird, led the farewells.

"Hard to believe a little girl like that can be a prophet," Herric said. He and Bolli had gotten into the habit of playing with her. They wished they could hear a prophecy from her, but none was forthcoming.

"It was her prophecy that made Ryons king," said Gurun.

Abnaks led them out of Carbonek, out of the forest to the plain. When they emerged, the Ghols broke into song—the army's anthem, "His Mercy Endureth Forever," sung deep down in their throats.

Only Shesh fell off his horse, and he was more embarrassed than hurt.

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Ysbott was troubled. Someone had dared to make a complaint to him—a pitiful little nobody of a clerk, left over from Judge Tombo's tenure. Ysbott hardly noticed him as he scuttled around the offices, shuffling papers and filing them away in parts of the Justice Building that Ysbott didn't know existed.

The clerk's hands trembled as he positioned himself in Ysbott's office doorway.

“My lord,” he said, licking dry lips, “some people have stopped me on the street, these past two days, to complain about something that I thought you would want to know about. I was afraid of what you’d do to me if I didn’t tell you.”

Ysbott liked people to be afraid of him. It put him in a good mood.

“How do you know I won’t be angry with you if you tell me?” he teased. As someone whose daily work was in the Justice Building, the clerk had many times heard the screams and groans that issued from the basement. They haunted his sleep.

His name was Trym. Ysbott didn’t know that.

“My lord, command me to tell or command me not to tell. I’ll obey you, either way,” he said.

“Then by all means tell me,” Ysbott said, “and take your chances.”

“My lord, a man who refused to give me his name told me that two of our deputies robbed him of his winnings at the gaming house. And this morning two others told me that they saw it happen again last night, as they were passing on the street. They knew our men for deputies by their badges.”

“And you didn’t get their names?”

“They were afraid to give them, my lord. Nor did they know the names of the deputies. But”—Trym licked his lips again, because his mouth kept going dry from fear—“they said they thought people would stop going to the gaming houses if these robberies continued, and that the governor-general would be angry if it caused business to fall off. They think the gaming houses pay Lord Chutt for allowing them to operate unmolested by the law.”

It did make Ysbott angry, because, more to the point as he saw it, the robbers hadn't given him a share of their take. Besides, Chutt would blame him if business suffered. It was not done, among outlaws, to withhold any loot from the chief.

"I really must have names," he said, reining in his temper.

"And I would give them to you if I had them!" said the clerk. The man was much too afraid of him to lie, thought Ysbott.

He would have been even angrier to know that, even as he was having this conversation, Redegger was discussing the matter with Lord Chutt.

"Your share of my profit is smaller this week because some of Ysbott's men have been scaring off my customers," said Redegger. "I suppose it's only to be expected, with a lifelong outlaw in charge of the Justice Building. But you can't expect me to absorb these losses without some loss to yourself."

Chutt fumed. Ysbott was his creature: he had no right to be interfering with this business. It wasn't the first time Ysbott's deputies had gotten out of hand, and it wasn't good for Chutt's own reputation in the city. He had no suspicion at all that the errant deputies were acting on Redegger's orders, not Ysbott's.

"You and I, Redegger, have done business together for years, and you have my word that these robberies are none of my doing."

"Judge Tombo would never have permitted it, my lord," said Redegger.

"Well, we don't have Judge Tombo anymore, do we?"

Chutt snapped. "I'll take Ysbott to task for this. And if we have to replace the whole force of deputies, we will."

"I was hoping you would say so, my lord." Redegger's men among the deputies would simply disappear before Ysbott got his hands on them.

"If Ysbott thinks he can do anything he pleases without my permission, I'll quickly teach him otherwise," said Chutt.

But Ysbott already knew that, and knew he'd have to act swiftly to nip this crime wave in the bud.

The irony of his predicament was lost on him.

## Behold the World

Traveling with all speed, Orth and his escort returned safely to Chief Foxblood's camp.

"I'm surprised these children can keep up with us so well," said Redwing, smiling at Jack and Ellayne.

"I'm not," Martis answered.

The people gave Orth a warm welcome, and he had to take part in a feast, which he was sure he didn't deserve, before he could confide in Foxblood. By then most of the Abnaks had gone to bed. Jack and Ellayne stayed up. They didn't want to miss what Orth would say to Foxblood.

"I see now I was wrong to go east," he said. They were out of earshot of the camp, with no audience but the stars. "I wanted the glory of bringing God's word to the Wallekki—as if the Lord couldn't do it without me. 'God is able to raise up children and servants from these stones,' said the prophetess. I should have remembered that saying."

Foxblood had already been told of the perils Orth escaped on his abortive journey eastward. "You have a taste for danger, Sunfish," he said. "I admire you for it: you're one of the bravest men I know. But from what I've heard, nothing could be more dangerous for you than to go back to Obann now, and I think that's just what you have decided to do. A hundred of our warriors would be willing to go with

you, if you'd have them."

Orth knew that to be true, and it moved him. But he answered, "No, my friend—they would only be in danger, too. I'll go in peace and not in war. The walls of misbelief will not be breached by force. I'll take Hlah with me, and Allifar, and send them back to you with news. They wouldn't let me leave them behind in any case. God's word must be my sword and shield."

"What do you think of this, Martis?"

Martis shrugged. "Who am I to tell the First Prester what to do?" he said.

"And these far-traveled children—what do they think?"

"You have to go where God sends you," Jack said, "even if it seems crazy." He was thinking of his own trek to the summit of Bell Mountain: a miracle that he and Ellayne had survived it.

Ellayne just nodded. What those people in the city would do to Orth if they caught him, she didn't want to think.

"I guess it's settled, then," said Foxblood. "But allow us at least to escort you up to Silvertown."

"With all my heart," said Orth.

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Obst, surprising himself, did remember the way to the maze. He remembered it as if it had all happened yesterday: guiding Jack and Ellayne through the forest, over the plain, and up into the mountains. He'd never reached the summit of Bell Mountain, but when the bell rang, God had breathed new life into him. As fast as the Ghols traveled on horseback, Obst matched them on foot.

Once, on the plain, Tam drew up beside him.

"You ride well," Obst said. "I've heard Chagadai say so."

"My uncle had a farm outside the city. I spent a lot of time there as a girl, and I had a horse. Battle was his name." She paused, peering through the mists of time to see her horse again. She hadn't thought of him in many years, or even of her aunt and uncle. Suddenly she missed them terribly, all three of them. "Part of getting old," she thought. But to Obst she said, "You're quite a specimen. King Ryons says you walk all day and don't get tired. I'll bet you don't get sick, either."

"Why should I get sick?"

"Because you're as old as the hills, maybe. How old are you?"

"I can't tell you," Obst said. "I lived a long time as a hermit and lost count of the years. Then I decided that it didn't matter."

Jack and Ellayne could have told her that on their way up the mountain, Obst foundered and they were sure he was going to die. He made them go the rest of the way without him, and when they came back to bury him, he was gone. But Obst told the tale simply: "I nearly died once, on the same journey that brought me to the maze. The Lord renewed me. Don't ask me how. He raised me up, that's all."

"Like that man Jiharr—the one with the sword, whom Gurun touched. That must have been something to see!"

"I saw it, and it was."

Tam nodded. "Many things have turned out to be true that I would've thought impossible."

"That's the kind of age we're living in," said Obst.

With neither bad weather nor enemies to delay them,

the king and his company needed only four days to reach their destination.

“How easy it would be to ride right past this place and never see it!” said Chagadai, captain of the Ghols. Obst had led them right up to the unprepossessing entrance, virtually overgrown with stunted trees. It was here that Ellayne had wriggled into what she’d thought was no more than a handy hiding place, after she’d seen Heathen raiders coming her way.

At a nod from Chagadai, one of the riders dismounted and was about to go in when Obst stopped him.

“Don’t do that!” he said. “This building is far bigger than you imagine, and once inside, you’d be hard put to find your way out again. Nor would you find the floor with the map unless by accident.

“No—we will have to travel along the top of the walls, where the roof used to be, and look down on the interior. The walls are thick, and one can walk on them easily. And I think it would be fitting if our king went up first—if Your Majesty pleases.”

“Oh, yes, please!” said Ryons. To see a marvel that wasn’t also frightfully dangerous would be a true delight.

Chagadai lifted him. “You’ve grown, Father!” he said. “You’re not as light a burden as you used to be.” Ryons braced his forearms on the stone, if stone it was, and drew himself to the top. The noontime sun was high in the sky, bright and glorious.

When he stood, the sight took his breath away.

Miles and miles of shadowed corridors, all hemmed in by solid walls as straight as if they’d been cut out with a razor and a ruler, with rooms and open spaces innumera-

ble—how had the people who'd built it ever found their way from one room to another? Such a mighty work of human hands! Like the great city of Obann itself, only a whole city contained within a single sprawling structure.

Angel flew overhead, calling shrilly down to him. He had no doubt that she marveled at it, too: this must be what Obann City looked like to the birds when they flew over it.

"What do you see, Father?" Chagadai said.

"Everyone, come up!" Ryons restrained himself from jumping up and down. "Come and see!"

He'd seen Kara Karram, the great fortress of the Thunder King, and had lived in Obann City for a time. But this was different. The walls were seamless, as if it were all a single stone. Ryons had seen this before, it was a feature of ancient buildings, but never on so vast a scale. No one knew how the ancients did it. That secret was lost in the Day of Fire.

Obst went up first, assisted by two Ghols, and then Shesh, who needed hardly any assistance at all. "It's a poor sailor who can't climb," he said. Gurun's brothers, then Barseen, came next.

"I'll go up tomorrow," Gurun said. Heric and Bolli often scaled Fogo's cliffs to gather seabirds' eggs, but she'd never mastered the art—nor had much desire to try.

"I'd like to go," Tam said. Two Ghols boosted her, and Obst and Shesh reached down to pull her up.

"That's enough for now," Chagadai said. "It's getting to look rather crowded up there."

Obst tried to remember the way to the great map, where Wytt had found Ellayne. It soon came back to him. "This way," he said, "and let's hope the rain and snow of sev-

eral years haven't washed the map away."

They went in single file, Obst leading. No one felt like walking two-by-two along the top of the wall.

"It's mostly empty," Tam said, "and what could have happened to the roof? Those corridors ought to be packed full of rubble."

"It's like someone came and pried off the roof," said Heric.

"It would take some very big giants to do that," Bolli said.

"No—I think the roof must have perished in the Day of Fire, somehow," said Barseen. "We'll never know."

Ryons stayed close to Obst. Whether he looked to the right or to the left, or straight ahead, he saw the walls and corridors running straight and true. When he tried, with his eye, to follow any kind of course, the countless turns and intersections and double-backs defeated him. It must be true, what Obst said: once in there, you'd never get out. It would be a terrible way to die.

"The thing I wonder about," said Shesh, "is what this place was for. What was in those rooms? What did people do there? There must be a thousand rooms, and they're all empty." Big rooms and little ones, some of them so tiny, you couldn't imagine any use for them—and who could count them?

"Whatever was inside, it was taken away long ago," Tam said.

"Perkin once showed me a place deep underground," said Ryons, raising his voice so that Tam, at the end of the line, could hear him. "It was full of little lights—high, high up, like stars—but you couldn't see much by them. Perkin

didn't know what that place was for."

"We're almost there," said Obst. "I thought it would be farther in than this."

They soon stood on a wall overlooking a space as big as a good-sized plaza in the city.

"Behold the world," said Obst.

By some lost art the ancients had laid bright colors on the floor. A thousand years had not sufficed to fade them. Blue for the seas and rivers, different shades of green for the forests and the plains, and red stars here and there for major cities, with islands scattered in the sea and long wandering coasts: nowhere else was there anything like it. You couldn't take it in all at once. Your eye followed the courses of great rivers, followed the coastlines up and down, tarried in the forests. For several minutes no one spoke, until Tam said softly, "So must God see the world He made."

Barseen pointed. "If that long river in the center is the Imperial River," she said, "then that red star, there, must be your Obann City and that other star, near the mouth of the river, must be Durmurot."

"And those half a dozen islands, there, are home to us. Those are Arachosia." Shesh let out a breath. "We have traveled far to get here!"

"And our islands, Fogo—where are they?" said Bolli.

"I think they must be those—there! Away up in the north," Heric said.

"Then those must be the mountains between the land of Obann and the East," said Ryons—the very mountains that loomed above them as he spoke. "And the Great Lakes!"

And far to the east of the lakes, the shores of yet another sea, and countries that you'd never heard of. Ryons sighed,

overwhelmed by the ponderous greatness of the world.

“With this to guide us,” Shesh said, “we can find our way to any country in the world. We can find our way back home.”

Obst shook his head. The great distances they’d traveled, he and Ryons and the army, were, after all, only a very small piece of the whole. The thought was humbling. “What does God expect of us?” he wondered. “To carry His word from sea to sea and out to all those islands?” How could it possibly be done, and how many human lifetimes would it take to do it? “O Lord,” he prayed silently, “we are your servants, but we are hardly more than insects creeping on the earth.” As if by way of an answer, a verse from Prophet Ika came to him: “As the water covers the sea, my word shall cover all the earth.” Obst prayed, “If you say so, Lord.”

But all the companions were excited.

“We know the shape of our country and the waters all around it,” said Shesh, “and this map shows them just the way they are. That tells me that the map is accurate and will allow us to calculate the distance from one place to any other. But we must make sure we copy it exactly.”

“We know how far it is from here to Carbonek,” said Tam, “and from Obann to Durmurot. The map seems to have it right.”

“It will be wonderful,” said Heric, “to be able to sail back and forth from here to home. We’ll bring Gurun with us, to see our mother and father again, and then come back.”

“And we can visit Arachosia,” Bolli added. He turned a shy glance to Barseen, and she smiled.

# The Hollow Woman

“All I’m saying is that if they catch us, it’s good night lassies. I can’t even imagine what they’ll do to us. Probably cut us into little pieces!”

This was more talk than Helki was used to. Gibb kept it up all day.

“We could go a lot faster if we weren’t dragging him along with us,” Gibb said, for perhaps the hundredth time. It was true that prodding along a bound captive slowed their progress, but they were still making good time, overall, heading straight back to Carbonek with no detours and only those halts strictly necessary. Indeed, it surprised Helki that Gibb was able to keep up. He’d been hoping the man would grow too worn out to keep on talking. Helki seldom answered him, but Gibb didn’t seem to notice.

The captive didn’t try to talk at all. Helki left the gag on him, lest he cry out, removing it only to give him water as needed. The man wouldn’t starve before they came to Carbonek, so Helki kept him on short rations: he’d make it up to him at journey’s end. In another day they’d be in country carefully patrolled by Chief Buzzard’s Abnaks, and one day more would see them home.

Cavall ignored the prisoner and kept himself alert for threats of any kind. Baby glared at the man, but made no hostile move.

“We’ll soon see what he looks like under all that stuff they smear all over themselves,” Helki said, during a brief lull in Gibb’s arrow-storm of words. “We’ll clean him off at Carbonek, give him a good feed, and then hear what he has to say for himself.”

“What good will that do? We don’t understand his language.”

“Obst will understand it,” Helki said: for God had given Obst the gift of tongues and Gurun, too. But he would let Gibb see that for himself.

The prisoner, securely bound and disarmed, made no resistance. Helki would give him back his weapons someday, if he deserved it.

The knife was wonderful, unlike any that Helki had ever seen before. Painstakingly worked from quartz, it cut as well as sharpened steel—maybe even better. You had to respect people who could create such things, Helki thought, requiring both skill and patience. Whatever else these people might be, they were intelligent.

“And if they’re a scouting party for an invasion,” he thought, “we’ll have our hands full.”

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Old Obann was full of gold and silver.

Now that the men were allowed to keep whatever gold and silver they might find, their officers found it hard to hold them back.

“What about the spiders?” Jax asked the men in his squad, as they got ready to take their boat across the river.

“Nobody’s seen any more of those. But did you see that lump of half-melted silver coins they found just a hundred

feet from the spot where we were digging yesterday? Ten years' pay for the whole team, in one lump sum!"

"Whoever thought the governor-general could be so generous? Long life to him!"

They chattered excitedly as the corporal led them to their work site.

"Don't you dare forget," he warned them, "that we're supposed to collect any little doodads we can find. That's still our mission, and we'll still be paid bonuses for whatever we turn in. Don't get so heated up for treasure that you pass up the stuff his lordship really wants."

"Heavens no!" a man said. "That'd be ungrateful!" And they all laughed.

Yesterday they'd broken into a little side street that was passable for fifty yards or so. Some great charred thing with at least a dozen metal wheels—and again no attachment for horses—lay huddled up against some buildings as if it had, at the last desperate moment, tried to get inside for shelter. The metal of its oblong shell came off in your hand and crumbled in your fingers, leaving rusty stains. Their job today was to clear away the surrounding rubble so the scholars could examine the artifact. They had to take care not to destroy it inadvertently.

"A whole platoon could ride in this thing, with room to spare," the corporal said. "I wonder if that's what it was for."

"There might be dead men's bones inside it, Corporal."

"We'll see about that when we get close enough to look inside." There was once a law in Obann that anyone handling the dead, other than the immediate family and certain priests whose duty it was, would be unclean and have to separate himself from the community until he could be

purified. But that was an ancient law, no longer observed. Nothing remained but a lingering superstition.

Watching his mates pick and pry away at tumbled stone—if it really was stone and not some unknown building material created by the ancients—Jax felt as if he could open a door, if only he could find it, and step through it into the remote past. To him the only past that had any meaning was his own past. Things were the way they were, the way he'd always known them, and that was how they'd always be. But amid the ruins of Old Obann, he was forced to see that the world had once been very different, much more so than he'd ever imagined. Anyone could say “a thousand years ago” without it really meaning anything. But a thousand years ago this dead ruin had been a living city, perhaps the greatest city that the world had ever known, full of living people like himself, who lived their daily lives in the midst of what he could only call wonders. They would have taken them for granted.

And then the Day of Fire, and the end of their whole world.

It was a warm day this morning, but Jax could not repress a shiver. This was what the prophets, speaking for God Himself, had warned Obann would happen, and it had.

“Am I the only one who fears this place, just now?” he thought. It would be good to walk away from it, right now, and never come here again.

But he forced himself to stay.

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“Hey! Over here!”

Some of the men had just levered up a large, thick slab

of rusted metal. They all agreed it had once been a door. Not that anyone had ever seen a metal door, but that was what it looked like.

“Look at this!”

The whole team stopped working and came over to see the discovery.

“Merciful heavens!” said a soldier. “It’s a preserved corpse.”

And truly that was what it did appear to be. Jax raised himself on tiptoe to look over other men’s shoulders, and the dead looked back at him. Those people of the ancient city, the ones he’d just been thinking about—here was one of them.

“It’s a woman,” someone said. The fine features of her face left little doubt of that, even though her head was shorn completely hairless.

But her eyes—her big eyes of a faded blue—were open with the unblinking stare of the dead, and they were looking up at all these men who had disturbed her rest. She was unclothed, and Jax felt ashamed to be gawking at her, although he couldn’t turn away.

The corporal knelt for a closer look. He looked back up and grinned, then suddenly clamped his hand around the dead woman’s arm and shot to his feet, pulling her with him out of her grave. Not one man failed to flinch away, and their corporal laughed at them.

“She’s not real, you poor fish! She weighs practically nothing, and look at this, where her lower leg is broken off.” He adjusted her to show them. “See? She’s hollow. Made of stuff that’s as light as paper, and yet she’s lasted all this time.” He adjusted the figure once again and shook it. A few small

pebbles rattled out. “Now what do you suppose she was?”

Everyone laughed, getting over their shock.

“We ought to get a pretty big bonus for her, whatever she is.”

“Are those eyes painted on, Corporal? They look real!”

The corporal touched the eyes. “Painted,” he said. “Well, at least we can handle her without her turning into dust. She’ll raise some eyebrows at the warehouse.”

Jax could not have said why he felt so deeply relieved that the woman wasn’t real. It had something to do with that door into the past that he’d imagined, the one you could go through if you found it. What if the people of the past could find it, too—and pass through it into the present? There was something profoundly wrong in all of this, he thought. This hollow woman—might it be an effigy of someone real? The thought troubled him.

When they returned to the landing with their prize, it was only to learn that another team, working on another street, had found a better prize.

“First one coin, then another, and another, and another—and all of solid gold!” a man was saying. He had an eager audience. “It was just like following a trail, and we followed this one right up to a kind of tunnel in the street. Well, we weren’t going to stop there, were we!”

“I crawled down that tunnel before the sergeant could stop me, and look what I found—we’re rich! Finders keepers!”

At his feet lay a cache of golden coins, melted and distorted, melted together in a mass of gold, but still recognizable as coins. Men stared at it hungrily—jealous, but hopeful that they themselves might soon find something very like it.

Gallgoid was unable to come and see Jax until nearly midnight. By then the old soldier was asleep and Gallgoid had to wake him. But at least no one in the neighborhood saw Gallgoid, disguised as a laborer, enter the house.

“Iva said it was important. Don’t get up. I won’t stay longer than necessary.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jax said. “I want to tell you what I saw in Old Obann today.”

Another man would have thought Jax’s report didn’t amount to much, but Gallgoid saw and heard the fear that lurked in it. He’d already heard about the discovery of the cache of golden coins: Chutt was beginning to regret his “finders keepers” rule. But the description of the hollow woman unsettled him.

“Sir,” said Jax, “it isn’t right to be digging up that city. God’s curse lies over it. God only knows how many people used to live there—all snuffed out in just a single day. If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not go there anymore. I’ll still go to the barracks to do chores and errands for the lads, and I’ll hear about whatever they’ve found in the ruins. But it would be better if no one went there anymore.”

“I won’t press you,” Gallgoid said. “But for the time being, I’d rather see Chutt’s army digging in the ruins than marching on Durmurot or Ninneburky.”

“I wish I could go to Durmurot.”

“I’ll see if I can arrange it. I think you’ve earned it,” Gallgoid said, “and now the weather will permit it. Wait a few days. I might know someone who’ll want to go there with you.”

# How Chuff Visited the Infirmary

Jax dreamed terrible dreams of hollow women rising from their graves and coming through his door, into his room, with a voice somewhere saying, “They were all hollow, all of them: the Lord destroyed them for it.” He woke several times with that voice ringing in his ears.

Many, many miles to the east, Gurun couldn’t sleep, either. She’d been on the wall that day, looking at the map. Bolli, standing hand in hand with Barseen, pointed here and there. “Those islands, Gurun, the ones up there—that’s Fogo Island. See how far we had to go to get here! And those islands over here, so far out to sea—that’s where Barseen comes from: Arachosia.” He was quite excited.

Obst said it would be best to get the map copied and return to Carbonek as soon as possible. It turned out Shesh had the best eye for the work, and Heric the best hand. Shesh thought to cut and trim a sapling and use it to make precise measurements. Down on the floor, of course, he was too close to see the whole, so Heric and Barseen directed him from above. “We may not get all the shapes exactly right—they may be slightly wrong to begin with—but at

least we'll get the distances," Shesh said. And Heric drew carefully, with Obst to advise him. "Who ever thought we'd have a picture of the world?" Obst said. "And to think the travelers in ancient times really went to all those places!"

Chagadai and his Ghols marveled at the distance from their homeland to Obann, and Gurun lay awake, thinking of her brave little Blays, her own bodyguard, whose country lay even farther east than the Ghols'. And still farther beyond that, farther east than any Blay had ever been, was another sea. Shesh had to put down and take up his sapling very many times to measure that distance.

Gurun wondered: could she truly sail home again, and embrace her father and her mother—and then come back? Tomorrow the drawing would be finished, and they'd start back for Lintum Forest, Ryons' home: her king. Was Lintum Forest now her home? Was that God's will for her? She prayed for an answer but wasn't getting one—unless it was that she loved Ryons, loved his people and his country, and couldn't imagine being parted from him. But was that God's answer, or her own?

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The next morning Cavall barked joyfully and Helki met a party of his Abnak scouts, three men led by the warrior Bandy.

"Well, Helki! You had good hunting; that I see!" said Bandy. Cavall stood up to lick his face, knowing they were all but home. "Who is this fellow all tied up?"

"We won't know that until Obst can question him."

"Obst not here, but he come back soon. This big fellow, you see any more like him?"

“A few,” said Helki. “We need to find out all about them. Where’s Obst?”

Bandy told him about the expedition to the maze. Gibb fretted, probably uneasy in the company of Abnaks. Helki let him stew.

“Obst once told me about that place,” he said. Helki had never seen any kind of map, although he had much of Lintum Forest in his head and could probably draw a map of it, if he had to. “I wonder if that map can show us where these people came from,” meaning the prisoner.

Bandy took a closer look at the captive and shook his head. “Never see a man like him before. Maybe Hawk and Xhama, they know.”

When he returned to Carbonek the next day, Helki presented his captive to those two chieftains, dark-skinned Hosa from a country far to the south of the Abnaks. They’d both learned to speak Obannese: they and their warriors were all King Ryons’ men and God’s servants. The prisoner stiffened when they approached him. Helki noticed it. He’d removed the gag first thing in the morning, but the man had not yet spoken.

“If I understand the tales my father’s father told me,” said Hawk, “this man is of a barbarian nation that once swarmed into our country and tried to take it from us. Many Hosa were killed, driving them away. My grandfather called them the Hyena Men.”

“No one ever saw them again, after we defeated them,” Xhama said. “No one knew where they went. Only the Thunder King himself was a worse enemy to us.”

The captive burst into unintelligible but clearly angry speech, and Helki was glad he’d left the fellow’s hands tied

behind his back. Hawk and Xhama listened impassively.

“These are very bad people, Helki,” Hawk said, once the man ran out of breath. “If they come to Lintum Forest, we’ll have war.”

“Then I reckon the ones I saw were a scouting party,” Helki said. “But they didn’t seem to be all that much at home in our forest. We’ll know all about it when Obst comes back.”

“And it won’t be good news, you can count on that!” said Gibb. He’d been staring at the black men, never having seen their like before. He’d be doing a lot of staring, here in Carbonek, thought Helki.

“Who is this?” asked Xhama.

“A retired outlaw I picked up on my way,” Helki said.

“And what’s a hyena?” asked Gibb.

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The barracks buzzed with news that morning. A number of soldiers in several different companies had fallen sick. None of the men in Jax’s company were quite sure how many, nor did they like to hear that Jax wouldn’t be going with them to their work that day.

“What do you know that we don’t know, old man?”

“Nothing!” said Jax. “But I know I don’t want to go there anymore. I’m tired, and that hollow woman that we found there yesterday, she came into my dreams last night.”

“Mine, too,” someone muttered. But the corporal sneered.

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of an oversized doll,” he said. “Well, you won’t get rich just sitting around the barracks. The men who found that pile of gold yesterday will live like kings, once they leave the army. I’d like some of that myself!”

“When an old soldier like Jax is afraid, Corporal, it means something!”

“All it means is that it’s time for us to go to work. Come on, pack up your gear. We’ll all be sorry if we’re late for the boat.”

They left Jax alone in the barracks, but there was more than a little grumbling as they followed the corporal to the river.

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Later that day, Gallgoid accompanied Lord Chutt to the military infirmary.

“A few sick soldiers, that’s all it is,” Chutt said. “Born’s carrying on as if he’d lost a battle.”

“It does seem strange, though, my lord, for several healthy, able-bodied men to fall ill at the same time,” Gallgoid said.

“I never should have made him Obann’s general. He hasn’t got the stomach for it. Any little thing that goes wrong throws him off his balance.”

Born was waiting for them at the infirmary.

“What’s the crisis now?” Chutt said.

“Come in and see for yourself,” said Born.

The infirmary, a converted warehouse by the river, had an office for physicians in one corner and supply rooms in the others. The rest of the space was for beds, some four dozen of them. In peacetime, no one thought more beds would ever be needed.

“Merciful heaven!” Gallgoid almost said aloud.

Two-thirds of the beds were occupied, with a harried doctor in their midst and orderlies scurrying from one bed

to another. The physician hastened to meet them. He forgot to stand at attention, but remembered to salute his general.

"This is Doctor Jarrah, who normally has only four or five patients to attend to," Born said. "Doctor, this is the governor-general and his aide. Tell them what you told me."

The doctor rubbed his hands uneasily. "My lord," he said, "these men are very sick and getting sicker by the hour. A few of them were brought in last night; the rest, early this morning."

"What's the matter with them?" Chutt said, betraying some impatience.

"Sir, we don't know. They suffer from acute nausea and can't keep anything down, not even a little bit of broth. They slip in and out of consciousness and appear to be confused, not understanding where they are." He paused, shuffled his feet. "Some of them, sir, their hair comes out in handfuls at a touch. I haven't seen anything like it."

"That makes no sense at all!" Chutt growled. "What could possibly have happened to them? They were all fit for work yesterday—weren't they?"

"We think so. It's hard to be sure. They don't respond coherently to simple questions. Half of them can't remember their own names."

"Have they anything in common, besides the work they have been doing?" Gallgoid asked.

Jarrah shook his head. "They were brought in from several different barracks, sir. We questioned their corporals, but they couldn't think of much to tell us: only that most of these men seemed to have had a good day yesterday, finding money. Or looking for gold and expecting to find it. They worked at several different sites."

“They’re torn between gold fever and fear of the curse,” said Born. “Sergeants reported yesterday that men were crawling into holes and entering ruined buildings before anyone could stop them. I hardly know what to say about the army’s morale. And I’m afraid there’ll be a lot more sick men coming in, before long.”

An orderly interrupted. “Doctor! This one’s dead.”

They all followed Jarrah to the patient’s bedside. The orderly was shuddering: he was used to stitching and bandaging clean wounds—not this.

“God help us!” muttered Born, and he was not a praying man.

The dead man had bled from the ears, and all over his lips were blackened scabs. His dead hands clutched the sheet tightly. Jarrah bent over to sniff his breath, trying to discover any small detail that might hint at what he ought to do.

“Not nice,” he said. “Odor of bad blood.” He stood back up, addressing Chutt. “My lord, I have no idea what killed this man.”

“It’s a plague spot, that’s what it is,” said Born. “We’ll have to halt the operation, Chutt—unless you want to take the chance of bringing plague into our city. God knows how many of our soldiers have been touched by it already.”

Chutt ground his teeth, battling to restrain his temper. “That’s nonsense, Born! If there is a plague, it’s had a thousand years to cross the river and has never done it. No! This is some kind of poison left over from the Day of Fire, and no one would have gotten it if they’d obeyed orders and stayed out in the open instead of crawling into holes. The operation will continue, and the men will do as they’re told!

This”—he made a sweeping gesture that took in all the beds in the infirmary—“ought to be a lesson to them.”

Born’s hands balled into fists. “I won’t be responsible for what happens,” he said.

“Then maybe I ought to find a general who will! I’ll accept your resignation here and now, if you offer it.”

But the next step after that, Born knew, would be the cellar under Ysbott’s office, so he held his peace.

## The Ula

Abnaks brought Orth and his companions up the mountain pass to Silvertown.

“I can hardly believe it’s the same place!” Jack said. He pointed for Orth’s benefit. “When I was here, most of the people lived in dirty little huts. Now look at all the nice, new houses, made with the bricks from the high chimneys that the Heathen knocked down.”

“They’ve repaired the gates, too,” Martis said. “Maybe soon they’ll get the mines and smelters working again. Obann will always need iron and steel.”

“This is where we leave you, Sunfish, if you don’t want us to go all the way to Obann City with you,” Foxblood said. “But remember this: if you call us, we will come.”

“The Lord watch between us till we meet again,” said Orth.

Silvertown was proud to receive Orth. Up to this time, no First Prester had ever visited their city. Since King Ryons’ army had freed it from the Heathen, Silvertown had a mayor and councilors chosen by the people themselves and a chamber house now hallowed by the First Prester—an ugly building slapped up by the traitor, Goryk Gillow, but redeemed for a much more noble purpose.

“My Lord First Prester,” said the mayor, “no one ever

truly expected you'd ever return safe and sound from the Abnaks. We are overjoyed to be the first to welcome you back to your own country."

"And won't there be a big to-do," added a councilor, "when they hear about it in the big city! What'll they do with two First Presters? It's never happened before." Martis had been wondering about that, too, but hadn't yet seen fit to mention it.

Orth answered gravely, "I will not fight to reassert my title. The clergy must do as they think best. But I will preach, and preach again, our need for a new Temple not made with hands but consisting of all God's people guided by God's word." Two of the councilors exchanged a troubled look, and Martis thought, "That's exactly what they'll all be fighting over." Ellayne had the same thought, and looked away.

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Obst, Gurun, Barseen, and Shesh agreed that the map Herric had drawn was a faithful copy of the great map. He'd drawn it on the biggest sheet of reed paper they'd been able to find in Carbonek, and they rolled it up carefully and put it in a leather case. More copies would be made on parchment later.

"This is one of the most important days in our time," Obst said. "May God make our efforts fruitful in His service."

"And now it's time we got back home," said Chagadai.

They set out immediately, late in the morning, hoping to cover as much ground as the horses could manage. No one spoke of it until Tam said to Obst, "I'm uneasy about the lack of news from Obann City and whatever mischief might be brewing there."

Obst's long strides, one after the other, kept pace with the riders. Tam marveled at his stamina.

"Whatever they're doing in the city," he said, "it's out of our hands. But the king's scouts would warn us if the army moves our way."

"Sooner or later they'll get tired of digging up the ruins," Tam said.

Runners had been sent out from Silvertown, but the king's party had received no word of Orth's return to Obann. That news would be waiting for them at Carbonek.

"What they might find in the ruins of Old Obann," said Obst, "is the thing that worries me."

Three days' journey brought them back to Carbonek, where Helki was waiting with his prisoner.

There had been time to wash the plant juices, animal fats, and dirt off the man's skin, which proved to be deeply tanned under all that. "You don't get that kind of tan living in a forest," Helki said. "These are plainsmen, wanderers. See if he will answer you, Obst. No one else here understands a word of his talk."

Obst took a long look at the stranger. Obst would speak in Obannese, and the man would hear it in his own language.

Obst thought he saw a man who knew he was alone among his enemies, yet prepared to defy them all. He had the broadest chest and shoulders Obst had ever seen, arms knotted with muscle, powerful legs, and flashing dark brown eyes under heavy brows. Scars decorated his face. To Obst it seemed there was a pattern to those scars, as if they'd been put there to convey a message.

"My name is Obst, and this is King Ryons' settlement

of Carbonek. What is your name, and who are your people?"

The man's jaw dropped, as so often happened when a stranger from a faraway country heard Obst speak his language. Shesh and Barseen always heard him speak in purest Arachosian; Gurun and her brothers, in the language of the northern isles.

"How do you speak my language?" It was a harsh demand, couched in suddenly alert suspicion with an undertone of fear.

"I speak all languages," Obst said. "It is the gift of God. I mean you no harm." Helki had untied the stranger's hands, but stood ready with his rod. "Please, friend, tell me your name."

The man hesitated, trying to weigh whatever danger might be in store for him if he answered. Finally, he did.

"I am Uwaiyah," he said, "and my people are the People." Obst heard it as "the People," but as spoken, it was "the Ulo."

"Where do your people live?"

"We live where we please. Many days' journey to the south of this forest. We hunt the shabarak, following the herds." There was no Obannese word for "shabarak," an animal unknown to Obst, not even mentioned in the Scriptures.

"What brought you to our country?"

"We follow the herds: the shabarak are moving north. When we saw your forest, we decided to explore it. There are no great forests in our country. Just little ones."

"Ask him why they killed my friends and kidnapped me!" Gibb cried. It was the first Obst had noticed him. He translated the question.

"We always kill those who might be our enemies, before

they can kill us," Uwaiyah said. "You have black men here. They have been our enemies." Helki had already told Obst what Hawk and Xhama had said about the Hyena Men.

"I understand that was a long time ago," said Obst.

"The People don't forget their enemies." When Obst translated, Xhama said, "Neither do the Hosa."

"You'll find no enemies here," said Obst. "We serve the living God, who of one blood made all the nations of the earth."

Uwaiyah showed his sturdy white teeth in what might have been a grin. "There are only the People," he said, "and all others who are not the People, Ulo and not Ulo. We are the only People. To us belongs everything we see. We have the right to it."

"That must make them popular with their neighbors," Helki said.

"They've learned nothing since they came to Hosa country," said Xhama, "where they didn't stay long!"

Obst sighed. "We would rather treat you as a guest, Uwaiyah, than a prisoner. It would please us if you made friends here and got to know us. It would even please us if we could tell you that you're free to go, whenever you want.

"But you have come into Lintum Forest and killed men who never did you any harm, so how are we to trust you? God would have us live in peace with all men, even with the Ulo. Why should we not?"

This time Uwaiyah did grin. "That's weak talk," he said. "Who is this god who makes you weak? But if we come and you submit to us without fighting, we may choose to let you depart from this country in peace."

Obst translated that, and those chieftains laughed out loud, but not merrily.

“Remind them,” said Hawk, “that even as we drove them out of Hosa lands, we’ll drive them out of Lintum Forest, too! They will never get as far as Carbonek. Let them stay where they are, on the plains, and hunt their shabarak and live.” And the other chieftains, all the king’s chiefs, rumbled their approval.

Shaffur said, “Let the Abnaks escort this man out of Lintum Forest with that message. He can deliver it to his people.” He turned to Ryons. “With Your Majesty’s permission,” he added.

Ryons startled, but managed to say, “By all means.” He’d been listening intently. Uwaiyah reminded him of the Zamzu, eaters of men, the Thunder King’s most avid followers. The thought of them swarming into Lintum Forest, he dreaded. “We’d rather be at peace. Let these people stay in their own lands, if they’d rather not be friendly to us.” It was the best he could do. Gurun squeezed his hand: his answer made her proud of him.

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“My lord,” said Chutt’s servant, “you ought to come and see this thing the army found. No one knows what to make of it.”

Chutt decided it would be good to show himself and pay out some special bonuses. He didn’t much care for Born, but it would be folly to ignore the fact that more soldiers had been taken to the infirmary and two or three more had died. There was one man who seemed to be recovering, and Doctor Jarrah had high hopes for him. But no one was talking about that case, and it was true that the army’s morale wasn’t what it should be, lately.

But worse, much worse, a rumor of plague striking the army had already leaked into the city, and people were scaring themselves talking about it. They spoke of God's curse, too: the curse on Old Obann, some said, had been brought across the river. Chutt ordered Ysbott to put a stop to such talk. He couldn't rely on Born or Otvar to do it. To remind Ysbott that he was still under some displeasure for the gaming house robberies, Chutt sent the order to Ysbott by his snootiest underbutler, who had to read it to him. The servant came back somewhat shaken.

"I tell you," he confided to the other servants as they had their supper, "if looks could kill, I'd be a dead man now. Why his lordship ever brought in a man like that, I don't know. I'm afraid to go back out on the street! Just in case that man decides to have me murdered. His deputies are just a pack of cutthroats; any one of them would do it."

Chutt heard nothing of this, and in the morning he invited Otvar to go with him to view the new discovery. He knew the First Prester considered it all a waste of time, and Chutt liked rubbing his nose in it.

"What useless piece of rubbish is it this time?" Otvar said, as they approached the warehouse.

"I wouldn't let my servant describe it to me," Chutt said. "I want to be surprised. He was so excited, it's bound to be something wonderful." Otvar's sour expression made the taunt worthwhile.

What they saw was more than a surprise. Chutt found himself struck speechless.

The scholars had propped it up so it could be viewed from all angles, which was what they were doing at the moment. They backed away, bowing to Chutt and the First Prester.

At first Chutt thought he saw a living woman, bare and hairless, standing there as if she'd been waiting for him all morning. It took him a moment to perceive that she was missing half her shin and her left foot. Those had been replaced by pieces of wood, so there she stood.

"She's hollow, my lord," said one of the scholars, "and weighs practically nothing. What she's made of, we cannot say. But other than the broken leg, she's beautifully preserved."

Beauty was hardly an adequate word for it. Chutt stared, entranced. The painted skin, if paint it was, looked warm and smooth, inviting a caress. She was perfection, he thought. Her eyes, her nose, her molded lips—these were timeless, as if she'd been buried only moments ago. Her face, devoid of any emotion whatsoever, seemed more than merely human. If this was a goddess, then Lord Chutt would be her worshipper.

"I have never in my life seen anything so beautiful," he finally said.

"But it's nothing," said Otvar. Chutt ignored him. Very slowly, he walked around the figure. She was without the slightest blemish, despite the passage of a thousand years. He greatly desired to touch her, but so many of the things from Old Obann fell into dust when you touched them, he couldn't bring himself to risk it—and besides, not in front of these fools, he thought.

Without words, she was telling him something. "This is the world that once existed, the world that must be brought to life again. For a thousand years I have waited for you, to tell you this. My world must live again. You must give me life."

“It’s only an effigy, man,” said Otvar. “Stop mooning over it.”

Chutt glared at him and made him flinch, but in the same instant suppressed a rage that left him quite unsteady on his feet, because of course this fool, this doddering scarecrow of a man, had no understanding. He might as well be blind and deaf. For the lady’s message, Chutt knew for a solid certainty, had been for him alone. He spoke to the scholars instead.

“No one is to touch her, for any reason, without my permission. A gold piece each for the men who brought her in, and one each for all of you.”

The scholars, all of whom had worked so far without any kind of bonus at all, could only gasp, too surprised to thank him.

“I’ll return this evening,” he said, and without another word to anyone, turned and walked briskly out the door.

Otvar shook his head, fearing for Chutt’s sanity.

## How Gsbott Dealt with the Robberies

Fnaa had not forgotten his special letter to Prester Jod, printed with blocks instead of scrawled by hand, but he had to wait until there were two Ghols available to deliver it. Meanwhile, like everyone else in Carbonek, he was fascinated by Uwaiyah of the Ulo.

Far away in Durmurot, Jod and Constan knew nothing of those matters. No one could tell them whether Gurun's brothers, and Barseen and Shesh, had reached Lintum Forest safely. Even from Obann City, news was barely a trickle.

So they went on with their work of copying and publishing the Scriptures, all by hand, and General Hennen began to build a watchtower, looking out to sea.

"If there are any more ships coming our way," he explained to Jod, "I want to see them before they can land. I'll want time to make our army ready—small as it is." For Durmurot could field, at most, a thousand soldiers, and the city had not been built for defense. "We'd never stand a siege. Better we fight in the open, if we can."

"But the first ship came in peace," said Jod.

“And so, I hope, will any others. But it would be better to be ready to fight, and not have to, than unready, and have to.”

The work on the tower went slowly, cautiously. Nothing like it had ever been built in Durmurot, and the builders had to feel their way with care. So far there was only the first level, with the stoutest timber they could find, and perhaps more bracing than was needed. They dug down fifteen feet to plant the beams on bedrock. The tower stood on high ground, solid ground, overlooking the dunes.

Hennen prayed every day that his army would never need to fight.

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Ysbott’s deputies, under questioning, couldn’t tell him which of their number had been robbing patrons of the gaming houses. He had to refrain from sending any to the cellar for more rigorous interrogation, lest they all desert him. He strongly suspected that the guilty parties already had.

“It’ll be death for whoever has done this,” he told his men, “and not a nice death, either. When they’re finally hanged, it’ll come as a relief. But whoever turns them in will be rewarded.”

Redegger hired more men to impersonate deputies—the badges were easy to counterfeit—and sent out five of them one night to rob Asha’s All-New House of Pleasure. Asha was a party to the ruse and played his part well, tearfully pleading with the robbers to leave him in peace. They looted the house and then the patrons, and fled into the night before any of the real deputies could be summoned.

“I don’t like robbing my customers,” Redegger told Gallgoid, “but someday I’ll make it up to them, after Ysbott is tried and hanged. I don’t even like setting him up for crimes he didn’t commit, but he’s committed so many real crimes in his life, it seems an adequate reward and just.”

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A chief of outlaws knows his days are numbered when the men in his band defy him or ignore him, as if he were no chief, and the next thing after that, always, was to kill the chief. Ysbott knew this pattern well. He’d helped in several of those murders, each time moving up in the ranks until the last assassination made him the chief.

The night the five deputies robbed Asha, Ysbott knew instantly that he was marked for destruction. That the deputies were not his deputies, and that Redegger had something else in mind for him besides a knife between the shoulder blades, Ysbott didn’t know. He wouldn’t have appreciated any difference between a lawful hanging and a quick stab in the back.

“Get out,” he said to the deputy who’d brought him the news at home that night. By now it was getting on toward midnight, and Ysbott had been about to go to bed. The messenger found him in a richly embroidered silken robe with an alabaster cup in his hand. The cup was meant to be an art object, but Ysbott liked to drink from it—sparingly, for drink was not among his vices. He’d seen drunkenness shorten many outlaws’ lives.

Anyone else would have paced the floor and wondered what to do, would have frantically searched his mind for persons who might help him, and how to get their help.

“I am Ysbott the Snake,” he said to himself, “and I slither away from disaster before it gets a grip on me. All this is very nice”—he spared a long look for the luxuries he’d accumulated in his den: paintings, exquisite little figurines in jade and onyx, jeweled daggers hanging on the walls—“but none of it’s any good to a dead man.” And Lord Chutt, after this rash of robberies that Ysbott was powerless to stop, would see to it, soon, that this is what he, Ysbott, would be: a dead body dangling from a scaffold.

He shed his robe and dressed for travel, taking what weapons and money he could conceal beneath his cloak. Without waking any of his servants, he went out by the back door. “I’ll wind up in my own cellar if I stay,” he thought, “and won’t Grybb and Evrog enjoy that!” Yes—his pet torturers would relish that assignment.

In the morning Ysbott’s manservant, when he went to rouse his master, found the bed unslept in, and the watch found a dead soldier by one of the lesser city gates.

Toward evening Gallgoid brought the news of Ysbott’s disappearance to Redegger. But the gaming boss had already heard it from his own people.

“It seems our little gambit worked a bit too well,” said Redegger, consoling himself with a cup of wine before supper. “I was sure Ysbott would try to hold on to his position, but now it seems Lord Chutt will have to find a new Judge of Obann sooner than expected.”

“Chutt’s been in his room all day,” said Gallgoid, “and won’t come out to talk to anyone. His servants are afraid to disturb him. He’s fallen into a very strange mood, they tell me.”

“I’m sure the reason for it will prove interesting,”

Redegger said. "Well, at least it takes me out of the robbery business, which is just as well. It's not my style."

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Barseen's mother and father were scholars, and she took after them. Uwaiyah the Ulo was to be sent away from Carbonek. Nothing to be done about that, but she couldn't bear to waste an opportunity to find out more about him and his people. Obst agreed to translate for her.

"Don't be too surprised if he refuses to answer," he said. "Helki says these men, when he observed them, hardly ever spoke even to each other."

Two Abnaks guarded Uwaiyah. They would give him back his weapons when he left the forest. Helki and Chief Buzzard were deciding what to do about the others who'd been Uwaiyah's companions. "We could kill them easily enough," said Buzzard, "but I suppose God wouldn't like it." Once upon a time, such a misgiving would never have occurred to him.

Barseen and Obst found Uwaiyah willing to talk, and his Abnak guards listened attentively, because someday they might have to fight the Ulo.

"Why do you and your fellows not talk among yourselves?" Barseen asked. "That man Gibb was with you for days, and he never heard any of you speak. He was surprised to find out that you could."

"When we spy out a strange country, we take a vow not to speak, so that the birds of that country cannot carry our words to those who would be our enemies. We all took that vow. I speak now because I am among enemies and cannot hide my presence."

“We’re not your enemies,” said Obst.

“You are not the People.”

“Why do the Hosa call you the Hyena Men?” Barseen asked.

“Because we are begotten by the great Mother who walks the earth as the hyena, the most noble of the beasts,” Uwayiah said. “That is what makes us the People, and no others.”

Barseen looked at Obst, but he shrugged. Neither of them knew what a hyena was, but neither of them had ever been far south of Lintum Forest.

“Is it a creature like a lion?” Obst said.

The Ulo laughed. “The lion is a coward who eats the lioness’ cubs. The hyena is both brave and holy. Those black men of yours are fools, who think they insult us by calling us after our Mother. Our bravest and mightiest men are reborn into the world as the hyena’s pups. That is their reward.”

Obst shook his head. In recent years he’d come to know of many things believed by various Heathen peoples. Bringing them all to know God who had created them—even the Ulo—sometimes seemed impossible. But all things, he reminded himself, were possible with God.

“Why would your people want to come to Lintum Forest and make war?” Barseen asked.

“Because all lands and all things belong to the People by right,” Uwayiah said. “War is when one tribe of the People goes against another, which is honorable. It is not honorable to fight with others who are not the People. That is only hunting, and taking what is ours by right.”

“So you will come to Lintum Forest and try to do that?”

“We follow the herds, and the herds are moving north.

If we like this country, we will take it from you. We are the children of the Mother. We have the right.”

# The Spirit of the Past

Few towns in Obann lie far from the banks of the Imperial. In a boat provided by loggers who worked for Roshay Bault, Lord Orth and his escort—Jack, Ellayne, and Martis rowing, and Wytt balancing on the prow enjoying himself, and Hlah and Allifar following in a canoe—made good progress down the river. Orth meant to go to Ninneburky while stopping at many towns along the way so that people could see their First Prester had returned. That he had come back alive and unharmed from a sojourn among the Abnaks struck many as miraculous.

Wherever he stopped, he delivered a brief sermon.

“I only want to remind you all that the world has changed, and that by act of God,” he would say. “God has shaken the old Temple into rubble so that a new and better Temple, that cannot be shaken, can be born—a Temple not made with hands, but consisting of all God’s people led by God’s own word and by His spirit. You are the stones with which that Temple shall be built.”

Orth was popular in the eastern marches of Obann and the people heard him gladly, amazed and proud that a First Prester of Obann should visit them in person. And all while he traveled, spring settled in toward summer, the water teemed with fish and dragonflies—Wytt fell in once

and had to be rescued after he'd leaped too far in pursuit of a dragonfly—and newly planted crops began to sprout.

"The land is good!" Orth said. "Looking at it, you'd never think a Heathen army ever passed this way. So the Lord will regenerate all the earth, in His time."

"We're having an easy trip to Ninneburky," Martis said, "but it won't be so pleasant after that. My lord, it would be best for you to go to Lintum Forest from Ninneburky."

"My son, I am called to Obann City. Don't you think I'd really rather go to Lintum Forest and be safe, protected by the king? I'm not a fool. I know what my enemies would like to do to me. The temptation to avoid that gnaws at me all day! Please don't add to it."

Jack and Ellayne, rowing side by side while Martis rested, exchanged a worried look.

"Can't you at least stay in Ninneburky for a while?" Ellayne said. "People will come from up and down the river to hear you, and my father will protect you."

Orth shook his head. "My presence would be dangerous for Ninneburky. I'd rather not have that on my conscience."

Jack said nothing. Everyone knew that if Chutt's army marched in summertime, nothing would keep it from the wooden walls of Ninneburky.

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Lord Chutt sent his butler and his senior footman to the warehouse with a written order, with his seal on it, to wrap up the hollow woman head to toe, so that no one would see her, and bring her to his house. To the footman it seemed clear that the butler found the chore distasteful, but

neither of them spoke of it. Chutt had the butler carry her up to his room.

“This is not to be spoken of, not even among the household staff,” Chutt said. “You’ll all be dismissed if I ever hear one word of it, and I’ll see to it that no one else dares offer you employment. Is that clear?”

“As you wish, my lord.” The butler had been with Chutt for some years, and knew he meant what he said. “Much more of this,” he thought, “and my lord won’t have to dismiss me. I’ll go!”

Chutt brought the hollow woman into his room. He didn’t like to handle her—it felt impious, somehow—but better him than anyone else. He thought the golden mask watched him as he moved. He stood the woman against the opposite wall, a few feet from his bed, and with trembling hands removed her covering.

For she was the past, the glorious past that demanded to be born again; she was its emissary. She would be covered, from now on, whenever he left the room. Indeed, he quickly decided to replace the covering, once he had her firmly positioned, with only her face showing. He must show her the utmost respect.

“I will do it,” he muttered. “Lord Reesh and the Thunder King both failed, but I will do it—bring back the glory of the ancient days.”

He would succeed because the past itself, as if it were a great god with a purpose—and that thought stopped him short. God, the God of Scripture, destroyed the glory of the past and all its wisdom and its might. Or had He? Here were the golden mask, that had the power of command, and a perfect woman whose power was not yet known. Here they

were, back from the past, here where he could see them. They hadn't been destroyed. And there must be more, Chutt thought: so much more, just waiting to be brought forth from where the spirit of the past, in its wisdom, had safely hidden it. The very thought made him short of breath.

Chutt stayed in his room all night and locked it, taking the maid's and butler's keys when he finally went out in the morning.

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Jax couldn't help wondering about the traveling companion the man he only knew as "sir" had selected for him: a ragged beggar boy who limped along on crutches. "Will this poor child limp all the way to Durmurot?" he thought. "And I?"

Gallgoid brought them to a hole in the wall of the cellar of an abandoned house: there were more of those in Obann than there used to be. It was a tunnel, he explained to Jax, that would take them under the city wall and out of Obann. The boy already seemed to know that.

"Both of you," Gallgoid said, "tell Prester Jod everything you've seen or heard in this city, and answer his questions as best you can." He handed Jax a thick envelope sealed with red wax. "And give him this, from me."

"We will," said the boy.

Gallgoid shook their hands. "You've done good service, both of you, and this is your reward. May we meet again in better times! Farewell."

He left them to the tunnel. The boy lit a lantern for Jax to carry.

"Let's go," he said. "We'll have a long way to go today."

Not far into the tunnel, they came to the entrance of a brick-lined passage. Here the boy surprised Jax by discarding his crutches and standing up straight.

“I won’t need these anymore,” he said. When he saw the look on Jax’s face, he grinned at him. “They’re only a disguise,” he said. “And you can call me by my real name from now on: Remmy. I’ll have to get used to hearing it again. I’ve used a lot of different names.” Fnaa, for one, knew him as Ebed.

“You, a boy—you were that man’s agent, like me?”

“I know the tunnels better than anyone, except him,” Remmy said. “But don’t ask me what his real name is. I never knew it. It’s dangerous for us to know each other’s names, in case one of us gets caught.”

Jax shook his head. “I feel like I’ve been a pawn in a chess game but never knew the rules,” he said. “Well, I’m glad you won’t have to limp on crutches all the way to Durmurot.”

“There’s a man who has a cart and horse waiting for us, if we can reach his farm today. It’s all been taken care of. You’ll have a ride to Durmurot, and you can tell me soldiers’ stories as we go. The chief says you’ve got hundreds of them.”

It was Jax’s turn to smile. He liked this boy already.

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Somehow the city got word that Judge Ysbott had deserted his post and fled the city—glad news and much talked-about in all the streets and market squares, albeit with assorted variations that would have to be sorted out later.

Ysbott had enemies in Lintum Forest: they'd come for him, but he'd gotten away just one step ahead of them.

Boss Redegger was going to have him assassinated for robbing his gaming houses—and again, a narrow escape. “That hurts!” Redegger complained. “I’ve never had anyone killed.”

Ysbott had plotted against the governor-general, but one of his co-conspirators had turned him in, necessitating his quick departure.

No—he'd only pretended to abscond, and was hiding somewhere in the city for some dark purpose.

“Good riddance to him, whatever the cause of it!” Born said. But Gallgoid was amazed to learn that Chutt had not yet been told, not even by the general.

“He isn’t seeing anyone,” Born said. It was Chutt’s second full day alone in his room. “He came down for a bite to eat this morning, then locked himself back in. His servants are under orders not to disturb him, and I couldn’t get them to try. They’re afraid—of what, I don’t know.”

“Someone ought to give him the news,” Gallgoid said. “The day’s half over.”

“Be my guest,” said Born.

Gallgoid went to Ysbott’s house, but as far as Ysbott’s servants knew, he was well and truly gone. From there he went to Redegger.

“He is shrewder than I ever thought,” said Redegger. “He saw a chance to save his life and took it—without hesitation. We can only hope he’s gone for good. I’ll go with you, if you’re resolved to tell Chutt.”

“Someone has to,” Gallgoid said.

Ignoring the butler’s objections, the two of them

climbed the stairs in Lord Chutt's house and knocked softly on the door.

"Go away!"

"My lord," said Gallgoid, "we bring you news you need to know. Lord Ysbott has left the city. He killed a guard at the gate."

"It's true, my lord—we've checked," said Redegger. "It seems he didn't want to be held accountable for those robberies."

Chutt recognized their voices, cursed them for disturbing him, and told them to wait downstairs. They stationed themselves in his parlor. No servants waited on them. They had a long wait before Chutt came down, fully dressed and groomed, but in a foul mood.

"What's all this about Ysbott?" he snapped, and they told him.

"Well, that at least proves he was responsible for the robberies," Chutt said. He didn't yet sit down, preferring to flit restlessly from one spot to another. "If he shows his face again, I'll have him hanged. Is that all you came to tell me?"

"We'll need a new judge," said Gallgoid.

"Hopefully one who's not a lifelong criminal," Redegger added. Chutt glared at him.

"Then that leaves you out, doesn't it!" he said. "Let the council choose Ysbott's replacement. I have other things to think about."

Gallgoid wondered what those other things could be, but didn't ask. He thought Chutt might have kept to his room because he was sick, but obviously he wasn't. Why were his servants so afraid of him? It had never been that kind of household before.

“Has something upset you, my lord?” he dared to ask. Surprisingly, a hard smile accompanied Chutt’s answer.

“I’m not upset,” he said. “Why should I be? Losing the services of Ysbott seems a very little thing to me, just now. Discoveries are being made in the Old City that have claimed my full attention. I have very much to think about, and I need peace and solitude in which to do it.”

Redegger stood up. “In that case, my lord, we’ll leave you to it.”

Back out on the street with Gallgoid, “What do you suppose he means?” he asked.

Gallgoid shrugged. “I haven’t heard of anything they’ve dug up so far that would preoccupy him so.”

“Keep thinking,” said Redegger. “It might turn out to be important. I’ve never known Chutt to devote that much energy to thinking about anything but grabbing more money.”

# How Bassas Found a Home

Messengers sped down the river with news of Lord Orth's return to Obann. By this the baron and baroness knew their children were safely on their way home, and could devote their attention to preparing Ninneburky to host the First Prester. He'd visited their town before, but to have him back was cause for celebration. The Abnaks were friends with Obann now, but the old stories that people had heard all their lives of Abnak stealth and savagery were not so easily forgotten.

Bassas led his riders as far west as he dared, practically up to the gates of Obann City. The enemy had no cavalry to challenge him, and the infantry couldn't catch him. Besides, they never tried. That might mean they were trying to set a trap, so Bassas was careful.

"I don't know what they're doing," he reported to Roshay, when he returned. "I could ride right into Cardigal and sack it, if I wished. Chutt's whole army is hiding in the city and won't come out, not even to see me off. It's not natural."

"As much as it would delight me to twist the tail of that

young snip of an oligarch that Chutt installed in Cardigal, I insist you do those people no harm,” the baron said. “This is your country now, and they’re your countrymen.”

Those words, spoken so simply, stunned Bassas. Nothing of their kind would ever have been uttered by his former master, Chutt. As if by reflex, he kissed his fingertips in homage to the baron.

“My lord and my chief!” he said. “This is now my home, and I will fight for it—and obey your commands.”

“King Ryons’ men have houses in Lintum Forest,” said Roshay, “and we’ll have to do something about better living quarters for your people before the winter comes.”

“We’re used to our tents, Baron. The Wallekki don’t build and live in houses.” Bassas’ men were camped outside the town, with free access to Ninneburky at all times. The townspeople were used to them by now: they knew that these Wallekki had fought for them. “Even so,” said Bassas, “your generosity does warm our hearts. It was not so when we were stationed in the city, where they put us in barracks and gave us unfriendly looks in the street. We were always strangers there.”

“But not here,” Roshay said.

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Their next stop would be Ninneburky, home, but Orth intended to go on from there.

“Chutt will kill him,” Ellayne confided to Jack. Martis had beached the boat and they’d all gotten out to stretch their legs. Orth stood by a bank of reeds, looking up at the sky.

“Even he knows that!” Jack said. “But what can anybody do to stop him?”

“They’ll make him disappear,” said Ellayne, “and then swear they never saw him, never laid a finger on him, and just don’t know what happened to him.” Jack stared at her. “Oh, it’s not my own idea!” she added hastily. “That’s what they did to the Sad Prince in the book, and no one could ever prove it was them until Abombalbap beat the Red Duke in single combat.”

She was never going to outgrow that twaddle, Jack thought. “They don’t do those combats anymore,” he said, “and anyway Abombalbap cut off the duke’s head, so there was never a confession. Nowadays you need more proof than that.”

She gave him an exasperated look. “Do try to use your wits, Jack Bucket. Lord Orth thinks he’s going to be able to send back Hlah and Allifar with news, but Chutt will make them disappear, too. Just ask Martis: he must have done jobs like that when he was an assassin. There won’t be any witnesses, no proof. And Chutt will get away with it!”

“But what can anybody do?” Jack cried, and Ellayne shushed him. “I mean, he won’t stay anywhere that’s safe, and he won’t take any soldiers to protect him.”

“Well, someone had better think of something before he sets out alone from Ninneburky.”

“If you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking—don’t!” Jack said. “Leave that kind of thinking to Martis and the baron.”

What she was thinking, of course, was that they and Wytt and Martis ought to follow Orth’s party without his knowledge, and protect him if they could, and at least be witnesses if they couldn’t. Nor did Jack have to try too hard to guess what the baron would think of such a scheme.

Allifar took off his boots and splashed his feet in the cool water, and Wytt vanished into the reeds to chase a frog. They at least were enjoying the journey, Jack thought.

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Two of the Ghols rode off to deliver Fnaa's printed letter to Prester Jod in Durmurot while Helki, Obst, and a well-armed band of Abnaks escorted Uwaiyah to the southern border of the forest. What they would do about the other Ulo who'd come in with Uwaiyah would be left up to the Ulo themselves, the council of chiefs decided.

"If you can get them out of the forest without killing them, Helki, well and good," Chief Buzzard said. "If not, they'll have no one but themselves to blame."

"I'll need Cavall again, Your Majesty," Helki told the king, "but not Baby. He's not much for stealthy hunting, and too easy a target for those throwing sticks of theirs. But Cavall is wise and clever. Between the two of us, we ought to be able to avoid a battle—although I think Bandy might enjoy one."

"Just bring everybody home again, Helki," Ryons said. His army was the only family that he'd ever known, and any losses hit him hard. He was resolved to be a king who fostered peace, when he grew up.

The Abnaks were coming along to guard Uwaiyah and do any fighting that might have to be done. Expert hunters, in any woodland they'd be deadly.

"I pray you can make your people understand our desire to be at peace with them," Obst said to Uwaiyah, as they set out from Carbonek. "You've seen enough to know we can and will defend ourselves. We've done it before,

often enough.”

“If we want your country, we will take it,” Uwaiyah said. Obst sighed: these, he thought, were an obstinate people.

“You’ve been south of the forest, haven’t you, Helki?” he asked.

“Once or twice, but not far. Open plains and little hills that used to be cities, long ago. I don’t expect it’s changed much.”

Helki and Obst both knew that the strange kinds of animals that had been moving into Obann in recent years came up mostly from the south. Great flightless birds like Baby, the shambling knuckle-bears, the striped predator with great jaws that could take down a moose, and a host of others, great and small: twenty years ago, there were none of them in all Obann.

And now came these Ulo people, following herds of some beast called a shabarak and worshipping a great hyena. The latter, at least, was fleetingly mentioned in the Scriptures, a kind of predator; but none had lived in Obann, Obst said, since before King Ozias’ time, two thousand years ago.

“God is reshaping the world,” he said, “and He’s only just begun. That’s why Gurun and her brothers, and Shesh and Barseen, are here. That’s why the Thunder King came so far west. It’s not just animals that are on the move, but whole nations of people. All according to God’s purpose”—Obst frowned—“which we do not yet know for sure.”

“I don’t know why God would stir up wars,” said Helki. “You always say that God loves peace.”

“Remember that He is the God of battles, too,” said Obst.

The High Council declared Ysbott an outlaw—not that Ysbott was present to contest it—and selected a woman to replace him as Judge of Obann: a widow named Zeria, whose late husband, largely by her efforts, had been the richest moneylender in the city. Several members of the council owed her large sums, which she had lately hinted might be forgiven if she were named to the council. Her election excited the whole city: it had been some fifty years since a woman had sat on the council, and never before as Judge of Obann, in charge of law and justice. For the most part she was welcome, but anyone replacing Ysbott would have been hailed as an improvement.

To Gallgoid's surprise, Chutt seemed to take but little interest in the matter and listlessly voted for her without comment. Her first official action, she promised, would be to replace all the deputies hired by Ysbott—news that cheered everyone who heard it.

"I can't fathom why Chutt has given up his hold on the Justice Building," Gallgoid said to Redegger. "And if people think Zeria will be an easy judge to live with, they're wrong."

"I owe her some money, come to think of it, and I suppose I'd better pay," Redegger said. "Well, at least the torturing and the confiscations will stop. But it seems to me that Chutt just didn't care whether she was elected or not—and he should have. Suddenly the city's government is popular again. People expect Zeria to be strict but fair, rather like Judge Tombo was. And yet Chutt voted for her without using the opportunity to take credit for bringing her aboard. He hardly seemed to notice it."

“Which means his mind is locked onto something else entirely,” said Gallgoid, “which he has not discussed with me. What could it be? Whatever it is, Born knows nothing of it.”

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Ysbott was glad to be on his own again, tramping eastward up the River Road in easy stages. That Chutt might send pursuers after him struck him as unlikely. The governor-general had nothing to gain by bringing him back to Obann for a trial, and Chutt never did anything without a chance to gain by it.

Besides, there were things Ysbott wanted to do that he could never do by remaining in the city: Settle his score with Helki, who'd run him out of Lintum Forest. Settle his score with Roshay Bault and with his daughter, the witch, who'd nearly blinded him. How he would manage to do those things, he didn't know. But it would be very good to do them, and he would find a way.

Did he miss his luxurious home in the city, so full of nice things? “I didn't really need them,” he told himself. “A man who lets himself get tied down by nice things isn't much good as an outlaw. And he won't live very long, either.”

Contented, he made his way toward Ninneburky.

# One City, Two First Presters

Lord Orth preached in Ninneburky, and visitors flocked from miles around to hear him. The people of the town turned it into a holiday, which the town council promised to add to the calendar from now on: First Prester's Day.

"By now there are messengers bringing the news to Obann City. By now they know," said the baroness, "that the man they fear is back in Obann. They will take steps."

Unable to sleep, Vannett sat up in bed and talked to her husband. She'd had a busy day, and Lord Orth had dined with her family and tonight was sleeping in her guest bedroom. Maybe she'd been too busy and that was why she couldn't fall asleep. But Roshay Bault couldn't sleep, either.

"He's all but daring Chutt to murder him," the baron said. He lay on his back. Neither he nor his wife proposed to light a candle. There were times when the dark was better. "I had a word with Martis earlier. He's sure they'll kill Orth before he gets anywhere near the city."

"There were two First Presters at the same time, once," said Vannett, remembering her history. "But that was five hundred years ago, and the one had the other assassinated."

“I have half a mind to keep him here, even if I have to lock him up.”

“You can’t do that, Roshay. They’ll only send the army out to get him—and us, too, while they’re at it.”

“The man won’t accept any kind of protection! Even if King Ryons were to command him to stop in Lintum Forest, where he really would be safe, he would only say that God commands him otherwise and that he must obey God first. Which hasn’t stopped me from dashing off a letter to the king, imploring him to do something to save Orth. But Orth will be gone before my message gets to Carbonek.”

“Which brings us back to asking, what can we do?” Vannett said.

“I suppose I could order Bassas to escort him despite his objections.”

“He’d only order Bassas not to.”

“Bassas will obey me.”

Vannett sighed. “Then it will be said that the First Prester is our prisoner, speaking only what we make him speak.”

“Our pawn against Lord Chutt!” Roshay grumbled. “And people will believe it.”

But Ellayne had already decided to follow Orth, with Wytt, and with or without Jack and Martis—if for nothing else, to be a witness to whatever was done to him.

She had not told her parents.

Having made that decision, Ellayne slept soundly.

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Aided, as he believed, by the golden mask, and encouraged by the hollow woman, who did so without speaking, Lord Chutt had mapped out his plan.

It would involve his parting with a great deal of the Thunder King's gold. The minters had been busy, and he now had many great chests full of freshly minted coins. The treasurer had even come up with a new denomination, a gold coin half the size of a "spearman," to make up for the want of silver and copper coinage. At first Chutt had desired his own portrait to be struck on the new denomination, but the treasurer had been appalled by that idea.

"My lord, it isn't done!" he cried. "It's never been done, putting a living person's image on a coin. And no governor-general, living or dead, has ever had his portrait on our money. People would laugh at you."

For a very small moment Chutt's temper flared. "Laugh at me, will they!" But it passed quickly. He would need those coins, and he saw the treasurer's point. Now was not the time to fight this battle. Maybe a few years from now, when Obann's new greatness, under his leadership, had become apparent to all, but not now. So they settled on the image of a flying eagle, and that was what the new coins would be called: eagles.

There was still plenty of raw gold waiting to be minted. With so much new money coming into circulation, Gallgoid said, the value of the gold and its purchasing power would decrease. Well, let it, Chutt thought. "We'll still be rich." Now was the time for action, and he meant to act.

He would also have to suspend the work in Old Obann. Too many men had fallen ill, and the bonuses had begun to lose their luster. Fear of plague was seeping into the city. Not real plague, Chutt thought, but certainly real fear. He mustn't let it get out of control. Besides, he had the hollow woman now. He had a plan. Without her, without the mask, he would

never find the courage for it. That such a plan could ever have sprung, unaided, from his own mind, was impossible.

He wasn't ready for the news that Lord Orth was coming home.

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Otvar delivered the tidings personally, the messenger from the oligarch of Cardigal having been unable to get an audience with Chutt. But Otvar heard him out, sent word to the other members of the High Council to join him as soon as they could, and had himself driven hastily to Chutt's house, where he bullied the butler into announcing him. With the rest of the council already on its way, presumably, the butler dared not defy the First Prester. And Chutt had no choice but to come down from his room.

"Well, Otvar, what is it now?"

"It may interest you to know that our deposed First Prester has arrived in Ninneburky and intends to come here." Otvar's papery voice, at the moment, was more menacing than any man's angry roar. "We have to decide what to do about it."

"It can't be true!" said Chutt.

"It is true. The oligarch of Cardigal, your friend Gilvaethwy, has signed and sealed the message. He is alarmed, and so am I. There can't be two First Presters."

"The Abnaks let him go?"

"It seems they're rather fond of him."

"But this is treason!" Chutt said. "This is Roshay Bault's treason, and Orth's—and the Abnaks have always been our enemies." Neither man suspected that an errand boy in Otvar's household had already brought the news to Gall-

goid. "I'll have Roshay's head for this. See if I don't!"

"Don't talk rubbish," Otvar said. "We'll need clear heads for this. Do you want the clergy splitting into factions? To say nothing of the whole city?"

"Send for the other councilors, then."

"I already have."

Chutt saw his whole plan threatened. He felt like screaming, and it took all his strength not to. A clear head, indeed: that was what he needed now. He rang for his butler.

"Bring me Gallgoid—immediately," he said. "Go yourself, and don't come back without him." And to Otvar, "Gallgoid always thinks clearly. He'll be a help to us."

"You'd better have a drink to calm your nerves," said Otvar. That was good advice, and Chutt took it.

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Gallgoid had lost no time in directing his people to spread the news throughout the city. It was the only thing he could do to protect Lord Orth, and he'd only just set that in motion when he was summoned to Chutt's house.

This was the first time he'd ever met Zeria, the new Judge of Obann. She was already there when he arrived and had commandeered the most comfortable chair in Chutt's parlor.

"Who is this, and why is he here?" she said, when Gallgoid entered.

"He's been a sort of secretary to me," Chutt said, "and he's here because I sent for him," not bothering to introduce Gallgoid, who had to introduce himself. He bowed to her. "Congratulations, my lady, on your election to the High Council."

“Fiddlesticks,” she said. Something about her reminded Gallgoid of an old toad sitting perfectly still while a worm crawls past and then, almost too quickly for the eye to follow, snapping it up. It was said she’d been a handsome woman, once. Gallgoid could see that in her still, but the overall impression was of a woman who had no time for such considerations anymore.

Chutt did remember one thing. “Shut that door,” he said. He rang for the butler and told him to see that no one tried to listen at the door. “Keep the staff away from this room.”

“What’s this meeting for?” asked Born. Chutt jerked his head at Otvar, who then delivered the news. Zeriah smiled mirthlessly.

“Two First Presters, but only one Obann!” she said. “That won’t do at all.”

“Orth is not First Prester anymore!” snapped Otvar.

“There are some who’d disagree with you.”

“Are you one of them, Judge? Are we to have a division in the council?”

“No division!” Chutt said. “Don’t you all know treason when you see it? Our enemies have sent him to raise up tumult in the city.”

“Our enemies? Or yours?”

Chutt glared at Zeriah. It didn’t seem to faze her, Gallgoid thought: Chutt might soon be sorry he hadn’t troubled himself to handpick Ysbott’s successor. Gallgoid couldn’t guess where she would stand on the issue, but he didn’t have to wait long to find out.

“After all we had to do to replace him,” Born said, “can anyone doubt it would be folly to let him back into this city?”

Could anything be more disruptive of good order?"

"Of course we can't let him back in," Zeria said. "But how to keep him out, and what to do with him eventually, that's the tricky part. He hasn't, after all, done anything wrong. It's absurd to call him a traitor."

"Very well—he's an innocent tool being used by Roshay Bault to undermine the government," Chutt said. He's coming out of his panic, Gallgoid thought. "If we could only send him back to the Abnaks, all would be well—or at least get the people to think he's gone back to the Abnaks. What do you say, Gallgoid?"

Gallgoid shrugged. "I doubt we can persuade him to go back," he said. "But if we do anything to make a martyr of him, we won't be happy with the results." And if we still had Lord Reesh, he thought, he would have already sent an assassin to deal with Orth. "Or else he'd have had me poison him and then lamented the man's untimely death from natural causes." He was glad none of the councilors knew that that had been the purpose for which Lord Reesh had employed him.

"We can't have people talking about this in the streets," Otvar said. "But they will be," thought Gallgoid, "and sooner than you'd think." He'd seen to that.

"Some mishap needs to overtake Orth on the road," Born said. "Remember, he vanished once before and wasn't here for Coronation Day." Gallgoid had arranged that, secretly. "No one knew where he'd gone; no one could find him. And wasn't it because he'd had an attack of brain fever and wasn't in his right mind? Would the people be too surprised to hear it's happened again and that he's just wandering around somewhere, witless and distraught? He might

not recover his wits a second time.”

“Well said, General! Everyone remembers that,” said Chutt.

“If that baron in Ninneburky provides him with an escort,” Otvar said, “he won’t lose his way even if he were to lose his mind again.”

“We’ll have to take him before he comes anywhere near the city,” said Born.

“My justice administration will not be party to any crime against that man,” Zeriah said. Unexpectedly, she rose from her chair. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, I have half a dozen deputies to dismiss and another half-dozen to swear in.” No one tried to stop her from leaving. “Keeping her own hands clean,” thought Gallgoid. “But not putting up any opposition, either. She’s clever.”

Although the remaining councilors discussed the matter for another two hours, the only plan they could agree on was for Born and a few picked men to hasten to Cardigal and see what they could do. “I’ll have to send someone after them,” thought Gallgoid, “but who can I spare?” His agents were effective in the city, but out in open country, who could tell? And surely Orth himself, and certainly Roshay, would anticipate the danger looming up ahead.

It was getting on toward suppertime when the councilors left Chutt’s house, and by then, as Gallgoid had intended, the news of Orth’s return was already loose in the streets.

# How Gurin Counseled the Chiefs

Uwaiyah's companions had already left the forest. Helki and Cavall found their trail and followed it out to the plain.

They were two days ahead of Bandy and Obst, who were escorting Uwaiyah. "Maybe we ought to follow this trail a little farther," Helki said. Cavall perked up his ears. "I haven't been in this country for five or six years, at least. There might be some changes that we ought to know about."

The Ulo had no skill in concealing their tracks, or else just saw no need to. They had no fear of anyone living in the forest. "Well, why should they? They're the People. They take what they want." Imagining what would have to be done to them if they invaded Lintum Forest, Helki pitied them. "People who are so wrong about what they can or cannot do haven't got a chance," he said to Cavall.

They spent a day and a night following the Ulo southward. By noon the next day, they hadn't caught up with them. But then Cavall barked at an approaching cloud of dust, a big one, and through the soles of his feet, Helki felt the vibrations made by a multitude of galloping hooves.

“Stay, Cavall! Whatever they are, we don’t have time to get out of their way. Sit!”

The dog trembled with excitement, but obeyed. None of the animals in Lintum Forest traveled in large herds, but Helki knew the plains well enough to know that even stampeding animals didn’t run headlong into obstacles if they could help it. The best hope of safety lay in standing still.

Helki saw shapes in the dust that reminded him of deer, but as the herd came closer, at great speed, he saw they weren’t. They made a noise like muted thunder as they came, and high-pitched barking cries that were like nothing else he’d ever heard—almost like the yelping of young wild pigs.

In another moment he was in the midst of them, tightly gripping the loose fur of Cavall’s neck. Stirring from that spot was likely to be fatal.

These must be the shabarak, he thought: dun-colored beasts with white bellies and thickly padded toes instead of hooves. They had long, soft snouts that bobbed as they ran, and large liquid brown eyes like deer.

They ran to escape a pack of wolves—a small pack, but bigger and bulkier than any wolves of the forest. Concentrating on their prey, the wolves ignored the man and dog. And when the herd—there must have been at least a hundred of them—had passed, Helki squinted against the dust and saw a shabarak stumble over a root, and three wolves brought it down and swiftly slew it. The rest of the herd, veering westward, kept on running, but the wolves now had what they wanted and settled down to feed. Cavall wisely suppressed a growl.

“Time to head back where we came from,” Helki said.

Even with Cavall, and his rod, he knew they couldn't fight off those wolves. He and Cavall departed very quietly. The wolves paused to watch them go, then resumed their feast.

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Vannett prevailed upon Lord Orth to stay in Ninneburky for just a few days longer.

"I confess to you, Baroness, that the temptation is to stay here quite a bit longer than that!" he said.

Tomorrow, he thought, he would send Hlah back to tell the Abnaks they'd safely arrived in Ninneburky. "My lord, let me stay with you!" Hlah said. "I loved and honored my father, Chief Spider. You've become a kind of father to me, Sunfish. And if you go on to the city of Obann, it'll be the second time I've lost a father."

"I will never have anyone who is more of a son to me than you have been," said Orth. "But you and I have the same father, who is the Lord our God—and you, Hlah, you're a father, too. And a husband. And a reciter and a teacher to your people, ordained for that service by the laying on of hands. That's your duty now."

Hlah nodded. Who was he to disobey the First Prester? Besides which, Orth was right.

"What about Allifar?" he said. "He's not ordained. He won't agree to be sent back."

Orth smiled. "It was for his sake that I accepted the baroness' invitation to stay a little longer." There were some two thousand Wallekki camped by Ninneburky, and Allifar had been making friends among them—and sharing with them the things he'd learned from Orth and from the Scriptures. The men liked the young chief. He was of their own

nation, and most of them had not yet learned to speak any language other than their own. More than a few of them had become very eager to hear what Allifar had to teach them, and Allifar found himself with a ministry. "He won't be too averse to remaining with his countrymen. He shows a fine aptitude for teaching."

"But he still needs to learn so much more from you!" said Hlah.

"He can have no better teacher than the Scriptures themselves," said Orth. "And you speak Wallekki, so you can help him."

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Born had left for Cardigal, Lord Chutt had suspended the work in Old Obann, and there were no more soldiers falling sick. To the people of the city, that was welcome news, but it couldn't quite drown out talk of Orth's impending return. Otvar's reciters did their best to denounce it as an idle rumor and to remind the city that with Orth as First Prester, there would be no reconstruction of the Temple. For the time being Chutt left that problem to be solved by the clergy—and by Born, if he and Gilvaethwy could get their hands on Orth before he got too far from Ninneburky and too many people saw him.

For the mask wished him to carry out his plan, his bold plan, and the beauty of the hollow woman encouraged him. "You are my emissary from the glorious past," he whispered to her by night, "and my guide to an even more glorious future." She never spoke in words, but Lord Chutt heard what she was telling him. Words would be only an encumbrance.

So far he hadn't breathed a word of it to anyone. They wouldn't understand it. They might even turn against him, especially now that Ysbott wasn't there to threaten them. He would have to take them by surprise, in front of the whole city, with no time to collect their thoughts, no time for argument.

Not so long ago, he would have reasoned with himself: "They'll kill me on the spot! Or else have me locked up as a madman." A little bit of that thinking tried to find a foothold in his mind, and he had to fight it down. "This, all along, is what the gold was for. For me! To bury their objections under it. I'll smother them in gold!"

He did wish, just a little, that he could reveal the plan to Gallgoid. There was a man who didn't think his master could do anything without him. Always so free with his advice! Usually sound advice, Chutt granted. But now he had a plan far beyond Gallgoid's scope. Gallgoid would marvel at it; he'd be appalled by its audacity. Chutt looked forward to seeing that.

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No one in Lintum Forest yet knew that Orth was in Ninneburky and preparing to go on to Obann City. But the mayor of Silvertown, deeming it his duty to his king, had sent a runner with what little news he could provide.

"This is bad," Chief Shaffur said. "Among the Abnaks, he was safe. But this side of the mountains, those villains in the city will never let him live." Shaffur was the first to see that, but the other chiefs were quick to agree. "We must take him before they can," he said, and they agreed with that, too. But Helki and Obst weren't there.

Ryons sat among his chiefs in council, with Gurun by his side, knowing that they wished him to command them to find the First Prester and bring him back to Carbonek. But he couldn't help thinking that if Orth had meant to come here, he would have told the mayor in Silvertown and a message would have been sent accordingly.

"We don't know where he is," Shaffur said, "only that he passed through Silvertown on his way west, and that he'd had an Abnak escort, but they parted from him at Silvertown. That means we'll have to search until we find him. I would expect him to be traveling along the river."

"Then he shouldn't be hard to find," said Chief Zekelesh. "He's a famous man, and people will remember seeing him."

Ryons was sure they shouldn't be making this decision without Obst's advice. Who else among them could even guess what was in the First Prester's mind?

Gurun asked to address the chiefs—not that they would have denied her. But even after all the time she'd spent among them, she never addressed them without their permission.

"My lords," she said, "First Prester Orth is famous for his preaching. That is what he was doing among the Abnaks. Wherever he goes, he will preach."

"It'll be safest for him to do his preaching here," said Shaffur, "where his enemies can't get at him. I'm sure that's what that man Gallgoid would counsel us, if only we could ask him."

"Lintum Forest is safe for all of us," said Tughrul Lomak of the Dahai, "but it's devilish hard, from here, to find out what's happening anywhere else. Lord Orth won't like that."

“If he is preaching,” Gurun said, “he will preach in many places all along the river. He will be easy to find. But when you do, he may not consent to come here. I know nothing of how these things are done in Obann. Is it right for us to compel the First Prester to do anything? King Ozias himself refrained from commanding the chief priest to permit the duke’s marriage to the widowed queen of Merrar, which would have been advantageous to King Ozias.” But of course Ryons’ chiefs were unfamiliar with that allusion to the Scriptures. Their learning had not yet progressed that far.

“I can’t do what wasn’t right for King Ozias to do,” Ryons said. And that the chiefs did understand, because the great king was their king’s ancestor, from whom—and that by God’s election—Ryons had his right to the throne.

“You talk like Obst,” Shaffur said to Gurun, but added a slight bow to show respect.

“On Fogo Island we all read the Scriptures. My brothers could have told you of the same incident I mentioned. It is in the Book of Thrones.”

Shaffur turned to Ryons. “Your Majesty, time is of the essence. May we at least find Lord Orth and inquire of his wishes? Maybe he’ll come here of his own free will.”

“There can be no harm in asking him, my king,” said Gurun. “And Chief Shaffur is right: not knowing how much time we have, we had better not waste any.”

It wasn’t Obst’s advice, but Ryons decided to take it. He put his trust in Gurun. He nodded to Shaffur.

“Find Lord Orth and ask him to come to Carbonek,” he said. “But don’t force him!”

“As Your Majesty pleases,” said the chief. “I’ll go myself, within the hour.”

# How Orth Prepared to Depart

Herric and Bolli missed their sister commending them to the chiefs. They were always eager to explore the forest. There was no such thing as a forest on any of the islands of the north. A stunted tree, here and there, was the most you'd see. All the timber for building had to be brought over from the mainland. Lintum Forest was a lure and an enchantment that the boys found hard to resist. Twice, now, had Helki and King Ryons taken them into the woods. It whetted their appetite for more.

Helki wasn't here, the king was busy with his council, but Fnaa was at their service.

"I'll show you a standing stone from ancient times—maybe from King Ozias' time," he said. "Nothing happens when they're having one of those meetings of the chiefs."

"Our grandfather used to visit the forests on the mainland," Bolli said. "He told us he saw elves, once."

"I think he said that just to entertain us," Herric said.

Fnaa led them into the woods, following some trails he knew. Trout, the Abnak hunter who'd married Fnaa's mother, had taught him a fair amount of woodcraft, and

sometimes Helki took him out with Ryons, and he learned more. Before long, the three boys stood in the shadow of the ancient monument. It was taller than a big man and covered with pale lichen, dark splotches of moss. If you looked hard, you would see a face carved into it, looking out. Whose face it was, no one knew.

“I don’t know how you found your way here,” Heric said. “All those twists and turns! Can you find our way back as easily?”

“I can,” said Fnaa, “but only because I’ve learned it. Helki makes you learn the woods, paths and all. It’s good to those who know it well, but it can be cruel to careless people. That’s what Helki says, and I know it’s true.”

“Have you ever been careless here?” Bolli asked.

“No,” said Fnaa, “and if you promise not to talk about it later, I’ll show you something that Helki once showed me: something that taught me not to be careless.”

“We promise,” Heric said.

Fnaa led them deeper into the woods, entering a region of undergrown trees and billowing masses of brambles. He found narrow paths where there didn’t seem to be any. “I have to keep these clear if I want to go on using them,” he said, “and Helki drove these sticks into the ground to guide the way. If I don’t replace them soon, everything will be all grown over and I won’t have a trail anymore. If you don’t do that, it’s best to stay out of places like this.”

“It’s easy to see why,” Bolli said. “Whichever way you turn, one spot looks just like all the others.” He would have likened it to a hall of mirrors, but there was only one of those in all Obann and it was in the city, so he’d never seen it. Fnaa had, once, and had promptly gotten lost in it. His

mother had had to go in and bring him out.

After a few more minutes, “Here we are,” Fnaa said.

Herric shrugged. “There’s nothing here to see,” he said. But Fnaa bent over and pulled away a tangle of dead branches.

A stained old skull peered out at them from thick black loam. Bolli startled.

“Who’s that?”

“Just a poor soul who lost his way and died,” said Fnaa, “years ago, before anybody came to live at Carbonek. Helki found him and covered his bones. There weren’t many of them left. Animals carried off the rest.”

It struck Herric as a singularly unpleasant way to die. “There must have been people who missed him, whoever he was, but couldn’t find him. Cover him back up, Fnaa. It isn’t right to be gawking at him.”

“I showed you this so you wouldn’t go off exploring by yourselves,” Fnaa said, as he replaced the covering. “That’s why Helki showed it to me and Ryons. It’s a good thing to remember.”

Bolli shuddered. It came to him that he was very far away from home, a stranger far, far away from everything he knew. Suddenly their long trek across the plains of South Obann seemed like a rather perilous adventure, and they hadn’t known it at the time. They surely would’ve gotten lost without Shesh to find the way. And maybe their bones might be lying out there now, unburied.

“Let’s go back,” he said. “I want to be around people.”

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Orth prepared to leave Ninneburky—alone. But first he had to persuade Allifar to stay behind.

“Where you go, I go,” the young man said.

“I know, I know, my son, and I love you for saying that,” Orth answered. “But can you deny that these men need you? Some of them, maybe many of them, hunger for a better knowledge of the Lord. Who can feed them but you? Prester Ashrof is a man of God, but he cannot speak their language. But with your help, he could teach them.”

“But what do I know?” Allifar cried. “I know only what you’ve taught me.”

“You know a good deal more than that, my son. To you, and not to me or anyone else, God gave the vision of the golden staircase between Heaven and the earth. Here in Ninneburky it must be written down, in every language, and preserved. I must insist you do that! It’s much more important than anything I can do.”

“But I do not know the meaning of the vision!”

“It may be that that will be given to someone else,” said Orth, “and maybe not for many years to come. That’s why it must be written down and circulated. In the meantime, these men of the Wallekki, who are ready to fight for a holy cause, need you, Allifar. There’s no one else.”

It would take more time than this, Orth realized, to convince him. “So be it,” he thought. “I’ll have to take the time—because this one man, the man who had the vision, must survive.” That would be unlikely, he knew, if Allifar followed him to Obann. Here, among Bassas’ cavalry, he would be safe.

“In all likelihood,” Orth thought, “I will be walking toward my death. But my life belongs to God, to spend as He sees fit.” He should have died, starving and out of his mind, when he was lost in the marshes; and he would have,

had not the Lord led Hlah to find him there.

“Help Allifar to see what he must do,” he told Hlah. At least Hlah understood that much, however unhappy he might be with Orth’s decision. “Think of him as your brother, begotten of the Spirit.”

“They’ll kill you, Sunfish,” Hlah said.

“Please don’t tempt me from my purpose,” said Orth. “And tell May and Wulf that I love them as a daughter and a grandson. You were brought up to be a warrior, Hlah. You ought to be able to understand that I must go on alone.”

“If you were a Griff,” said Hlah, “you’d be about to sing your death song.”

“I think that’s what I’m doing,” Orth said.

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Roshay Bault, for once, had little to say. He’d tried bluster, threats, and heartfelt pleadings, but nothing could deflect Orth from his purpose. That failure shortened the baron’s temper.

“I ought to lock him up!” he said to Vannett.

“You know you can’t do that.”

“Bassas would, if I told him to.”

“You’d still be blamed for it. Lord Chutt would be delighted.”

He sought relief by going to his stable to groom the horses, sending the groom away so he could be alone. That was where Ellayne found him, with Jack, an unwilling accomplice, a few steps behind her.

“Father, you’re upset because Lord Orth’s leaving and we can’t hold him back,” she said.

“Did you come here to tell me that!”

“Father, let us follow him at a safe distance—Jack and me and Wytt, and Martis, too, to protect us. You know how Wytt can sniff out danger before it ever comes in sight.”

“Now she’s talking twaddle,” the baron complained to a horse.

“Father, if they take Lord Orth prisoner, as they surely will, someone needs to see it! Even if there’s nothing they can do to stop it. But at least there will be witnesses. And if there are witnesses, any lies that Chutt might tell, they won’t hold up. Because the witnesses will tell the truth.”

Roshay glared at Jack, who shuffled his feet and suppressed an urge to run away. “And what do you think of that?” the baron snapped.

“It’s moonshine, sir,” Jack said. “But she’s right—there ought to be a witness.”

“If you get close enough to see what happens, they’ll take you, too.”

“Wytt can get close enough,” Ellayne said. “No one will ever see him, hiding in the grass. He can tell us everything he sees.”

Roshay laughed, not merrily. “That’s rich! The future of our country hanging on a little furry creature!”

“God uses the weak to overthrow the strong,” Ellayne said. “He loves doing that.”

An ordinary father would have locked them in their rooms until Orth was many miles away from Ninneburky, but Roshay Bault was a desperate man for the First Prester’s sake, and he had seen many things that an ordinary father never sees.

“Go fetch Martis,” he said.

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“Do you think it can be done?”

Martis shrugged. “I think it’s all we can do,” he said.

“I would, not so long ago, have thought I’d lost my wits even to consider such a thing,” the baron said. “But these children have grown, Martis. Before too many years go by, they’ll be taking care of us if they don’t get themselves killed one of these days. They’ve already done things that I couldn’t have imagined, and maybe they can do this, too. Do you think you can protect them?”

“With my life,” said Martis, “according to my oath. And I have learned to have a lot of faith in Wytte.”

Roshay shook his head. He turned to Ellayne and Jack, daughter and adopted son.

“Will you obey Martis, whatever he tells you to do? Even to giving up the mission, if he judges it too dangerous?”

“We will, Father.”

“I promise,” said Jack.

“Then let’s go see your mother,” Roshay said. “This thing won’t be done without her permission.”

To Jack’s surprise, but not Ellayne’s, Vannett allowed it.

# How Lord Chutt Used His Gold

It was a day full of promise of an early summer, and Government Plaza in Obann was a sea of heads and shoulders around a sturdy wooden speakers' platform big enough for the whole High Council, with room to spare. They would need that room, although Lord Chutt had yet to tell them why.

On either side of the plaza lay heaped ruins, of the Temple and the Palace. Those had been the glory of Obann.

General Born was absent, but an honor guard of picked men in shining mail surrounded the platform, with Colonel Frowley in command. Earlier, soldiers had carried up three heavy chests and, with much labor, set them on the platform. Extra-strong braces had been installed beneath it.

In the front row of the crowd, Gallgoid waited for the proceedings to begin. Chutt had not told him what he planned. A few yards away stood Redegger. They'd deemed it wisest not to stand together. He saw Otvar lean in his chair to say something to Zeriaah, but couldn't hear what it was.

"I hope that this is not more foolishness," the First Prester said. "The governor-general has not been very forth-

coming these past few days.”

“I don’t think he can afford to do anything that’s foolish,” Zeria said. “But there is something about him today that reminds me of a nervous cat. When my cat looks like that, I know he’s just left a dead mouse in my shoe.”

Chutt, just two seats away, paid no attention to them. What he heard was a voice that no one else could hear. He struggled with himself to maintain an outward calm. Before the day was over, he would either be the hero of Obann or hustled off to prison.

Military trumpets sounded, quieting the crowd. Chutt rose from his seat. His knees trembled, but he didn’t think anyone would see it. He couldn’t hope to project his voice all the way out to the borders of the plaza, but he would do his best. He’d been practicing the speech, up in his room.

“Good people of Obann! This day will be remembered, and I won’t make you wait long to find out why.

“Behold the ruins of our Temple, destroyed by the Hea-then. It was the greatest and most beautiful building in the world. Not a day goes by but we are reminded of our loss.”

He nodded to the soldier stationed on the platform. The councilors and the crowd watched intently as the soldier raised the lid of the first of three great chests. Chutt went to it, thrust his hands into it, and came up with gleaming golden coins that he let fall back in. The rays of the sun turned it into a dazzling waterfall. Hundreds gasped to see it.

“Gold!” he cried. “Freshly minted golden coins!” He turned to Otvar. “To the clergy of Obann through you, First Prester, I dedicate this gold to the reconstruction of the Temple, to spend as you see fit without hindrance from the city government. And when—and if!—you use it up, there

will be more. All freely given for the rebuilding of the Temple—a new Temple, greater and more beautiful than the old!”

A hush fell on the city. By law, thought Gallgoid, Chutt had no authority to do this on his own without a vote by the High Council. He was behaving as if he were an emperor, not a governor-general elected by his peers. But even Otvar was too dumbfounded to offer an objection. It was all he could do just to stammer out his thanks. “My lord!” he gasped. He had never seen so much gold in all his life. “My lord! The new Temple will be glorious!” He even bowed to Chutt, something he’d never done before. And Gallgoid began to feel alarmed.

The people cheered—thousands of them, all at once. Chutt let it go on for several minutes, then signaled to the trumpeters and held up both hands until the crowd was quiet once again.

“Now, good people,” he continued, “turn your eyes to the ruins of the palace. A lamentable sight! It was a noble palace, a jewel of the city. It, too, must be rebuilt.”

The soldier opened the second chest. It was filled to the rim with golden coins.

“This, my fellow councilors, is for the reconstruction of the palace—a new palace for the seat of government, more noble than the first. The gold is freely given, and there will be more as needed.”

The councilors stood up and bowed, thanking him. Gallgoid repressed an impulse to shake his head. Couldn’t they see what Chutt was doing? “He’s buying them!” thought Gallgoid. “He’s making himself their overlord, their master, and they don’t even know it. All they can see is the gold.” He didn’t dare exchange a look with Redegger.

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Chutt took a deep breath. Organs that he didn't know he had twisted themselves in knots. And what was that muted roaring in his ears? Was it his heart, about to burst?

But he was almost at the end. If he overcame a powerful temptation to step back from the brink, he would know in minutes whether he would fly or fall. "I could stop here!" he thought. He could stop right there and everything would be perfect. With all his might he fought to overcome that thought.

"I will not fall!" he told himself. He knew he wouldn't fall because he knew the hollow woman wasn't hollow. Her emptiness was only a deception; and he alone, because the glorious past and the even more glorious future had chosen him, had seen past her hollowness. He alone had seen that what appeared to be her hollowness was in truth an inexhaustible, immeasurable fullness. It was abundance. "I will give you, my Lord Chutt, the treasures of both past and future," was what she promised him, and not in words. This was much too grand for words. He had to look into her through her painted eyes, and once he had accomplished that, the fullness that was in her enfolded him and filled him.

Of this he would never speak, not to anyone, not ever. "They cannot know what I know. They'll only think me mad; they'll lock me up."

It was time to take the final step, and after one more breath, he took it.

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One more chest remained to be opened. For whom was that largesse? Gallgoid couldn't imagine.

When again he had silence, Chutt continued.

“Some of you thought it a great error on my part,” he said, “to set the army to digging in the ruins of Old Obann. True, there was a price to be paid for that, one that neither I nor anyone else expected. But that danger has subsided. And we have learned much from our explorations that we could not have learned without them.

“We have been given a new appreciation for our country’s former greatness. And more than that, the certainty—I say the certainty!—that what once was, can be again.

“For they, the people of the ancient world, were men and women just like us, their direct descendants. Their inheritors! What they were, we can be. What they achieved, we can achieve. We are the same kind of people that they were.

“Before we open the last chest, let me tell you this. We are about to win a victory like no other—a victory over history itself. And we need to put a seal on it, something that will declare our victory as nothing else can declare it.

“You all remember the Thunder King. No greater conqueror has ever lived. But we conquered him! And it is time to carve our victory on the very stones of history, for all the world to see. But you, my people, here and now, shall see it first.”

Chutt went to the third chest and opened it himself. Gallgoid saw his hands tremble as he raised the lid. But this chest was not filled with golden coins.

With both hands, Chutt raised the golden mask of the Thunder King over his head for everyone to see.

“The mask of the Thunder King, our greatest enemy!” he cried. “His, but now ours! For was he not slain right here in our city? His coming here was his last throw of the dice,

and he lost. The Thunder King is dead; and what once was his, is now ours. Ours!”

And he put on the mask.

For an incalculable moment you could feel the silence. And then, to Gallgoid’s horror, the crowd cheered wildly. The whole city cheered. You could have heard it miles away. Chutt stood above them in the golden mask and they cheered him. Even the High Council, robbed of its powers in broad daylight, cheered him.

“I can end this!” Gallgoid thought. “One little dose of perfect poison in his drink, and I can put an end to this.”

But he also heard, in his memory, the little prophets: “The Lord is with you, Gallgoid. Sin no more!”

The two voices battled for his soul, and the city of Obann cheered on.

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Lord Orth, unaware of these events, made his farewells to Hlah and Allifar. With both Orth and Hlah working on him, Allifar was finally persuaded to remain in Ninneburky. But that didn’t stop the tears.

“They will murder you, my lord!” he said.

“Not your lord, my son, but your father and your brother in the spirit,” said Orth. “And whatever happens to me, remember that God has loosed His spirit to make Himself known to all nations. He has chosen you for a ministry among your own people, these Wallekki. See that you are faithful to it.”

He had already taken his leave of the baron and his family, and preached one last time in Ninneburky. By the baroness’ advice, he would set out by night and not by day.

They had packed provisions for him, sufficient for many days on the road, along with blanket, tinderbox, and a stout knife to serve him as an all-purpose tool. It was a heavy pack. The baron gave him a new pair of boots and a sturdy staff to lean on. He was ready to set out for Obann City, with only the faintest hope of getting there.

“Goodbye, my father,” said Hlah. “I will pray that you come back to us again. Remember that you will always have a home among the Abnaks and people who will love you forever.”

They embraced, shedding tears.

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Far away in Lintum Forest, Helki and Obst returned to Carbonek, and to the news that Shaffur and some of his riders had just departed on a desperate mission to overtake Lord Orth before his enemies could seize him. They knew that with Bassas’ cavalry always on patrol, those enemies dared not approach Ninneburky. They did not know that Orth had refused the cavalry’s protection.

“Two First Presters in Obann, eh?” Helki said. “I wonder how that will turn out. Not well for us, I reckon.”

“Not well for anyone!” said Obst. “It was safe for Sychas the Mighty to defy kings, for God gave him the power to do it, and they feared him. But I’m afraid Lord Orth has been given no such power.” And then he was ashamed of himself. “Well, we shall see. Our First Prester is in God’s hands now, as are we all.”

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Martis judged it best to give Orth an hour’s head

start. He spent the time lightening his hair with ashes. “I don’t expect anyone to recognize me, but it pays to take precautions.”

Jack and Ellayne were ready. “You’d think,” said Ellayne, “that after getting himself lost on his way east, Lord Orth would have learned a lesson from it. He isn’t very clever as a traveler.”

“I don’t think he’s much interested in being clever,” Jack said. “He’s doing what God has called him to do—just as we did once, when we were young.”

Martis smiled when he heard that. Still, if age were calculated in miles journeyed and things seen, these two children would be older than anyone he knew. And soon, if they lived, they wouldn’t be children anymore.

But Jack was right; Martis saw that now. Orth was doing what he had to do. He deserved immense respect. No one would have criticized him for not doing it; no one would have blamed him for sheltering himself in Lintum Forest. Truly Orth had overcome temptation.

“Does Wytt understand what we expect of him?” he asked Ellayne.

“He’s grown quite fond of Lord Orth,” she said, “even though he thinks of him as a man more helpless than a baby Omah. He understands, all right.”

The last thing they did was to load Ham, their donkey, with their gear. To be setting out at night was a new experience for him. But having gone with them almost to the very summit of Bell Mountain, Ham was used to new experiences.

Martis caressed his horse, Dulayl. “You must do your best to imitate a humble pack-horse, cousin,” he said. “A

man proudly riding a fine Wallekki horse will attract too much attention.” His plan was for them to pose as a grandfather with his two grandchildren, on their way down the River Road to visit family in a little village some miles from the city. Ellayne could no longer be disguised as a boy, as on their earlier adventures, but dressed in some of her older brothers’ hand-me-downs, Martis hoped no one would take her for the baron’s daughter.

“I think we’re ready now,” he said. “Kiss your mother and father goodbye, and then we’ll go.”

Wytt climbed onto Ham’s pack and chattered contentedly.

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