

Farewell Azraphel

The next day, the ship picked up the anchor and to the surprise of the entire crew, except for the navigator and the captain, it did not turn its nose to the expected North, but to the South again. For the second time during this sail, Azraphel was heading toward the unknown. They sailed along the flat coast, covered with large sandy beaches slowly turning into large grassy savannas, for ten days. These waters were marked in Abarhil's maps as Azar Estâr, the Sea of Hope, because they watched for the mouth of the Forest River every day. So far, however, nothing indicated that the mouth could be anywhere near. When they circumnavigated the tip of the mainland, which Abarhil named the Dark Cape, the coast finally turned dark due to a thick forest which reached out to the sea shore.



"Exactly as Oghlar recounted," said the sailors tentatively, watching the terrifying dark green wall. Nergal's stories had the effect of water poured onto hot oil, and they prophesied that Azraphel would end up in a huge vortex which supposedly awaited them at the end of Dairluré. The sailors began to recall all the horrifying stories about captains who had not heeded the warnings and had gone to seek the lost shores of Dairané and had never returned. Such stories were told all around the Sealands for dozens of years. Many crew members began to gripe, and Korah, who became their spokesman, complained the most.

"I was hired for a sail to the South, to Nirruch. But now we've gone a month worth of sailing further south. Who do they, for Dâurkhôr's sake, want to trade with here? Will someone explain, dammit? We're not paid for this!"

Excitement and nervousness on the ship increased when they came less than a mile away from the coast. The sailors saw what they, until then, had only known from Oghlar's stories, the sea dragon. At a distance of less than a hundred feet, a huge lizard, about ten fathoms long, swam along the side of the ship.

"Dragon, did you see it? Was it a real dragon? I was right, the old legends don't lie, dragons live!"

Nergal was the only one who felt no joy from the unusual encounter. He felt that after some time he had the upper hand and this feeling fully dissolved his worries. Unfortunately, it concerned only himself. The same day, in the late afternoon, the sea shore turned sharply east into the mainland. They sailed around a low cape and with the sails half pulled down they continued to head east within reach of the shore. The sun was setting behind the distant horizon when Amarsin, who was charged with cleaning the deck, lowered a bucket over the lateral bracing to draw out water for cleaning. In a little while, his shouting resounded across the deck.

"The water is fresh! Hey, can you hear me? The water is fresh!"

This attracted the entire crew, including the captain and Abarhil, on the deck.

"You see, it's fresh! Go ahead, try it!"

The cabin boy could not get enough of his discovery and playfully splashed the water from the bucket on those standing around.

"It's a wonder, fresh sea water! No one will believe us!" the approval of the helmsman and the rest echoed around. They were licking their drenched palms and faces and nodding in wonder. What a strange land they had found themselves in. Fresh sea water! But, like a lightning out of a blue sky came the voice of the navigator, who had also been attracted by the cabin boy's shouting.

"You are such group of fools! Do not tell me you believe it? Fresh sea water! Who ever heard of that? You are like old women hearing about far away sails for the first time. They would believe everything, too!"

Oghlar was sneering at all of them standing there. "Yes, maybe a sea of fresh water, but fresh sea water? Do you really not understand this?"

The men stared at him in amazement. Frowning faces, puckered eyebrows, baffled eyes, were the only response. The helmsman, who at first was amazed, agreed with the cabin boy. Now he turned to the captain but he only shrugged his shoulders in uncertainty. Even he did not understand Oghlar's sarcasm. Only in Abarhil's eyes did the sparks of enlightenment flash.

"Oghlar? Are you saying? No? It can't be true! This can't be..."

A triumphant smile crossed the navigator's face. "Thank Maghúr, at least one understood. Yes, crew, we are here, it is Birghin, the Forest River!"

Darmúk, the first officer, pulled himself together and sarcastically said: "Oghlar, do you have heatstroke, man? You're making fools of us? River! Do you even know what a river looks like? A river's got a bank here and another one on the other side. Where's the other side then?"

"The water is fresh, we are in the mouth of the Forest River!" insisted Oghlar with a triumphant smile, not even paying attention to Darmúk's jeers.

The mouth of a river. The sailors looked amazed at the distant shore, which was by all accounts, one bank of the mighty river. The second was out of sight and hidden away behind the horizon. A river of such proportions exceeded their imagination. They measured all against the Great River, and in comparison to this mighty river it was just a poor stream. But whatever doubts the crew had, they would be able to find out for themselves the next day.

Then the moment came when the unclear outline of the second bank ascended over the horizon. It took more than two days before the river narrowed to less than a mile, approximately the width of Dardún before its mouth. Meanwhile, Azraphel continued slowly against the mighty river flow, using a favorable wind, or the power of the human arms of rowing sailors. The flow of the river was dark brown, and full of mud, which had washed off the shores at the upper reaches of the river. The riverbed was divided into many branches made of a number of islands and islets covered with wild vegetation. Even for the navigator, it was difficult to decide which branch they should take, so they sailed very slowly and carefully. They had had to return several times when they had chosen a branch where the shallows and large fallen trees blocked Azraphel's way. Abarhil and Lominas, knowing they were pressured by time, eagerly pestered the navigator with questions of when they were going to finally see human settlements. Oghlar only scratched his neck awkwardly and smiled guiltily. According to what he had heard, there were supposed to be several villages near the mouth, but it looked like the Earth had swallowed them. Could he have been wrong? Or, might they have been on the opposite side of the huge river? Similar questions were running through his head and he had no idea that he would soon receive answers to these unspoken questions.

It was around midday, the sun was directly overhead, and Azraphel was threading her way through a net of shallows and small isles when a small fleet of full riverboats blocked their way. The boats were hollowed from a single piece of wood. Around ten small dark-skinned men were sitting in each of them. Their boats had a high fore and stern decorated with ornate carvings and drawings. In the center of the fleet was a boat, twice as big as the others, which appeared to carry the local chief.

"Well, now, Dâurkhôr help us, there's at least a hundred of them," said the helmsman Henderch with a grimace after he saw the fleet. Abarhil commanded the crew to anchor the ship and to arm themselves, but apart from that he decided to wait. It did not take long for one of the boats to separate from the fleet and float within earshot of Azraphel. A small man stood up on the bow and shouted something in an unknown language. No one from the crew, however, understood anything he said. The man tried again in a dialect very similar to the original one.

"Well, you've got a mouth, monkeyman, but how about trying to speak human?" said Darmúk sarcastically. Zarik followed immediately: "Well, it's not looking like we're gonna do some long friendly talks."

"And the trades will look the same!" Korah could not resist adding this poisonous note.

"Shut up!" shouted Lominas angrily.

Meanwhile, the current brought the boat a few dozen feet from Azraphel. Then the man said something that Oghlar found a bit more comprehensible.

"Where your boat from and what you search on territory of Nigans?"

Although the navigator tried to respond in short simple sentences to be understandable, it did not seem that his level-headed speech satisfied the speaker. Only when he mentioned that they had brought a number of presents, did his interest increase.

"You wait until great Nigan chief decide what to do with you!"

The boat turned back and in a short while it reached the large boat in the middle of the fleet. Meanwhile, Oghlar shared what he had picked up from the short conversation.

"They do not speak Chyrrkhan, it seems more like a dialect from south of Bôghir. I do not understand some expressions but the whole is quite comprehensible."

"So far, it doesn't seem to be leading to trade. It certainly doesn't seem like he's ever seen anyone like us before. Didn't he mention, by chance, whether they have already traded with someone?" asked Lominas solicitously, but his question was left unanswered.

Abarhil agreed: "You're right, Lominas. But we can do nothing but wait now. Perhaps it'll change. We'll have to see. I'm going to prepare some gifts for that great chief of theirs."

Some time passed before the boat moved. Followed by other boats it slowly floated within an earshot of Azraphel. The interpreter had another message prepared.

"The great Nigan chief is ready to visit big boat and accept gifts. Want to know who will talk? Who your chief?"

Abarhil, who in the meantime had returned from his cabin, stepped forward, leaned on the rail of the ship and said: "I am the master of the ship. The great chief is welcome and presents are prepared for him. I guarantee him free arrival as well as exit!"

The interpreter spoke with the chief.

"Good, Mozauko coming!"

After these words, the boat approached the ship. It reached the side of the ship where the railing was the lowest. Sailors lowered a short rope ladder on Abarhil's

behest. As first, the interpreter who led the conversations came on board. After him came several armed men, apparently guards, and after them, the chief.

The crew examined the newcomers. They were small in height, the tallest could only have measured around five feet. Their bodies, however, were well-built and protruding muscles showed underneath their black skin. Their faces were wide, their noses flat, and from a closer distance it was visible that their faces, shoulders, and arms were tattooed. In their short straight thick hair, they had decorations made of feathers and wood. Except for a leather loincloth, they were completely naked. Their chief was an older, small, chubby man with an unpleasant face accented by a few ugly scars. His eyes buzzed around the deck curiously and greedily. He was dressed like his guards, only he had a spotted fur of some predator thrown across his back. He wore a heavy chain on his neck with various bones and stones hung on them, and among these Abarhil recognized a few golden nuggets.

'Is it possible that those sailor stories might true, after all?' he thought to himself.

Meanwhile the visitors examined the crew just as curiously. Tall Abarhil with his fair hair, which had grown long over the time, aroused their interest. They stared at him bluntly, pointed at him, laughed, and overall, behaved very casually. It was apparent that they had never seen anyone similar. Some of the men began to walk around the deck and touch the ship's equipment. One of them found an unattended knife on a box, took it as his own, and showed it to his companions while shouting loudly.

Korah, whose knife it was, did not like this: "Hey! You little thief, give it back or you go overboard!"

And because he meant it, he started to walk toward him. The native however, was not going to give up his newly acquired asset and responded by aiming his short spear at the sailor. The crew shouted angrily. No words had even been spoken yet and a skirmish was about to begin. Abarhil intervened. With a wave of his hand, he calmed the crew and snapped at the angry sailor.

Then he turned to the interpreter. "Tell your chief he's most welcome on board. We will be happy to give him presents, but he has to tell his men that our hospitality has its limits!"

The interpreter puckered his eyebrows and he looked like he was trying to understand Abarhil's pronunciation. Only when Oghlar repeated it, did he nod and translate it to the chief. The two men spoke to each other for a while before the interpreter replied: "You strange tribe when the youngest rule. You maybe not smart. You came to the Nigan territory and here all belong to brave Mozauko. But now you can keep your boat. Chief is curious about your gifts."

When Oghlar translated this, it aroused an outrage among the crew.

"Well, I call this hospitality at its best. I didn't like the old monkeyman from the beginning! When I saw his eyes I told myself he's a rascal!" said the helmsman. Even Abarhil was flustered by such a response. He looked at Oghlar with questions, but Oghlar only shrugged his shoulders.

"So, I don't know if we should just lift the anchor, turn around, and throw that rascal and his entire crew into the river. They can surely swim, so let them taste our response for their hospitality," suggested the helmsman provocatively. This aroused shouts of agreements. Abarhil looked thoughtfully at the chief. He agreed with the crew, but for now held his temper. He did not mean to follow Henderch's advice but he surely could not let it go either. He turned to Oghlar.

"Tell them that we do believe in the rules of hospitality, but we're not accustomed to such behavior. We're going back!"

When Oghlar passed on the message and the interpreter translated it, a heated debate began among them. To stress his words, Abarhil motioned for his men to

prepare the ship for departure. He told the others to show their weapons. This impressed the visitors. The interpreter spoke again but this time his speech was longer.

"The great Nigan chief know well rules of hospitality. When he get gifts, he invite strangers to our village to celebrate. Chief know why your boat come. We get messages from village down river. We know that big boats come and sell them weapons. Because those weapons, Nigans lose war and must move up river. Nigans too trade. We have a lot goods, spices and sofir."

Oghlar made a gesture to show he did not understand. The interpreter grabbed a small golden nugget that hung on his neck and continued: "Nigans good and generous friends when they get gifts. Mozauko invite your chief to village to celebrate. We make big feast in your honor."

When Oghlar had translated it all, Abarhil said: "Well, that looks more promising. Frendin, bring the things I have prepared from my cabin, they're on the table!"

When the cabin boy brought some things wrapped in canvas, Abarhil took them and unfolded them on the deck. There were knives, clay and pewter dishes, several cheap brass necklaces, and a few pieces of plain flax clothing.

"Those are my presents for the great chief of Nigans'. They are only samples of what we can offer if we trade with Nigans."

The chief squatted and examined the presents. He paid most attention to the knives and necklaces. Then he stood up and spoke to the interpreter.

"The chief thanks for gifts, but he think from man he get gifts for man. This be gifts for his wives. Nigans need weapons! Like your men have. Long knives and spikes for spears and arrows. Chief believe you make good trade in Nigan village. Here be payment for long knife for his warrior."

With these words, the interpreter threw a golden nugget at Korah's feet, which the chief had taken out from his necklace. Surprised, a sailor picked it up and showed the men around him, which raised a wave of interest. The chief watched with satisfaction as his gesture was received as he had expected.

"All men come and make good trade?"

When Oghlar translated this, Abarhil turned to his companions: "What do you think, should we try? Will we take a look into their village? Whether they really have spices and perhaps gold?"

"Sir, I'd certainly try. We haven't seen gold anywhere along the coast!" said Darmúk from somewhere in the crowd of men watching the negotiation. Korah's nugget was being passed from one hand to another and awoke greed among the men. It was common that the crew traded within their capabilities, and the idea of exchanging an ordinary knife for a golden nugget miraculously dispersed their fears and anger.

"Gold? I don't like that man. I wouldn't even trust that the nose between his eyes is his. Did you see his eyes when he stepped onto the deck?" said Henderch, in whom gold did not awaken greed.

Abarhil tentatively turned to Lominas. "I don't know, perhaps if we're very careful we can give it a try."

"Well, the gold looks good," he replied thoughtfully, while turning the nugget that had been passed to him in his hand.

"Oghlar?" Abarhil turned to the navigator with an unspoken question.

"I agree with the helmsman. Let's return to the mouth. The village Tighans visit must be there. You heard it. Even the chief mentioned it. We must have missed them; perhaps they are on the opposite shore. I too do not have a good feeling about him!"

Now, everything depended on Abarhil and his thoughts were almost visible. He was not tempted by greed as his companions were, but more by curiosity and a desire for adventure. He hesitated. Go back or continue?

The chief, who watched their conversation, knew well what this was about even though he did not understand. He motioned to the interpreter and whispered something to him. The interpreter looked at him with surprise, but the chief nodded and so he turned to Oghlar. "The great Nigan chief know hospitality. Each man from the boat get sofir from chief when come to celebrate to village."

When Oghlar translated this, men started shouting enthusiastically. Their worries vanished and greed won over their caution. For the moment, it was decided. The chief and his men descended onto their boat and the fleet of river boats set forth against the river flow. Azraphel followed them, to dock later among several islets, close to a large inflow of the Forest River. The Nigan village, however, lay a few miles upstream. The tributary or distributary to which the boats were heading was too shallow for Azraphel. The fleet stopped, and the boat with the interpreter floated to the ship to find out what was happening. When Oghlar explained, he was given an invitation for the sailors to move into individual boats.

When Abarhil later told the story he would say: "I will never understand. I think we must've all gone mad. I don't know whether it was the gold, but most of us were blinded."

Henderch was the only one to say that he was not interested in either visiting the village or trading and he would remain on the ship. Another nine men were chosen to stay with him. The rest of the crew armed themselves upon Abarhil's command, packed goods to be traded, and moved into the Nigan boats. Including Abarhil, Lominas, and Oghlar as an interpreter, there were seventeen men.

For another two hours, the Nigans rowed their overcrowded boats against the flow, before a vast plateau in the middle of the forest opened up in front of them. Now they could see one of three Nigan villages, the most important and largest one where the tribal chief lived. In a small bay, the boats ran onto a sandy beach and all the warriors left with their chief to the village.

The sailors were left alone and Abarhil commanded that no one was allowed to leave the group. Only now did he realize how much he had risked by permitting them to leave Azraphel. He felt a rush of responsibility and he did not want to increase the risk by splitting the group up again. No one paid any attention to them for quite a time, so they only watched the village and its surroundings. The settlement consisted of about thirty houses grouped together on a regular basis. As they later learned, each house was inhabited by one large family, which sometimes consisted of a few dozen people. In the middle, there stood a large circular building, which, as they were about to find out in a short while, Nigans used as an assembly house. Around the village there were a number of small fields. In these fields women and older children worked. However now the majority of them had ran to the village, where from a safe distance, they watched the group of unusual visitors. They waited for some time and the sun was low on the horizon when the interpreter eventually came back. Then he finally told them his name was Waiko.

"Mozauko ordered you great feast in the assembly house. Women prepare food and drink and we come for you soon."

"We thought we'd trade first? We brought the goods?" said Abarhil anxiously.

Waiko shook his head decisively. "First the feast, it is great honor. Good food, drink, and dancing to reconcile spirits. Trading tomorrow."

Abarhil and Oghlar looked at each other uneasily and the navigator pointed at the boats spread out along the beach. "This stinks. I do not like it at all. I would rather get into the boats and go down the river towards the ship. We would make it before it gets dark."

"Well, perhaps it's not as bad? Until now, they've been quite friendly. And look, they're coming, we can't go now," said Lominas, pointing at the long procession heading from the village to the river. The procession was led by the chief Mozauko, and another important person from the tribe, a shaman whose name was, as they were to find out later, Izandro. At the head, young half-naked girls walked carrying floral wreaths and presents to honor their guests. Among the sailors, who had been on the journey for more than three months, this aroused excitement and they began to poke each other and a few lewd comments could be heard. However, when the tiny Nigan girls put the wreaths around their necks, most of them knelt with a fatuous grin, and many even put aside their warmers and helmets to fit the wreaths on their necks. The chief kept his promise and each sailor received a neck pouch with a gold nugget. The faces of all, Lominas' included, lit up with satisfaction. The procession turned around and slowly began to walk back to the village. Each of the men were accompanied by several locals who led them into the assembly house where refreshments were prepared.

In this region, darkness came rapidly. Before they sat down in a circle around the free space, where the chief sat in an elevated position, it became dark outside. Many burning torches around the perimeter now provided the light. Behind the sailors on the outer circle, local men sat down, and after them women and children. In the meantime, young girls served food to the sitting sailors. The food consisted of baked fish, baked and fresh fruit, and pancakes made of a special flour. It all tasted great. It seemed that Lominas was right and that worrying was unnecessary. There was nothing sinister in the food or the way their hosts behaved. Mozauko was sitting at the elevated place, talking to other men and sometimes he laughed lively. Abarhil saw nothing to justify his hidden worries. He sought Oghtar's eyes. It looked like the navigator had also calmed down and he smiled at him subtly. In spite of all of this, Abarhil could not shake the feeling of uneasiness. He remembered the warmth of the hospitality in Waghirach.

"That's it. The warmth is missing. They are all holding back as if they are forbidden to speak with us. Gods, let this end well," he whispered to himself as he swore to be vigilant.

When the meals were finished, the young girls carried wicker bowls containing leftovers. Behind the circle of men, the sound of drums and rattles could be heard. The sounds were isolated at first and did not create any solid rhythm. It looked like the musicians were talking to each other using their instruments. A drum resounded from one corner, then from the opposite corner another drum or rattle responded. Then the sounds slowly began to merge into a continuous and smooth rhythm. The sailors turned back, looking at each other, and smiling uncertainly.

What does this mean? What should they do?

The rhythm accelerated and a couple of dancers jumped into the middle of the circle. They began to rotate, the rattles on their wrists and ankles bolstering the captivating and accelerating rhythm. Clapping and encouraging sounds came from the onlookers. The sailors, who at first did not know what to do with their hands, now began to yield to the entrancing rhythm and the enthusiasm surrounding them. They had already set aside their weapons and now they even began to drop parts of their armor too. The temperature in the hut was increasing and the heat began to overcome the dancers as well as the spectators. At the behest of the chief, women began to serve drinks. The sound of the beating drums turned into a wild whirling rhythm, which began to take hold of the senses more and more. Some of the sailors began to slap their thighs to the rhythm.

Abarhil felt like his throat had become completely dry. He turned to look around for a drink. A woman standing behind him cheerfully offered him a fruit drink. He smiled thankfully and took the wooden bowl. First, he only tasted it. The drink was murky and not very tempting at first sight. It tasted bitter but it was cooling. The whirling of the drums reached a crescendo and some of the dancers had already sunk into trance. Abarhil's thirst became uncontrollable. He looked into the bowl and drank it all at once. He failed to notice Oghlar's cautionary and concerned look.

The frenzy overwhelmed both the dancers and the spectators. Abarhil saw some sailors jump up and join the dancers. He felt like the rhythm was taking over his senses, too. His alertness and dedication dissolved in the wild throbbing sounds. He felt his blood pounding in his ears to the beat of the drums.

Then suddenly his perception changed. To his surprise, he realized that the sounds were disappearing. He heard them as if from a distance, where they merged into a single soft whirling colorful ball. I can see sounds, he thought to himself, and felt the urge to laugh. He looked around and saw that some of his men were rolling on the floor in uncontrollable laughter.

He looked back at the dancers. He felt like they were dancing in the center of a ball made of sounds. As the sounds faded, his sight began to sharpen. He saw Lominas get up from his place and splitting into two. Simultaneously, Lominas sat on the floor and danced. He saw men who stood motionless, but they also seemed to move at the same time. He wanted to get up but his knees softened and he fell to the ground. As he fell, he saw Oghlar who stood like a tree with his arms spread. Everything was spinning at an incredible speed. He fell on his back, his eyes rolled, and all of a sudden he was looking up at the dark sky studded with an endless carpet of stars.

He exploded. His mind exploded. He lost all sense of perception of his own body. He was everything and nothing at the same time and he flew across the endless sky. With amazement, he watched the eternal and infinite dance of stars. Stars were exploding all around him in incredible colors. He had never seen such wonderful colors before. It felt as if he was falling down from an enormous height. He saw a sea below him and jumped right in. Then he realized he was part of a flock of dolphins who played in the ocean waves. He felt their simple joy of motion.

I am. And I live. He thought to himself.

Then the images transformed again. Now he was flying above the ground. Flashing beneath him were boundless grass plains full of game, thick dark forests, and high mountains covered with snow and ice. He lost all track of time; he did not know whether things were taking a second or an eternity. He felt as if he was hearing the time roar and rumble more and more, until finally the noise absorbed his mind. Then, all of a sudden, everything stopped and he saw just white all around. It was so quiet that it tore his ears. He realized he was standing alone in a snowy unknown landscape. On one side, the white plain stretched out to the horizon. On the opposite side he saw a thick forest of spruce and pine trees. He felt the snow creaking beneath his feet. With surprise he realized his arms and legs had returned again. He began to run. He was in a hurry. He assumed his mouth was shouting, and though he perceived the sound he did not understand the words.

His ears were full of the sound of uproar, yells and metal rumbling sounds. These were the sounds of trumpets and drums. He found himself in a battle. He heard battle noises, the neighing of horses, and furious and poignant laments. With some amusement, he realized he had a sword in his hand. All of a sudden he was overcome with cold, wild, devastating, absorbing hatred. Kill. He could clearly perceive his immeasurable power. He saw his opponents moving towards him. They were so very slow. It was as if their legs were loaded with weights. He ran towards them and his sword

caused devastation. With satisfaction he saw the terror and horror he was causing among his opponents. Equally as coarsely he perceived his feelings. Power, invincibility, and cold ruthless hatred. His body worked as a perfect machine. He did not know how long all of this had taken, but he suddenly realized his limbs were becoming stiff. He felt as if his body was being tied down by a foreign will. He wanted to shake the feeling off. He turned and shuddered with horror. He was looking into foreign eyes. Huge, green eyes with elongated pupils. It was a cold snake look. Those eyes slowly filled his entire field of vision. Their will was stronger than his. They robbed him of his strength. He shook. He felt horror. He tried to prevent his panic but in vain. His limbs froze. He felt tied up, he wanted to look away but couldn't. With terror he realized that this alien had entered his mind and was now beginning to control it.

Then he heard a sound. It ceased to exist and then re-appeared. It sounded like weak, slurred music coming from a great distance. Beautiful, soothing, and protective music. He could not look back. His stiff limbs began to feel again. He felt calm, warmth, and protection. He felt as if the music spoke to him, tried to tell him something. He wanted to understand so much. The music was morphing into letters, whirling and creating words that were so well-known. He so desperately wanted to hear and understand.

"I am here, I am your strength, I'll protect you!" he heard from behind. Then, swamped by a wave of heat, he fell asleep.



Realizing he was awake, he felt pain in his entire body. He was cold and needed desperately to warm up. He had a headache, stomach cramps, and a gut wrenching thirst. He could not control his limbs, which felt so infinitely heavy. When he tried to speak, his lips only released inarticulate groans.

From a distance, came a familiar voice: "Roghídan? Well, finally!"

Someone propped up his head. He opened his eyes with a great effort. He was looking into some treetops and he saw the gray sky. He realized it was raining slightly, which was the cause of the cold he felt. He turned his head and looked into a face, it was a familiar face, but he just could not remember who it belonged to. It was all so strenuous. Oghlar! Suddenly, he regained full consciousness. He leaned on his elbow.

"Drink!"

Oghlar handed him a bowl with water. Once he had drunk, he lay back on the ground and closed his eyes. He tried desperately to put his thoughts together. He remember pieces: Azraphel, sailing up the river, meeting Nigans, the celebration.

He opened his eyes. How come he was lying down? Where was he? Collecting all his strength, he lifted himself, and with Oghlar's help sat up and looked around. He was in some sort of enclosure made of sharp high stakes and around him lay naked human bodies. He recognized some of them as the men from his ship. Many were still unconscious; the others were painfully waking up. He looked at his legs and saw that he was also naked. He propped himself up on his arms and sat up.

"For Dâurkhôr's sake, Oghlar, where am I? What happened?"

"Maghúr is great, finally you woke up! I was worried that you drank too much of it."

"Of what? What happened?" asked Abarhil, perplexed.

"Oh, we swallowed the bait of the old hacker. He did it perfectly. The whole celebration, the warm welcome, it was all just bait. The drink they served at the end was full of maghanai."

"Maghanai?"

"An intoxicating drink. Our brins use them for initiating rituals. I knew this when I smelled it. How are you feeling?"

"My body hurts, my head, my stomach, I feel like vomiting. But now I realize I also experienced something incredible!"

Abarhil suddenly remembered his strange visions and strength rushed into his veins. He straightened up and his voice also changed. Then the fatigue fell away.

"I was in a different world, flying amongst the stars, I saw incredible things. I saw a battle. And do you know what's funny? I was participating, it was like I experienced it all myself."

Oghlar grinned. "Maghanai! I know that, every young man experiences something similar with us. It is a part of the initiation into adulthood."

Abarhil would have continued, but suddenly a naked Lominas staggered toward them. He leant against the stakes with one hand and with the other he held his aching head. "For Gortar's sake, will someone tell me what happened and why the hell we are all naked?"

And because the rest of the crew had woken up in the meantime, Oghlar began his brief explanation. The celebration was a trap, as were the presents. The shaman had added, on Mozauko's order, an intoxicating substance into the drink, which was used by the dancers. They all drank it, except for Oghlar, and they had all become intoxicated. Alone, Oghlar had had no chance. Nigans then robbed the lifeless sailors of everything, their clothes included. They had been in this trance for a whole day and a whole night, which meant that the first day after their arrival at the village was just ending.

"What will happen to us? What do those bastards want to do with us?" cried Korah, who was one of those able to put himself together enough to vent his anger.

Oghlar shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. After they put us into this cage, no one came. They did not even bring food or water. The only water is that which I caught from rain in the few bowls I found. But I have no illusions. I admit I am really worried about those who stayed on the ship."

Only now did they remember their companions who had stayed on Azraphel. Unfortunately, the answer to what had happened to them came way too soon. After dusk, a group of warriors arrived in the village and brought two prisoners. These were Tahar and Frendin's young companion, Amarsin; the only ones who had survived the attack on the boat the previous night. Tahar was wounded, a spear pierced his side, and he had lost a lot of blood, but was still capable of describing what had happened. The lifeguard was shaken and the men could not get a word out of him. He huddled in the corner of the cage and refused to talk to anyone, including Frendin who was trying to comfort him.

Tahar described the attack with the following words, which were only interrupted by his painful groans. "The demons, let Gortar devour them, had arrived yesterday at dusk and talked to Henderch. They said that the other men should come to their boats and come to the village. Henderch wanted to see some proof, a written message from the captain or from mister Abarhil. They, of course, did not have it. After two hours of negotiating, they suddenly attacked us. We were prepared because Henderch had foreseen it, but there were too many of them, maybe a hundred, and only ten of us. Fortunately, we were able to turn the tables on them." Tahar smiled painfully and pressed his wounded side.

"What happened to Henderch?" Oghlar's voice sounded dark and ominous. Although the navigator used to tease him often, he also liked him because they both respected the knowledge and skills of one another.

"I saw a stone axe smash his head, but he took at least five with him."

Tahar paused; there was complete silence among the group of naked men.

"May Dâurkhôr have mercy on him on his journey to his ancestors," said the captain quietly.

"They're on their way already, but what will happen to us?" Nergal's nervous voice brought everyone back to the reality. Suddenly they all realized that their prospects were equally miserable. Nineteen naked men, deprived of all their armor, who had not eaten for two days and, if it had not been for the rain, would not have drunk either.

"Oghlar, try to call Waiko, we have to get something out of them. They have to tell us what's going to happen?" Nergal nervously demanded.

The navigator looked darkly at him and nodded. "I don't know, I think they do not have to do anything. But I can try."

He stood up on the palisade and began to shout the interpreter's name. "Waiko! Waiko!"

It took some time before the called one came. Triumphant and with a grin he looked at the group of naked and vulnerable men in the enclosure. To Oghlar's questions of whether they could get something to eat and what was going to happen to them, he replied. "You is all fools, Waiko know it from the beginning. Nigans are great warriors and they fool you like little silly children. Chief Mozauko and brin decide about you. But I think you end up as sacrifice for Tori-gil. You need no food, but Waiko be gracious and send women to bring water and fruit."

When Oghlar translated his answer, silence fell over the cage.

"What's the Tori-gil? He didn't explain?" asked Frenidin with a tremulous voice.

"I don't know, but I am afraid that-" Oghlar paused.

"That what? What does it mean? For Dâurkhôr's sake, tell us what you know?" snapped Darmúk angrily.

"I am not sure but gil could be the same as gild in our language, which is a snake. I am afraid we are destined to be a sacrifice for a giant snake."

"So, we shall end up in the maw of some beast, that's impossible. They are animals!" Darmúk angrily and desperately turned on the captain. "It's your fault! You brought us here! Thanks to you we'll end up as food for some beast!" The officer yelled hysterically and ran around the fenced area.

Nobody joined him, and as a reply he received only a dark and desperate silence.

"Darmúk, wake up! You are a man and an officer, so behave that way!" the cold voice of Abarhil stopped the man for a while. Abarhil had remained silent up to this point, and had been listening to the conversation. He was painfully aware that it was him who had got these men into such a desperate situation. There had to be a way out.

"As far as I remember, your voice was the loudest when we talked about going to the celebration! Or am I mistaken? You carry your share of the blame, just like each one of us!"

Abarhil slowly and strenuously stood up. He was still struggling from the aftermath of intoxication. He turned to the men. "Despair and complaints won't help us. We need to think. Pull yourself together! There must be some solution!"

The men were looking at him, but in their eyes was only a dark and deep despair. He looked at Oghlar, but even he turned his eyes away. Lominas just looked at him sadly. "I said from the beginning that this voyage would end badly."

"No, I know there is a way out!" insisted Abarhil stubbornly, glancing at each of the men. In response, he received only lowered eyes. Oghlar approached him from behind and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Roghídan, you are behaving like a lion, but even a lion cannot break the bars of a cage he has been caught in."

Meanwhile, a group of women arrived at the enclosure. Laughing, they pointed at the group of strange fair-skinned naked men. Then they started to throw fruit into the enclosure and moved a few containers filled with water to the palisade. Despite their desperate situation, most of the men greedily pounced on the food and drink. Only Abarhil and Oghlar sat on the opposite side.

"Oghlar, do you really believe our situation is so desperate that we have no chance?"

"I think it is even worse than it seems, Roghídan. I cannot see a way out for us, but Maghúr is great, and because we are still breathing we should also eat."

He stood up and caught one of the large fruits thrown into the cage. He split it and offered half to Abarhil. "Eat! There is nothing else we can do anyway. We shall see what the next day will bring."

After this, dusk came quickly and it became cold. The men gathered in a huddle, trying to pull their backs and hips against each other to make themselves at least a little warm. And in this way they survived another night. But only a few of them slept. And those who did only did so out of exhaustion.

In the morning, after the dawn, women again brought some water and fruit. It was around noon when a group of men armed with spears came to the cage, among them were Waiko and the shaman. For a while, they talked to each other and then the shaman pointed at one of them. It was the hefty Korah.

Waiko stepped in front of the group and turned to Oghlar. "The big day come and Tori-gil wait. This man insult our king, but Mozauko forgive him and give him great honor to go first. Let man come out of cage!"

Oghlar did not even have to translate. When Waiko pointed at Korah, it was clear to all what was going on. The hefty man turned pale and retreated to the opposite side of the fence. He clenched his palms firmly around the stakes. Oghlar looked at him, his voice sounded bland when he said: "They have chosen you, Korah. Our turn will come later."

"No! I'm not going! They won't get me out of here. You must help me. You can't let me down!"

The gate of the cage opened. About ten men entered with spears, and bows and arrows in their hands. With the threat of these weapons they drove away the other men from Korah and surrounded him. One of the ropes fell around his neck. Korah let go of the fence and caught the rope that had begun to choke him. He was convulsing as they pulled him out of the cage. Korah wrestled with them for a while and then he straightened up.

"You damn animals, I'll show you. You don't get Korah that easily!"

He threw himself on the men who held the rope. His large fists hit the target and the small Nigans collapsed like hirot figures. However, one warrior sprang from behind and shoved a sharp spear into Korah's thigh. Korah swore and collapsed to the ground. The Nigans threw themselves on him, tied down his arms, and dragged him to the ground. In a short while, the men in the cage could only hear his swearing and lamentations. It was quiet for a long time, the silence interrupted only by dark thumping drums.

Then there was a shriek. An inhuman cry of a terror. It imprinted itself deep in their ears, as well as in their souls. For some time, there was inarticulate and desperate yelling, which could not be drowned out even by the relentless beat of the drums. Then, suddenly Korah's yells ceased. The silence was, at that moment, even worse and more horrifying than the desperate wailing that had come before it. There was silence in the cage. The men sat along the walls of the cage. No one felt like speaking. Some held their heads in their hands, others stared stubbornly ahead. Only from the corner, could the quiet cry of Amarsin be heard.



A few more days passed and they were all the same. Twice a day women came to the cage and brought water, food, fruit and some baked pancakes. There was just enough food to keep them alive but never enough to kill their hunger. During the following week, Waiko and the shaman came twice and selected the next two unfortunates to serve as sacrifices. One of them was Ebrin, the other was Darmúk. In both cases, it went as well as in Korah's case. In the cage, only sixteen men were left and their souls were poisoned by the terror of who was coming next. Therefore, there was silence most of the time. The men only exchanged short sentences concerning food and water. They did not want to talk about anything else.

In the second week after Korah's death, a group of men accompanied by Waiko and the shaman came to the cage again

"Mozauko decide today you cast lots who next to have great honor to be sacrificed to Tori-gil."

With these words he threw a bag into the cage. Oghlar picked it up and opened it. He and Abarhil looked inside. They found a handful of greenish rocks and one that was crimson red. Whoever pulled out that one would die today. Abarhil felt shivers running down his spine. Only luck would decide whether he saw the dusk. Oghlar looked at Waiko first, who was smiling gleefully, and then he started walking past each man. Each of them pulled one stone from the bag, clenched it in his fist, and then opened it. So far they had all been green. However, when Frendin opened his hand, the sun shone on a red stone. The young man turned pale. At that moment his skin was as white as the snow on the peaks of the Snowy mountains. The other men looked at him with compassion but also with visible relief. They had been spared for another day, or two, perhaps even three? The cabin boy stood as if frozen, stiff with fear, unable to speak a word. Abarhil looked at him and felt sympathy for the boy. He liked him and enjoyed talking to him during the sail while Frendin was cleaning his cabin. A sudden and inexplicable impulse caused him to turn to Waiko.

"I! I volunteer. I am the chief," he spoke in short Chyrrkhan sentences, so that Waiko understood. Puzzled, Waiko looked at the shaman who was watching Abarhil with his dark, deep eyes - his face expressed no emotion. Waiko did not have to translate, he understood what Abarhil had said. He nodded his head, whispered something to Waiko and turned away. Waiko did not say anything; he just beckoned to the men to open the gate of the enclosure. Abarhil looked petrified, as if only now realizing what he had done. He felt fear in his stomach. He looked back to see Frendin's staring eyes, the compassionate looks of the rest of the men, and Lominas' terrified gaze. Lastly, he looked into Oghlar's eyes. The navigator's face was hard as if carved from a stone, his jaw was firmly clenched but his skin was lighter than usual. And his eyes? Abarhil had never seen the navigator's eyes so tender and soft. To his surprise, he realized that he could see tears in them. It was the first time he had seen the navigator cry. Oghlar grabbed Abarhil by his hands.

"Abarhil," he said, swallowing heavily. "Maghúr is great and I know that your journey does not end here. Believe," then his voice broke and he could not finish the sentence.

Waiko's voice cut sharply through the air. Abarhil turned and slowly walked out. He turned around one more time to look at the group of men in the enclosure.

Then the Nigans led him to the other side of the village. They wanted to tie him up, but Abarhil refused and the shaman Izandro agreed, so the warriors let go of him.

When they had walked across the whole village, they entered a large clearing. Around a hundred men gathered in a circle; all the male inhabitants of the village. Abarhil noticed that some drums had been prepared, then his attention turned to a huge wooden cage. The cage was about eight feet tall and about the same width. He could not see the other end of it because it was hidden behind the trees. The cage was made of stakes as thick as man's arm, which were artfully bound by cords weaved from grass and lianas.

'So this is where it ends,' he thought. He felt sorrow but also some kind of reconciliation. He looked around at the assembly. Only now did he notice that the chief Mozauko was sat on an elevated stool. The shaman and Waiko stood next to him and were telling him something. As Abarhil looked at him, he felt as if everything around him was disappearing. He was falling into a state of indifference. The chief beckoned to the men and drums began to whirl. The sound woke Abarhil up. He again felt excitement and noticed the tightness in his stomach and groin. His apathy had gone and he was overwhelmed by a fear once more. It took a huge effort to control his desire to run away. One of the men opened a small hole in the cage. The shaman, who in the meantime had walked to Abarhil, pushed him, said something and pointed at the cage. Abarhil looked at the shaman who was adorned with feathers and fur. His dark face was covered with intricate tattoos, and in his eyes Abarhil did not see a grudge, but more a mix of curiosity and excitement. The shaman pushed him to the hole in the cage and began to sing a melody. Abarhil bent reluctantly in order to make it through the low hole. He stopped mid-step, but then he felt the sharp tip of a spear on his naked back, which forced him to continue. When he was inside, the hole closed behind him. Then he stood leaning against the wall of the cage and waited. Each moment felt like an age. He heard a grinding noise and the hole in the wall opened. Desperate, Abarhil pressed himself against the stakes behind his back. A shadow appeared in a hole in the opposite wall, and against Abarhil's will, a terror overwhelmed him. He wanted to scream and howl like an animal at the horror that began to seize him.

Then a head appeared from the hole.

It was the biggest snake head Abarhil had ever seen. It was almost as big as the head of a bull he used to see on the plains outside his city. A huge snake body wriggled out after the head and began to fold itself on the floor of the cage.

The snake pressed itself to the wall, all the muscles in his body were taut. He choked on an implicit cry of terror. The head slowly lifted up only two fathoms away from Abarhil's eyes. Bewitched, Abarhil stared into those green snake eyes. They were taking away his will, and he felt his limbs stiffen as if his own power was leaving him. It was like...

