РЕЙН
ДИАНА

МАГИЯ, ЗВЕЗДЫ И КОШМАРЫ



Magic, Stars and Nightmares

Companions and Spirits

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Магия, звезды и кошмары

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Magic, Stars and Nightmares

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Chapter 1

Once upon a time, seven blind brothers resolved to steal the Juju's moon stones, hoping their extraordinary power might restore their sight. In those days, spirits still dwelt side by side with mortals, and finding the enchanted village was no great feat.

"Let us wait for nightfall," the brothers reasoned. "The Juju will be as blind as we are, and powerless to stop us."

Magic feathers, tucked into their hair, guided them to the village. The feathers fluttered whenever the brothers walked the true path, and drooped the moment they strayed from it. Even today, such feathers point lost travelers homeward and replenish the mana of shamans and chiefs — but that, of course, you already know. Listen instead to what happened next.

The brothers crept into the hut of Luna the Juju and began rifling through her belongings in search of the stones. The youngest — and clumsiest — of them knocked over a clay pot by accident. It shattered, and three moon stones rolled out. Each is the size of my palm, grey as Luna herself, with a magic sigil upon it that glows blue.

The clatter woke Luna the Juju.

"Who goes there?" she cried. "I see nothing! Who is stealing my magic stones?"

The brothers seized the stones and fled the hut, while Luna waved her arms about in vain — she could see nothing, and she had no magic feathers with which to pursue them.

"O Dark Juju!" she called out. "Command the darkness to lift, that I may catch the thieves who took my stones!"

The Dark Juju had long courted Luna, but she turned him down time and again. At her word, he commanded the darkness to depart at once, and sunlight flooded everything around. The Dark One believed

that after so great a favor she would finally look kindly upon him — but he was mistaken. Who can say — perhaps that is why he grew so wicked?

Luna and Juju set off in pursuit of the blind brothers. The brothers left a trail behind them: they clutched the moon stones so tightly that crumbs kept falling from their hands, though they never noticed. It was these very crumbs that led Luna to the thieves.

From those crumbs of moon stone the Moon Path came into being. Follow it without straying, and it will carry you straight to the spirits. But will they be glad to see you? I doubt it.

Luna overtook the seven blind brothers just as they reached the jungle where their village lay.

“You stole my stones — now you shall become stones yourselves!” she cried.

That very instant, the seven blind brothers froze where they stood and turned to cliffs. Luna reclaimed her stones and made her way back to the village along the Moon Path.

The seven brothers stand there to this day — it is they who guard the border of our district. True, the youngest and clumsiest of them could not withstand the wind, and now only half of him juts up from the earth.

Tak, the shaman’s apprentice, had never been fortune’s favorite. In strength he never amounted to much: he could not run around the clearing without losing his breath, and any attempt to lift a boulder left him straining in vain. He could not swim across a river, and animals bolted at the very sight of him. For all the good he was, he might as well have been a dead sheep — and yet, for once, fortune smiled upon the boy. Despite every failing, he possessed something no other person had.

Juju’s magic.

A wild power that belonged to the ancient spirits alone had stirred, wholly unbidden, in an unprepossessing foundling. It seeped through Tak's skin, set his eyes aglow, and at times all but tore his body asunder with its fury.

With such a boon, Tak ought to have become the hero of his tribe—yet here, too, fortune failed him. Magic is no trifling matter. You do not wield it; it wields you. It will never bend to your will; the most you can do is try to make peace with it. And even that much took Tak a long, hard while to learn.

Only a year before, the tribe had judged him cursed and treated him more wretchedly than a slave, for Tak was a walking catastrophe, like a monkey gripping a torch in its paw. He carried the gift yet had no notion how to master it, and everyone around him paid the price. Ask anyone in the village to enumerate the misfortunes the shaman had visited upon them, and the fingers of both hands would not suffice to reckon them.

Then, at last, things took a turn for the better. Tak acquired a magic staff that held his sorcery down the way a lid pins a pot, keeping the brew from spattering in every direction, from boiling over and flooding everything near. The villagers breathed easier, no longer dreading that the boy might accidentally scorch someone's backside or tear the roof off a house. But their attitude toward him barely changed. They could no longer torment him without cause, yet they still looked on him as less than an equal, eyed him with distrust, and could not bring themselves to call him kin.

Tak wasn't complaining. True, he knew he ought to feel far more troubled and alarmed that the very people who would one day come under his care avoided him, but he had no desire to dwell on it for long. So long as his adoptive uncle stood beside him — Dzhibolba, the tribe's aged shaman, who had nothing left to do but pass his mystical

arts on to Tak. So long as his friends kept him company: the hermit Kiko and the princess Dzhera. And so long as the Chief still couldn't bring himself to honor his long-standing promise and cast him out — life was wonderful.

But now it was twice as wonderful as ever. Everything was falling perfectly into place! Tak had driven off that crazed rhino — or had it been a monster out of the realm of Juju, or a band of warriors from a neighboring village? What difference did it make? What mattered was that the tribe had seen what he was capable of — had at last recognized him as its hero!

And how they cheered, how they applauded him! The whole village had poured out into the central clearing to pay him the respect and admiration he was due. Tak strolled past his kinsmen, his gaze drifting from one face to the next with the faintest hint of condescension. They should have admitted long ago that the Pupununu would have perished without his magic, without his help. But each time, they would simply turn a blind eye, or pick at flaws and grumble — anything rather than concede the obvious. But now — yes! — now they were honoring him with all the fairness he deserved. Well, about time.

Even the proud and vain Chief was clapping so hard that the nearest huts bounced. Even his elder daughter, the haughty Zaria, waved and smiled at Tak — for once in her life regarding him as an equal. And as for the younger one...

Tak glanced around for Dzhera, but she was nowhere to be seen. No surprise there. Whenever a chance arose to prove his worth, the pink-haired witch invariably melted into thin air. Just now, though, there was no time for her.

Tak stepped up onto the wooden platform and turned to face the tribe. He tried to pick out individual faces in the crowd, but apparently

success had addled his wits, for he could not make out a single one. Ah, well.

“I...”

His throat clamped shut without warning. Nerves, most likely. He tried to swallow and could not; a bitter taste, like soot, rose in his mouth. The people fell silent, and the sky darkened as though a shadow had slid across it, though the heavens were perfectly clear. A cold wind stirred. The nape of his neck prickled with a foreboding of disaster—an instinct that had never once misled him.

Panic swept through the throng like wildfire. They bolted, fleeing they knew not from what or whither, stumbling, crashing into one another, their screaming swelling louder and louder until it drowned out every other sound. Tak reached for his staff, but it had vanished outright and refused to appear, however fervently he called to it.

Fear drove a painful stab through his heart. And the next instant, he was knocked off his feet.

He was flung from the platform, slammed into the ground, and had only a heartbeat to glimpse the tall gray silhouette of some beast looming above him. Somewhere very close by, Dzhera’s cry rang out...

“Tak! Tak! Wake up already!”

A hard blow to the arm, then a slap on top of it. Tak gasped—and the next moment the ground gave way beneath his feet, and he fell.

The fog before his eyes was slowly thinning. Human cries were fading from his ears, and the bitter taste was ebbing from his mouth. It had been only a dream — a nightmarish dream, nothing more. But when Tak opened his eyes, a surprise lay in wait for him.

He was not at home. He was not inside any building whatsoever. The heavy air, sharp with the scent of vegetation, settled on his skin in tiny, chill droplets. All around, trees rose and dissolved into the darkness of night, enclosing him in a dense wall, like thickets of

bamboo. He sat on the icy, damp ground, and close by stood the slender silhouette of a human figure with a luxuriant mane of hair.

Well, at least it wasn't the beast from his dream…

"Tak, what are you doing here?" Dzhera pounced on him the moment she saw he had come round. "What happened?"

From her voice it was impossible to tell whether she was frightened or angry, or perhaps simply taken aback by the whole affair — more likely a little of everything at once. Dzhera was no timid soul, but if even Tak couldn't make sense of anything, then she certainly couldn't either.

He got to his feet, rubbing his backside and glancing around once more, as if that could somehow supply the answers to all his questions.

In a jungle. In the dead of night. With no memory of how he had come to be here. Unbelievable — nothing like this had ever happened to him before.

"I don't know," Tak admitted at last, and Dzhera fell silent. "I was just sleeping, and… but what… I definitely fell asleep in my own home — how could I have ended up here? And where exactly are we?"

"Near the village," said the younger princess, tossing a hand behind her. "I caught you just as you were heading into the jungle. I never guessed you were asleep — you walked like anyone else, your eyes were wide open! As if you'd been hypnotized."

"In the name of the spi— And why weren't you asleep in the middle of the night?"

"Oh, do you really want to know?"

"Not anymore."

For a moment they fell silent, listening to the night sounds drifting from the depths of the jungle; then, without a word to one another, they hurried on toward the village. To find yourself in the forest in the

middle of the night was as unwise as angering the Chief or teasing a rhino. Nothing good would come of it.

The settlement of Pupununu slept peacefully. Little flags and feathers fluttered on cords strung between the trees above the houses. The neat round huts of coconut-palm wood, each crowned with a great bark feather jutting from its roof, looked like black boulders scattered in a spiral. Even the livestock — pigs, sheep, and chickens alike — were asleep, and the whole village seemed to have died out. Only at the main gates did a campfire burn low, and beside it a sentry dozed on a log. Tonight, that sentry was Art.

“Perhaps you’ve been bewitched?” Dzhera suggested once they had caught their breath.

Tak shrugged, trying to imagine how such a thing was even possible: he had been asleep, and yet he had risen of his own accord and wandered off, noticing nothing at all. Very, very strange — he had never heard of anything like it. But who would want to do such a thing, and why? And the most frightening question of all: where would he have gone, and what might he have done, had Dzhera not stopped him?

“All right, just try not to go running off anywhere again,” she smirked by way of farewell, and he caught the flash of her teeth. “Tie yourself to the bed or something, I don’t know.”

“Commoners have no beds,” Tak reminded her in a honey-sweet voice, and Dzhera pinched his arm, her aim unerring.

Suppressing their laughter, the two turned to glance at the sentry once more, but Art’s soul was already roaming the borders of the World of Dreams, and he paid no heed to the scuffling at the village’s secluded edge.

“See you in the morning,” Dzhera tossed off lightly, glancing toward her house. Tak, unable to see her face, could have sworn she was frowning. “And now I’ll have to sneak past Kaik again...”

Tak strained to make out the squat guard by the Supreme House, but whether from lingering drowsiness or simple absentmindedness, he could see nothing, not even by starlight. Or perhaps Kaik was sitting behind the little hill where Dzhera's hut stood.

"Oh, you poor little princess," he teased his friend once more.

Dzhera hated it whenever anyone pointed out her kinship with the supreme family — even when the hint had slipped from her own lips unawares. Now she gave his arm another jab and stole toward her home, light and quick as a bird; only her luxuriant mane of hair swayed with every bound. Watching her go, Tak trudged off to his own quarters — the shamans' house stood apart from the village. And what a journey he had made in his sleep — and yet he had not tumbled off any cliff, had not stumbled anywhere, and had not even drawn the guards' attention. Why, even wide awake, he was by no means always so sure-footed!

How had he kept his body under control through all that? Should he carefully sound out Dzhibolba — had the old man ever heard of anything like it? The shaman might grow suspicious and begin asking questions, and once he learned what had happened to Tak, he might — heaven forbid — decide the boy had caught some strange affliction and lock him away in his room for all eternity. No, Tak was certain an attack like this would never come again, which meant there was nothing to worry about. Probably.

But before drifting off for the second time that night, Tak wiggled his fingers and murmured a spell. A simple protective barrier demanded no great magic — he didn't even need to reach for his staff. If the charm failed to spare him a second foray into the jungle, then it truly would be time to sound the alarm.

Perhaps only pampered darlings like Zaria or Blita seriously believed that everyone's morning in the village began with women

bearing a bowl of fresh water and hibiscus petals into the room for washing the face. Next, a basin of water strewn with orange petals was held out for bathing the feet, while another woman brought coconut oil for rinsing the mouth. Once the feet were washed, she rubbed them with avocado oil, kneading the soles thoroughly. The girl patted her damp skin dry with a soft, fluffy towel of sheep's wool, clapped her hands for a dress to be fetched, and only then was she ready to rise from her bed and greet the new day.

For better or worse, Tak's day had begun quite differently today.

Pain lanced through his body and tore him, rough and merciless, out of the World of Dreams. Tak crashed down onto the floor, bruising his backside for the second time. What the—?

A thin, pinkish wall of magic shimmered mere inches from his nose—one he had raised himself. Morning had long since broken, yet once again he had gotten up and wandered off somewhere—fast asleep the whole time, no less! What was happening to him? Or had the night been so steeped in magic that it simply refused to let him rest?

Well, since he was already up and about…

Tak snapped his fingers, dissolving the protection, and lingered a moment before leaving the room. He would have to consult Dzhibolba. Might the old man have come across something of the kind before? He was so ancient that it often seemed he had already witnessed everything this world had to offer. Perhaps this was merely some ordinary human ailment, with nothing magical about it at all? And was it contagious? A tribesman roaming the night jungle was just what the village needed to be perfectly happy.

But if Tak hoped this would be the only trouble awaiting him, he was in for quite a surprise.

He had just rejoined his friends after breakfast: Dzhera, the Chief's youngest daughter, and Kiko, a solitary soul who lived in a cave on the

edge of the village. Two more different people could hardly be imagined, and Tak could not have wished for better company.

Dzhera was braver than many of the tribe's warriors, feared neither hard labor nor long journeys, and possessed a cunning to rival Luna of Juju herself. Kiko, by contrast, was used to relying on no one but himself and could survive anywhere. His mind simply didn't work the way most people's did, and he was forever tinkering with marvelous contraptions meant to make a person's life easier. The only catch was that they rarely functioned.

In looks, too, Kiko stood apart from his tribesmen. Years of dwelling in a stone cave had left his skin pale, far lighter than the bronze tan of the others, and his tattoos differed slightly from everyone else's. The design of every Pupununu included the magical sigil of Juju — a spiral set within a square and ending in a sharp spike. For some reason, Kiko's spiral was round. Even so, the tribe counted him as one of their own. And when he turned twelve, he underwent the initiation rite on equal footing with all the other children who belonged neither to the ruling family nor to the shaman's line. Kiko's front teeth were knocked out in the ritual, and ever since, his upper canines had jutted out from beneath his lip.

Fortunately, Dzhera was not one to gossip, and Tak could rely on her for anything. She told no one of his nighttime exploits — not even Kiko — and so Tak resolved to confide the strange incident to him himself. Told in broad daylight, it sounded wilder still.

"Never heard of anything like it!" Kiko declared, giving Tak a thorough once-over as though searching for a rash, a swelling, or some other outward sign of the mysterious affliction. "Think about it — maybe this way you can not only travel about, but do things as well? Just imagine: you're fast asleep, and off you're carried to Juju's realm..."

The mere thought made Tak's jaw clench. Nothing could surprise the Great Spirits anymore, of course, but the last thing he wanted was for them to find out about it. As it was, they never lacked reasons to mock the Pupununu.

"That's not what worries me," he cut his friend's musings short. "What if this illness is a perfectly ordinary human one? And what if it's contagious?"

Without a word to one another, Dzhera and Kiko edged a step back from him. Tak would have laughed, had the situation held even a spark of humor.

"Nonsense — no one's ever heard of such a thing," Dzhera protested quickly, though she kept her distance all the same. "Maybe you just ate something before turning in?"

"Sure — crazed frogs," Kiko smirked. "Their venom sends a person straight to the Spirit World — never mind letting him get up off his mat."

Midway through this genteel little exchange, two terrified women — Kaona and Lei — came sprinting out into the clearing. They had gone to the forest to gather noni fruit for breakfast, but evidently something had gone badly wrong. The poor creatures could barely keep their footing, and their eyes were stretched so wide it might have been the Dark Juju himself on their heels.

"There's a monster in the lower valley!" Kaona shrieked before she had even come to a halt, let alone caught her breath. "Some hideous creature tore the animals to pieces, and now it's coming this way!"

Sowing panic among the tribesfolk is one of Pupununu's favorite pastimes.

Heads began poking out of doorways, and everyone in the clearing rushed up to Kaona. Her words had already swept through the entire village, like a burning brand flung onto a haystack. While the Chief

strove to soothe the alarmed villagers and, at the same time, piece together exactly what had happened, Tak, Dzhera and Kiko had vanished without a trace.

The trio made for the edge of the upper valley at once, all thought of their conversation — and of Tak's strange midnight ramble — instantly forgotten. A monster? Now that was well worth a look.

It wasn't as if the reckless teenagers had never laid eyes on monsters in their lives, nor was it that monsters appeared so often they had lost all fear of them. Now and then strange creatures turned up in the jungle, straying in by one route or another from Juju's realm. But these were usually harmless things — plump little noselings, or the most endearing papikins. Occasionally someone would carry one of their comical babies back to the village, where it would be adopted as a household pet, a living plaything for the children. Once such a creature grew too troublesome to keep, the poor thing was either devoured or returned to the jungle. Dzhera and Tak were raising a baby noseling of their own, a little fellow named Nevis, and they flatly refused to contemplate the day he would be fully grown and they would have to decide his fate. The chief had placed a taboo on eating noseling meat, yet he could lift that ban at no cost to himself.

But a monster that tore animals to shreds was quite another matter — impossible to ignore. No predators prowled the jungle; a wild cat was glimpsed there only on the rarest of occasions. Or perhaps it hadn't been a beast at all? Fear could conjure all manner of visions in a woman's mind, and in all likelihood they would find nothing but a pair of butchered lizards.

One strange discovery was quite enough for a single day.

"What a revolting sight!"

Kiko's voice rang out across the lower valley, sending small birds scattering from the trees. He, Tak, and Dzhera stood at the cliff's edge,

craning their necks to peer down, eyes wide, hands clamped over their mouths or pressed flat against their stomachs. It had been a mistake to come here straight after breakfast.

The ground at the foot of the cliff was drenched with fresh blood, and its clinging reek rose even to this upper reach of the valley. The sun glared boldly upon scraps of skin and fur, while a light breeze stirred the torn-out feathers. Here and there the earth had been churned by the mighty hooves of rhinos, and a young murraya sapling lay snapped by the impact. From this height no trace of the predator could be made out, if any trace remained—but the fruits of its work lay plain before the eye.

Two enormous bull rhinos lay with their bellies slit open, entrails spilled across the earth, yet not a single bird had come to the feast. From one carcass a patch of thick hide had been ripped from the flank, leaving ribs bare through the flesh; the other was missing an ear, its muzzle torn to the bone. Of the moa, only scraps of bloodied feathers and a pair of toes with thick claws remained.

“Who could have done this?” Dzhera whispered, her fingers still pressed to her lips. “Why didn’t he eat them?”

Ordinarily she was far from squeamish about such things, but the mangled animals, abandoned in this state, horrified even her. A hard lump had risen in Tak’s throat as well, and he could think of nothing to reassure his friend. Then again, what could anyone possibly say here?

“What if it’s a sacrifice?” Kiko voiced the thought, shading his eyes with his hand like a visor beneath his heavy brows. “A most unorthodox sacrifice, but…”

Dzhera’s eyes grew wider still—no doubt she was picturing exactly what sort of bloodthirsty tribe had settled nearby. Tak swallowed hastily and blurted out the first thing that came to mind, if only to calm her a little:

“But what if the rhinos gored each other on their own? You know—a fight broke out, a moa happened to be passing by... and then they tore each other’s bellies open with their horns. Why not?”

Dzhera and Kiko gave him odd looks and dropped their eyes to the ground again.

“This place makes my skin crawl,” Dzhera whispered. “Let’s get out of here.”

She stepped back from the edge of the cliff and cast a wary glance at the crowns of the nearest trees. Her arms tensed, her fingers curling into fists; one could even make out the rise and fall of her chest beneath the tight binding of her top. Tak was just as eager to leave, but he could not simply abandon the place without at least trying to work out who had done this—and why. A predator or a hunter was bound to have left some trace behind.

“But we can’t just walk away and pretend nothing happened,” he said, hoping to win his friends over.

“You want to climb down there?” Kiko’s wide mouth twisted. “Because there might be tracks down there?”

That was possible, but the very last thing Tak wanted just then was to find himself at the bottom—beside the carcasses, on the blood-soaked ground—and completely alone at that; nothing in Dzhera’s or Kiko’s faces suggested they were eager to follow him.

He looked down once more. He had seen a great deal in his life, yet he had never come across such senseless cruelty. Had people been in the rhinos’ place, he might still have understood it—but whom could animals possibly have stood in the way of? Or rather: whom could they have crossed so badly that someone chose to slaughter a couple of healthy males at once? What strength, what daring, must this creature possess?

“Fine, let’s go,” he conceded at last, and Dzhera and Kiko immediately wheeled around and dashed back into the jungle.

Tak hurried after them, barely managing to fend off the broad leaves that whipped at his face. The forest here was dense—though, of course, nothing compared to the forgotten Vog Valley. But there were no trails to follow, poisonous plants grew in riotous abundance, and lianas and fue creepers hung from the trees in heavy sheaves, barring all passage. And just now it felt especially eerie to think that some unseen predator might be lurking close by. His only hope lay in the noisy birds, which never fell silent for a single moment. Surely no beast could be hiding nearby with all that clamor going on.

“Brother, do you think it was the Juju who did this?” Kiko asked as they walked, and Tak nearly stopped in his tracks at the accusation.

The mighty Juju spirits could snap their fingers and destroy the entire valley, yet for the most part they were harmless. True, one of them might now and then take it into his head to strike off a man’s head or lock him away in a dungeon for all eternity—but there was always a reason behind such cruelty, however absurd. Descending into the world of humans for no purpose but to tear animals apart without mercy was decidedly not their style.

Tak knew of only one Juju cruel and powerful enough to destroy without cause. One who had already done more than enough to blight Pupununu’s life as things stood. Of that much he could be certain: this was his doing.

But he had slain the Dark Juju with his own magic, and he seriously doubted the creature had managed to return. And if, despite everything, it had—then the time had come to prepare for the worst.

A hush of peace lay over the village. The Chief had succeeded in calming the tribe, and surely by now everyone had forgotten the women’s words entirely. Tak glanced about in search of Kaonu, but

neither she nor Lea was anywhere in sight. No one spoke of the dreadful news; everyone busied themselves with their daily tasks. Whenever something strange and unsettling happened, people would mutter for a while about spirits and mad neighbors, but soon enough it was all forgotten and life carried on as before. No doubt the same fate awaited this tale.

And yet…

"I'll talk to Dad," Dzhera declared, already striding toward her home. — He has to do something about this.

Tak doubted the Chief would drop everything to take on so strange a matter, but it was worth a try. Perhaps he would even entrust Tak with a leading role in the affair, and once it was resolved, he would proclaim it before the whole village, throw a feast in his honor, and…

"Off to see Juju?" Kiko asked, pulling him out of his daydreams.

"Yes, I must. Luna is bound to know something about it, especially if Pupununu is in danger."

He uttered these last words as softly as he could, so that no one but Kiko might hear. He had no intention of frightening anyone a second time in a single morning.

Kiko glanced around the village and let out a long, melodious whistle, as though summoning a parrot.

"It hasn't been long since our last misfortune."

"Not long? A full two moons! The bloodsucking wasps certainly plagued us, but at least we knew what we were up against. But this…"

"Tak!" The Chief's mighty roar rang out across the entire clearing. — Over here! Come at once!

Tak needed no second bidding, though the closer he drew to the leader, the less he liked the look on the man's face. Evidently he had paid no heed to his daughter's words and had resolved to see the site of the slaughter with his own eyes.

“Tak, do you remember what I told you when the women came?”

The Chief spoke calmly, without hurry, fixing Tak with an unblinking stare. Not that he needed any help looking fearsome — tall, powerfully built, with hands thicker than Tak’s whole body. He was enormous in exactly the way a chief ought to be. Tak had always felt faintly ill at ease in his presence, most of all when the man was in a foul temper.

He swallowed hard. Their gang had bolted into the jungle, scarcely pausing to learn what had happened; lingering to absorb the Chief’s prohibitions had been the last thing anyone had time for.

“What I said, the leader continued in that same measured tone, pressing his fingertips together,” was that no one in the tribe… IS TO COME ANYWHERE NEAR THAT PLACE! — he roared at the top of his lungs, and Tak shrank back.

Dzhera took her father by the arm, but he paid her no mind. Once his temper kindled, nothing could put it out. His eldest daughter, Zaria, was cut from exactly the same cloth.

“Whatever happened out there is no concern of ours!” he went on, quieter now yet no less furious. — I don’t so much as want to hear the details of this business. Is that clear?

Tak disagreed heartily, and prohibitions of any kind irritated and enraged him. Still, he knew that arguing with the Chief was like shutting your eyes and stepping off a cliff. So he lowered his head and muttered:

“Yes, Chief.”

“Excellent.” His good humor returned as swiftly as it had fled. — Now off with you — go make yourself useful.

It was on the tip of Tak’s tongue to say that the most useful thing anyone could do just now was find out who had killed the animals, and why. But he had the good sense to hold his peace. He turned and

trudged off toward his house, resolving that around midday, when the Chief would be occupied, he would slip away to Juju’s altar.

Yet even that plan was fated to come to nothing. Dzhibolba caught sight of him and ordered him to tidy the herb shelves — a chore that would swallow at least half the day. Tak scowled bitterly at the thought that he would not reach the altar until tomorrow. It was as if his uncle were doing all this on purpose, as if he had divined the boy’s intention to slip away.

But he raised no objection, voiced no argument — it would have led nowhere all the same. No matter how many times you saved the tribe, no matter how much good you did it, you would always be seen, above all else, as a lad not yet grown enough to be trusted with such grave matters. And there was nothing to be done about it; all he could do was wait and keep growing up.

Tak set to work in silence, while the old man fell to grumbling and lamenting as he went over his stores:

“The jamun leaves are nearly out, and someone is bound to come running with a bellyache... Rambutan... there’s still enough of that... Not a single tamanu nut left, hm... Let me see, let me see... Not one datura leaf to be found” can they truly all be gone already? Tak, just don’t you dare tell me you took them!

Tak listened with only half an ear, his mind still turning over why the rhinos and moas had been killed. What, after all, was the point? To frighten Pupununu? Yet they had learned of it by pure chance — the women had happened to be near the edge of the upper valley and saw it. Anyone who truly wanted to frighten the people would have left the carcasses right beside the village.

Could it really have been a sacrifice? But not a single altar stood anywhere in the lower valley, and the blood of rhinos and moas had never been counted sacred.

Then what was the sense of it all? Why would anyone slaughter the beasts without meaning to frighten the tribe, perform a rite, or claim the meat? Why?

“We’ll have to go and gather the herbs before dark,” the uncle concluded, and the words pulled Tak from his thoughts.

“Aren’t you afraid? I mean — you heard, didn’t you?...”

“Of course I heard!” Dzhibolba cut him off irritably, selecting a basket. “I live in a village, thank you very much; I still hear what goes on in the world. And why should I be afraid? Do you imagine this fellow, whoever he may be, will start attacking people in broad daylight? Don’t talk nonsense.”

Tak pressed his lips together and watched him make ready for the road. He wanted to offer to fetch the herbs himself, if only to keep the old man at home, but he knew exactly what answer such an offer would earn him.

“You’ll gather the wrong things.”

“You couldn’t tell a taro fruit from a Jerusalem artichoke.”

“Or you’ll wander off and fall straight into the clutches of a nubu plant.”

“You always gather the wrong things.”

So he said nothing, watching Dzhibolba leave the house. Then he went back to his tidying, though his heart was ill at ease.

Had he perhaps made too much of the fact that the beasts of the jungle kill one another, as they have done for thousands of years?

Hardly had Tak managed to banish the thought and lose himself in the work when a stifled cry rang out from outside.

Dropping everything, he bolted from the house, drawing his staff as he ran. That bad, very bad feeling had clearly not been for nothing.

Dashing to the edge of the village, Tak spied a small figure staggering unsteadily out of the jungle. His pace quickened the

moment he recognized Dzhibolba. Anxiety and dread clouded his vision.

“Uncle Jay, what happened?” he gasped, catching sight of the blood on his hands. — What the...?

“Tleylok.”

“Tleylok?”

It was as though Tak had been slapped awake. How had he not understood at once! How could he have missed the shadow of that terrible shaman hanging over the carcasses? Who else could it have been, if not Tleylok!

“I should have guessed!” The crystal on his staff flared orange, unbidden. — Where is he? Can you make it to the house?

Even his fear for his uncle faded into the background. His fury at the relentless sorcerer, who simply would not leave their tribe in peace, burned and goaded him like a fresh wound. For so long there had been no word of him — and now, here we go again.

“No, Tak.” Dzhibolba fearlessly laid his palm right on the staff’s crystal, pressing it down. — It wasn’t him who attacked me. He was the one attacked.

“What...?”

“Come quickly, we have to carry him to the village. And don’t look at me like that” I’m fine.

Tak understood nothing, but he obeyed, following the old man with his staff still at the ready. With Tleylok you never know what to expect — his very appearance is an unpleasant, wholly unforeseen “gift” for the tribe.

Tleylok was a sorcerer. He had lived in Pupununu long before Tak was born and had once been Dzhibolba’s partner. But when Dzhibolba was appointed high shaman, Tleylok flew into a rage. He abandoned the tribe, and for a good ten years nobody laid eyes on him. Then the

sorcerer stole the magic stones from Pupununu's guardian, the Moon Juju, and nothing could stop him from turning every last one of his former tribesmen into sheep. That was when Tak was forced to make his acquaintance.

After that, Tak crossed paths with the dark shaman a couple more times. Tleylok was cunning, vengeful, and immensely powerful in the magical arts. If it was not he who had killed the animals in service of his new plan, then no one else could have.

"Are you certain you're not hurt?" Tak asked Dzhibolba as they went — but the next moment, everything else in the world slipped his mind.

A contorted body lay sprawled in the middle of the path.

Tleylok was trying to press his hands against the wound in his stomach, but it could do him no more good. A bloody trail stretched along the ground behind him — the shaman had been crawling toward the village until his strength gave out and he sank into unconsciousness. His tall, sturdy frame was curled up like a withered leaf, one cheek scraped raw against the earth, his eyes half-shut and gleaming faintly beneath heavy eyelids.

Tak stood rooted to the spot, staring at him. Despite the sweltering heat, an icy chill swept through his body, and a cold weight settled in the pit of his stomach. In his memory, Tleylok remained a formidable warrior and a mighty shaman — and, truth be told, Tak had always been rather afraid of him. The man was as treacherous as a crocodile, as cunning as a serpent, and as capricious as the spirit of Juju himself. But now the sorcerer cut such a pitiful figure that Tak found himself at a loss. He had pictured their next meeting very differently.

"What are you standing there for?" Dzhibolba snapped, feeling for the pulse of his former assistant. — Pick him up with care and carry him to the village.

“I’m not sure I can” what if he takes a turn for the worse and loses even more blood?..

“With magic, Tak” magic! In the name of Juju, I’d have carried him myself by now…

Ignoring his uncle’s grumbling, Tak waved his staff, and a blue cloud enveloped the injured man, bearing him slowly upward. Tleylok’s body went slack, his arms and head lolling, his legs dangling half-bent. The enchanted cloud hovered level with Tak’s head, ready to follow him wherever he went.

“What’s happening here?” Dzhera came bursting onto the path and nearly collided with Tak. — Dzhibolba, you…

At the sight of Tleylok she gasped, her eyes flying open so wide that they seemed to mirror the entire scene before her.

“This is…”

“Dzhibolba is fine,” Tak explained as calmly as he could, — but this one is wounded. I need to get him home.

Without another word, he turned away, and the blue, glowing cloud drifted smoothly after him through the air. In truth, Tak had feared that Dzhera would protest and demand they leave the shaman to die in the forest; instead she walked in silence behind him, beside Dzhibolba. The old man murmured something quietly under his breath, and Tak could not begin to fathom what he must be feeling.

By then the entire village had already poured out into the clearing and stood waiting impatiently for the shamans, unable to tell what exactly had happened and trading guesses among themselves. Only Dzhera had the courage to follow them into the jungle; everyone else preferred to keep a safe distance. The Chief stood at the fore, half the village sheltering behind him, his mighty arms folded across his chest and his heavy, square chin thrust upward. A tribal tattoo curled across his great protruding belly like crooked blades.

Tak slowed as he stepped out of the jungle. To get home he would have to pass through the crowd, but the Chief, of course, would never let them go until he had learned what had happened. And by that time, Tleylok might already have breathed his last.

“Make way—let us through!” he cried out, striding resolutely forward. “Gravely wounded! Gravely wounded!”

“Tak, what is going on?” barked the Chief, without budging so much as a finger. “What have you dragged into our home?”

“Dad, let him through!”

Dzhera ran forward and seized her father’s arm. While his attention was on her, Tak hurried past, and the cloud bearing Tleylok nearly grazed the Chief. The people shrank aside, parting before him. Leaving the explanations to his uncle and his friend, Tak swiftly made his way home.

What now? He lowered Tleylok onto a mat in the sickroom and, with a sweep of his staff, dispersed the cloud that hung about him. The shaman still lived, but consciousness had not returned. Tak bent over him for a closer look at the wounds. The longest gash raked across his chest, stretching nearly from his right shoulder to his left hip. A knife or a beast’s claw had shredded the leather strap crossing the sorcerer’s breast as though it were spun from cobweb. There were several smaller wounds on his body, yet these ran deepest, as if from spear thrusts, and wet blood glistened in their depths.

Who had set upon him? Some desperate warrior, armed to the teeth? Or the giant hawkmoth that dwelt nearby? It posed hardly any danger to people—but what if Tleylok had tried to take its egg…

Dzhibolba came hurrying into the house, nearly stumbling as he crossed the main hall. The floor there was built in two tiers, dipping toward the middle of the room. The stone niches of the ledge held

herbs and the makings of elixirs and powders, and slippery lizards sometimes took up residence there as well.

“This is bad, this is very bad,” Dzhibolba muttered as he examined the injuries, drew down the patient’s lower eyelids, and felt for his pulse.

Tak looked on, unsure whether to offer help—or what help he could even give. The gravest thing he had ever dealt with was Bul’s dislocated arm. Well, and once Lok had wrenched his back so badly it left him senseless. The people of the tribe were careful enough, for the most part, and wild beasts never attacked first. But now—this was the first time in his life he had seen so much blood.

“Psst!” Dzhera hissed softly from behind the front door, not daring to step inside. — Tak! What’s going on in there?

Nothing would have pleased Tak more than to slip out and join her — he had no wish to deal with Tleylok, least of all in such a pitiful state. And yet he pretended not to hear, holding his place at his uncle’s side and awaiting orders. That was the one thing he had never imagined: that one day he would find himself tending a traitor.

Dzhibolba merely told him to fetch warm water, then saw to Tleylok’s wounds himself. Tak lingered nearby a while longer, watching the shaman’s brisk, assured movements, before daring to steal away toward the door. Dzhibolba never noticed.

Dzhera and Kiko hovered at the threshold, frightened and fascinated in equal measure by all that was unfolding.

“Father has allowed us to keep him, the princess began whispering,” but he isn’t pleased. Not pleased at all. Who could have wounded him?

Tak said nothing, yet the same answer was already turning over in all three of their minds.

The one who had torn the animals apart in the night.

Chapter 2

Now I shall tell you how the Juju spirits divided their realm from the realm of humankind.

Long, long ago, when Luna and the Sun were still young and shone but dimly, humans and spirits shared a single world; their villages stood side by side, close beside one another.

Yet in time the Juju wearied of the foolish, clinging humans, who were forever begging favors of their powerful neighbors. Once they asked for a tree whose fruit could be drunk, and the spirits granted them the coconut palm. Another time they grumbled at having to wait for a thunderstorm to light a fire, so the spirits handed them a tinderbox. And when they wished to fashion bowls for cooking and carrying food, the spirits gave them clay, and Luna herself taught them to mold pots.

Not a week passed without the humans pestering the spirits over some fresh request. Indeed, it was the spirits, too, who taught humankind to divide time into hours, days, weeks, months, and years, inventing for them the sundial and the calendar.

So at last the spirits gathered to decide what should be done with this tiresome tribe of mortals.

“Let us destroy them,” proposed the Dark Juju.

“That is far too cruel,” objected Brawler Juju. “Let us simply give them a sound thrashing.”

“The two of you deserve each other,” said Love Juju indignantly. “Take away their love, and they will die out of their own accord.”

Then Luna Juju rose from her place, and every argument fell silent at once.

“We shall not kill the humans. But we shall part from them: from this day forward we will dwell in our own realm, and they in theirs, and peace will reign everywhere.”

At this, the other spirits burst out laughing.

“Juju’s sister, your proposal is every bit as cruel as our own. After all, everyone knows that people could not last a single day without our help.”

“Help they shall receive, Luna continued.” Let the people choose one among them to speak with us and seek our aid on behalf of the entire tribe.

“But, Juju’s sister, the spirits objected once more,” what would change in the world then, if people came to us, just as before, over every manner of petty concern? Even if it were only one person now.

“It will be far harder for them henceforth, the wise Luna replied.” People may commune with us only at altars, which they themselves must raise. And they may commune only by presenting an offering: a tiki doll carved from the predatory nubu plant and bathed in the precious oils of orange and manuka. No longer will people plague us with trifles and folly.

And so it came to pass. The strongman Juju gave a mighty heave and severed one world from the other, leaving the self-absorbed and greedy people without our constant succor. From that day to this, the spirits have dwelt in their realm and we in ours, and only the shaman may come to the altar and ask for help. Yet first he must fashion the tiki from the perilous nubu plant, then seek out the rare orange and manuka trees and gather from them oil enough to anoint the doll.

This was perilous, arduous work, and shamans very, very rarely dared to venture to the altar. People had to fend for themselves. They learned to fashion spears for protection against beasts—and against one another. They had to master the tilling of the soil and the growing of

useful plants; they even succeeded in taming wild pigs and chickens. And all of this without Juju's aid, for the predatory nubu plant has a habit of swallowing people whole, while the manuki and the orange grow so far away, and yield so little oil. But you know that

in time a shaman did appear in our tribe who managed to dispense with offerings altogether. He would simply come to the altar, wave his staff, and there was the required spirit, right before your eyes. I cast blame on no one, but

it seems to me that it is precisely because of him that Juju are displeased once more, and misfortunes beset us humans as never before

. — You're no help to me here anymore

. There was utter weariness in Dzhibolba's voice, and he himself seemed to have aged another ten years. His hairless head hung bowed, his gray brows knitted together. Tak gazed at him, not noticing that he was pressing his right hand apologetically to his chest. As if he ought to have done more. But

it turned out Dzhibolba had not finished yet.

"Then you'll have to go for the rambutan yourself." I'm

afraid rambutan won't help him just now, Tak answered almost in a whisper, hoping the words had sounded gentle enough not to wound the old man still further. But in his

anger the old man suddenly stamped his foot, and the thick feather necklace at his throat quivered.

"For the elixir! I need it to keep Tleylok alive" to stop him from passing into the World of Spirits! Come on, get a move on — I need at least five ripe fruits. The riper the better, but if you bring me rotten ones…

"On it!" Tak cut in, already turning toward the door. — I'll be right back!

“That’s not all. I’ll need the wings of white butterflies as well. Not many” a dozen at most. Now off you go! Quick, hurry!

Tak flew out of the house and ran straight into his friends in the doorway. They hadn’t gone anywhere after all, still standing guard by the entrance. Nor was that all: small knots of people lingered about the clearing, discussing what had happened. Some five men had gathered around the Chief, who was explaining something to them, gesturing in every direction and loudly issuing orders.

Trouble. Plain and simple, the Pupununu were bracing themselves to face yet another ordeal — and, if at all possible, to survive it.

“I have to go to the jungle” Dzhibolba is preparing an elixir… — Tak had barely begun to explain when Dzhera blurted out:

“I’m going with you!”

“Are you sure? I only meant…”

“Tak, no matter what Father says, I am not going to sit in the village. And there’s no way you’ll make me! Well, are we going or not?”

Before anyone could take notice, the teenagers hurried off toward the jungle. No one would miss Kiko, of course; but if the Chief so much as glimpsed his little daughter, he would be sure to lock Dzhera up.

“Once we’ve delivered everything to Dzhibolba, we’ll head straight for the altar,” Tak continued once they had run far enough from the village to slow to a brisk walk. — We need to ask Luna what’s going on.

“Do you honestly think she’ll deign to help us?” Dzhera asked, her skepticism plain. “Oh, please — she’s hardly going to lift a finger for the likes of us. A predator has turned up in the forest, and yes, in all likelihood one from Juju’s realm, so a fine thank-you to them for that. We need to lay traps and catch the thing.”

Tak could not suppress the hurt he felt at Dzhera's anger toward the spirits. Of course, she was right up to a point, and he personally bore no blame for it — and yet he was part of Juju's world all the same, and that was why his friend's words stung him.

"For the life of me, I don't understand why we decided to save Tleylok," Kiko spoke up suddenly. "All he's ever done is bring us trouble. If he croaks, things can only get better for everyone."

Tak set about choosing the right words to explain it to him. Sometimes you didn't notice it in the least, but at other times it was plain at first glance that the hermit Kiko, who had grown up and lived apart from the rest of the tribe, lacked certain notions and principles that, it seemed, everyone should be born with. Behind his well-known good nature and serenity, cruel streaks showed through. He never grasped that what he was doing was wrong, and at times he had no idea he was causing anyone pain.

"Well, what's so hard to understand?" Dzhera cut in. "Dzhibolba couldn't just walk on by, could he? The two of them had worked together once. How could anyone leave a man to die alone in the jungle? Even Tleylok didn't deserve that. Though my father was none too pleased about it."

Judging by everything, no one else was exactly thrilled either. Tak could only hope that in his absence the people wouldn't come to Dzhibolba demanding that the sorcerer be cast out.

The friends quickly gathered ripe rambutans, heavy with juice, their rinds fringed with springy, curling "hairs." The butterflies proved far more elusive. The great "whites" with their iridescent wings would dart away at the mere approach of a person, soaring up toward the blossoms that crowned the trees.

Tak, Dzhera, and Kiko gave chase like children, forgetting for a while both the unknown beast and the one for whom all this was being

gathered. But that was only half the task. Once a butterfly was caught, the most unpleasant part remained: tearing away its delicate little wings with care not to rip them, then crushing the insect's bare body so the poor creature would not suffer. Tak and Kiko went about this without much trouble, but Dzhera winced and turned away every time. She never tore the wings from the butterflies herself; she only caught them and handed them over to the boys.

"Why does Dzhibolba even need their wings?" Kiko asked once the work was done.

By then they were themselves dusted with the shimmering pollen. The fragile wings were folded carefully into a pouch of tapa cloth. Dzhibolba would grind them into powder regardless, but he was sure to scold Tak if he brought wings that were broken or frayed.

"There is great power in these butterflies. Their pollen can carry a soul from the Spirit World and back."

"Oh, nerbils!" Kiko hurriedly began wiping his pollen-dusted palms on his leaf tupana. "You mean we could actually die just from touching it?"

Even Dzhera cast a wary glance at her own silvery palms and gave her hands a little shake.

"It isn't quite so simple," the shaman said with a smirk. "It calls for certain other ingredients as well. But Dzhibolba told of how his brother once came upon a whole glade of white butterflies, and in passing through it he was dusted with pollen from head to toe — and, before he knew it, stepped straight into the World of Spirits. Juju's Death sent him right back." He could scarcely suppress a smile as he watched his friends' eyes go wide. "But I suspect it's only a joke."

Dzhera went on furiously scrubbing her palms against her skirt, but Kiko's interest in the tale had suddenly quickened.

“So it might actually work? If everything is done just as it should be, could you enter the World of Spirits — and come back?”

Tak hesitated before answering, remembering his one and only journey to the other side. When the sheep trampled Loka, Dzhibolba had been beside himself with grief. The whole tribe believed Loka to be the very warrior of the prophecy, the one who would deliver the village from the traitor, and when he himself was slain, it seemed that — nothing more, nothing less — the end of the world had come. Reaching the World of Spirits had cost Tak a bitter struggle. Only a dead man can guide you to his realm, and Tak had been helped by no fewer than four of the dead — the ancient chiefs of Pupununu, mummified and lying in a burial mound all their own. The cursed nerbil beasts had dragged the mummies all across the graveyard, and once Tak had restored the chiefs to their resting places, they opened for him a fissure into the World of Spirits.

And what he had seen there would never be erased from his memory. Perhaps, after such a journey, he ought to have found peace and stopped brooding over death; instead, the opposite had proved true.

“If everything is done correctly,” he began slowly, in answer to Kiko’s question, “if you find a ghost-guide and Juju’s Death, then... it is quite possible.”

Kiko asked nothing more, and Tak could only hope that, after this conversation, he wouldn’t dream up some mad scheme for a stroll through the land of the dead.

They hurried back to the village. Tak tried not to dwell on how their outing had come to nothing, but the notion kept darting through his head. It would be a dreadful thing if a man died because of his slowness—even a man like Tleylok.

At first glance the village seemed perfectly ordinary, but soon the friends noticed people carrying bamboo trunks, and the Chief standing

at the edge of the clearing, issuing orders with broad waves of his hands. Dzhera ran over to find out what had happened, while Tak and Kiko made straight for Dzhibolba.

Tleylok was still alive. Dzhibolba had bandaged the wounds, but that was all he could do for now, and he waited impatiently for his nephew's return. Catching sight of the friends, he hurried over to them, stretching out his hands in eager appeal.

"Quickly! He's already on the very border of the Spirit World!"

Snatching up the pouch of wings and the basket of fruit, the shaman raced to the sick man's side at unheard-of speed; only the tapa screen swayed in his wake. Dzhibolba had painted the fabric himself—on the outer side he had inscribed a plea to shield his home from illness, and on the inner side, the one the sick man could see, an ancient charm against disease. Two tamanu nuts and a few myrtle leaves lay in a tiny niche in the wall beside the room.

Kiko leaned against the doorframe, gazing absently across the main hall. Even on the hottest days, a coolness lingered in the shamans' stone house, keeping the herbs and fruit perfectly fresh. But on certain nights it grew truly cold, and one had to wrap oneself in a sheepskin.

Not that Kiko wasn't used to it; at times he even lit a fire in his cave to take the chill off.

"Still, it's strange that he should be tending to him," Kiko said, nodding toward the screen behind which Dzhibolba had vanished. "If I remember rightly, that fellow meant to bring our tribe under his sway. To get rid of Dzhibolba. And of you."

"So what?"

"I mean, perhaps we're wrong to be helping him. We may live to regret it."

"Did you hear what Dzhibolba said?" Tak said hotly. "He's at the very border of the Spirit World! How could he take revenge on us from

there?" He paused, then added more quietly, "Besides, if he does wake up, he'll be able to tell us who attacked him."

"Well, if only for that reason..." Kiko lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

He was looking away, his face all but hidden. By his right ear, where the irregular gray-violet tattoo curved, butterfly pollen glimmered faintly. His shoulder-length black hair set off his fair skin. Perhaps his heart, too, had turned pale and cold, raised as he was among stone walls? Or because he had never known a parent's love, nor the warmth of his tribesmen?

Dzhera slipped soundlessly into the house and pressed her back to the door, closing it behind her.

"Father has ordered the people to raise a wall around the village, and he has forbidden anyone to set foot in the jungle without a compelling reason." She cast a meaningful glance at Tak, and he could not fail to notice it.

"What? What do you mean? Are you saying a trek to the altar isn't reason enough?"

He caught his breath. What a stupid day! Some cursed streak of troubles and bafflements had been dragging on ever since the night itself. And now here he was, snapping at his friends already. At this rate they'd be at each other's throats by nightfall.

"I never said that," Dzhera answered slowly, her eyes widening for an instant. "I only meant that you should be more careful."

Tak nodded absently, gazing at the screen that veiled the sickroom.

"All of us should be."

He gave himself a shake to drive off the numbness. He had to act before a pack of hideous, clawed monsters fell upon the tribe and tore everyone here to shreds.

"Who's coming with me to the altar?"

By now it was impossible to imagine how people had ever managed without the aid of the Juju spirits — how they, so weak and defenseless, had once coped with everything alone, relying on nothing but their own strength and skill. On the way to the altar, Tak found himself recalling how much grief the people had endured in those days. For fourteen years the raids had come without pause: first poisonous frogs, then snakes, and then, from nowhere, swarms of insects such as no one had ever seen, devouring the corn crop down to the last stalk. The village had been flooded more than once, and twice the warriors of the Black Haze tribe had come against it. Pupununu had known hunger, had rebuilt their homes again and again, and had learned to defend themselves. The jungle was harsh, its neighbors treacherous — yet all these calamities had befallen them through the will of a single Juju nursing a grudge. He had tried to wipe Pupununu from the world of Moana, and though he did not succeed, the tribe had still lost several of its own — among them the parents of Kiko, whoever they might have been, and the mother of Dzhera and Zaria.

Yet now the tribe felt that, after all these misfortunes, they had been nearly fortunate. Theirs was the only tribe to possess Juju magic, the only one that could count on the protection of the great Luna. But that did not mean the protectress appeared at the first summons, ready to grant the people whatever aid they might need. Luna the Juju was the wisest of all the spirits, and she knew better than anyone when her people truly required her help — and when a trial had been sent to them by Moana, one they simply had to accept. It fell to Tak to invent explanations of exactly this sort whenever Luna the Juju refused to come to his aid against yet another rhino raid or an outbreak of belly sickness in the village.

Hidden away in the jungles of the upper valley lay several ancient, long-abandoned little altars where one might commune with Juju. Tak,

Dzhera, and Kiko would sometimes stumble upon them in their wanderings, though they were careful never to linger. Kiko said such places turned his stomach; Dzhera said shivers raced down her arms and her nape prickled; and Tak... well, Tak felt that if the power slumbering in those places ever woke, disaster was sure to follow.

A darker memory clung to these places as well. Once, the ill-fated Ungachaka twins discovered an ancient altar of the Nasta — progenitors of all the tribes. The Nasta had lived in dark times, and their rituals were cruel and potent. The altar had been built for one purpose: to swap people's souls.

Lacking any better idea, Blot and Blita resolved that it would help them claim Juju's magic for themselves. And so Tak found himself bound to a magic disc.

For the first half of the cycle he shared it with Dzhera, who had tumbled in by mistake. Then came four more — four long, slow, agonizing cycles — with Blot Ungachaka. Just before the last cycle ended, Dzhera finally managed to pull Tak free, and he, in revenge, planted a baby snaggletooth beside Blot.

Even now, Tak sometimes sensed particles of Ungachaka's essence — and of Dzhera's — lingering inside him. It was like the ache of a splinter driven deep beneath the skin: one you can neither find nor be rid of. The fragments of foreign souls announced themselves as an itching restlessness, sudden disorientation, and the uncanny sense of no longer being in your own body. Thankfully, at least, such episodes came only rarely.

Tak never spoke of it to Dzhera, let alone to Blot, though he hoped the fragments of his essence hadn't caused them any particular trouble. Then again, it would have served Blot right to endure those unpleasant sensations more keenly — and more often. He had, of course, paid for everything in full with his brief sojourn in an animal's body, yet Tak

doubted even that would stop him from trying once more to steal his power.

Tak visited only one altar — the very first, the one the Pupununu had raised. Reaching it was no small undertaking. The sanctuary sat atop a slab of land torn from the upper valley, marooned in the middle of an abyss. A rickety rope bridge, lost in the mists, offered the only way across, and it was better not to wonder how old that bridge might be.

Tak felt a special bond with this place. It was from here that he had first journeyed to the realm of the Juju, and it was here, fourteen years ago, that Dzhibolba had found him. He guessed his parents would rather have handed him straight to the Chief than expose their son to the peril of being torn apart by birds or of starving to death. But his mother was a Juju, and she could hardly have simply walked into the village and announced: “Here, this is my son, by one of your men. By the way, my ex-fiancé, the Dark Juju, killed him, and now he means to slaughter all the rest of you as well. Oh, and I have no idea what this child will grow up to be, but clearly nothing good. And now I must run and save my own skin — have a nice life!”

Tak didn’t blame his parents. And yet at times, looking at Dzhera and Kiko, he would ask himself: did they realize that he was the reason they had never known real families?

The main altar of Juju slowly surfaced from the damp fog — a round island adrift in a white void. The enormous stone head of the first chief, whose name no one remembered anymore, towered over the central circle of the sanctuary. His powerful fingers, so smothered in moss and ivy as to be barely noticeable, bore up the altar platform itself.

No matter where you stood on the altar, it seemed his eyes were staring straight at you. Perhaps crystals — or even glass — had once

been set into the stone sockets, but they lay empty now; even so, that did nothing to shake the feeling of being watched. As was proper, his head was crowned with a sura, which on the statue looked like flat boards driven into the skull, cracked and worn down by the winds. If you looked hard enough, you could even make out the tribal markings beside the broad nose and along the cheekbones. The sun symbol on the forehead, meanwhile, was still perfectly visible without any effort at all.

Such was the first chief of Pupununu. Lost in the fog, blotched green with moss, gazing blindly ahead from beneath his beetling brows. Tak was almost certain that, where temper was concerned, he was in no way inferior to the current leader.

But the first chief was not alone. Around the central platform, ten stone heads of the chiefs who had come after him jutted out of the ground, all facing the fog, buried up to their noses. They bore a certain resemblance to the living stone heads that guarded the main entrance to the shamans' house, yet Tak had never once heard these chiefs speak or betray any other sign of life. Then again, just try holding a conversation with a mouth full of earth.

On the reverse side, within the circle, the heads had been polished smooth as menhirs and were crowned with five images, each appearing twice. A dragonfly, an antelope, a scorpion. The strange four-legged creature with its long neck and the round nut with a cap were unlike anything the people knew — clearly something from Juju's realm.

The bridge creaked beneath every step, and the wooden planks, damp with fog, were a little slippery. Dzhera and Tak held fast to the rope railings, Kiko walking close at their side. They went in silence, and in the white emptiness nothing could be heard but their hollow footfalls on the wood and the low groan of the bridge. At the end of the path, two enormous wooden "horns" loomed out of the fog, their

curved tips inclining toward one another — the emblems of the Pupununu tribe, shaped much like their tattoos. Half-arches such as these guarded both the main entrance to the village and the way to the altar, and a smaller version of the same figure even graced the balcony of the supreme House. They warded off evil spirits and kept nerbils at bay.

The altar always brought Tak peace, and he knew the place like the back of his hand. His feet had long since learned the carved spiral at the circle's center, and the ancient chief felt like an old acquaintance. The brooding menhirs ringing the platform no longer unsettled him with their unfathomable images. And his magic could sense the mana gathered here — and it liked that.

Tak stepped out onto the center of the altar and drew a deep breath. Here, more than anywhere else, he felt that he belonged. The stones beneath his feet, worn smooth by his predecessors, bound him to all those who had stood on them before. And each time he came to this place, he proved anew—to the tribe, to Juju, and to himself—that he had the right to be here. This was his work. This was his destiny. The shaman called the spirit he needed to him with a thought and tapped the pommel of his staff against the stone. The spiral beneath his feet answered with a faint flare of violet light, then went dark again at once. Without the magic crystal, ordinary folk had to work up a sweat merely to invite Juju—but none of that applied to Tak. The whole tribe ought to be oh-so-grateful to him for that, yet would they ever show it? They took it for granted, as if to say: at last they had found some use for the foundling.

He tightened his grip on the staff, watching the air around him so as not to miss the first signs of the spirit's coming. Mana prickled at his fingertips and temples. His soul, more at home in the spirit world than in flesh, fluttered restlessly inside its human shell, yearning for the

meeting with Juju—but Tak stood calm, betraying none of the turmoil within. He was the people's shaman. He was their brother. And he would never turn his back on them.

The spirit he had summoned still did not appear, and the wait gave Tak time to grow nervous—what if the Jujus had turned away from the people, and what if they were to blame for the nameless nightmare that had been raging across the world since morning?

"He isn't coming?" Dzhera whispered at his back, and Tak hushed her.

Dzhera and Kiko stood a little apart from him. Tak had long since noticed that his friends did not share his ease at the altar. Was it that not a drop of Juju blood flowed in their veins, or that princesses and common folk alike seldom had any need to visit altars?

At last a radiant violet cloud flared up before the friends, and out of it, slowly, stepped a young woman in a long silvery gown. At first glance, Luna Juju might have passed for human. Tall and supple, she could have been the queen of one of the tribes — the kind of queen who could afford beautiful clothing never meant for work, and whose hands would never touch an axe or a bow. Her skin was a delicate pink tinged with blue, her hair shimmered lilac, and tiny stars seemed to swirl within her violet eyes. Human and Juju alike — all could behold her beauty.

"Tak," she said with a tender smile, gazing at him as though her own son stood before her. Then her gaze turned to Dzhera and Kiko, who stood behind him. "To what do I owe such a visit?"

Her voice was always so gentle that one could never guess what she truly felt or thought. Yet the fragility and softness of this spirit were dangerously deceptive. Tak knew that she had only to let out a giggle — and with it wipe out his entire tribe.

“I greet you, Luna Juju. Forgive me for disturbing you, but I would not have called without cause. Something very strange began among us this very morning…”

Luna paid Tak no further heed. Without warning she drifted over to Kiko and Dzhera, and the two cautiously raised their eyes to her. As a rule, spirits disdained conversing with mortals, preferring to deal only with intermediaries — the shamans. Yet certain Juju had already grown used to Tak’s company and would even exchange friendly words with Kiko and Dzhera.

But not Luna.

“What is it you seek?” she asked Kiko, drawing out each word, and he, defying every custom, met the spirit’s gaze straight on. “Whatever it is, you will not find it on Pupununu — that much is certain. Your road leads to the raki-fanakenga. But not soon. Not this time.”

Kiko’s lips parted slightly.

“What? What do you mean?”

But Luna had already turned away from him and was now regarding Dzhera. She, too, did not fling herself to the ground as custom demanded of people, for Dzhera had never bowed the knee to anyone in her life. Unlike Kiko, however, she did not stare brazenly at the Juju; she dipped her head a little and frowned, abashed by this unlooked-for attention.

“The chief’s daughter, then? Hmm…” Luna drew the tips of her pink fingers along her chin. “My Fauna is something like you… Not in fate, perhaps, but in character.”

“Luna! We have an important question for you!” Tak cried out in despair. If his guardian had suddenly taken it into her head to become better acquainted with his friends, she could scarcely have chosen a worse moment for it. “Who could have slaughtered the animals for no

reason whatsoever — and who could have bested a sorcerer as mighty as Tleylok? Is there such a—“””

“Tleylok?” The Juju Luna whipped round to face him. “He was killed? By whom?”

Tak drew another breath, patiently reminding himself that it was a very bad idea to be rude to a Juju.

“That’s exactly what we wanted to find out! Some animal killed two rhinos and a moa in the night and simply left them lying there, uneaten. And then we found Tleylok. Someone had… scratched him very badly. At least, that’s what it looks like. He barely survived.”

Luna Juju folded her arms across her chest with unhurried grace, and her thin brows sank a fraction. Her silver dress shimmered like starlight reflected on water.

“So you summoned me, the protector of Pupununu, because a predatory beast has appeared in the jungle?”

Put that way, of course, it hardly sounded like reason enough for a summoning…

“Yes… no… not exactly. It’s just that…”

“Nothing like that has ever lived in the jungle, Dzhera blurted, unable to hold back.” Ordinary animals don’t kill simply for the sake of killing. And I doubt an ordinary animal could have bested Tleylok.

Luna Juju gave her a measuring look, and the warmth and friendliness had gone out of her eyes. Tak nearly panicked with fear for his friend.

“You are the chief’s daughter, but I never gave you leave to speak, she remarked in a voice soft and low, and turned back to Tak.” Tleylok has only himself to blame. He is mired too deeply in dark magic. I wouldn’t be in the least surprised if he had set the evil spirit upon the beast himself. Did that never occur to you? And besides, — she seemed to be tiring of the conversation, — if an animal is to blame for it all,

why didn't you summon Fauna? — Luna slowly veiled her beautiful eyes with their pink lids, watching Tak closely. — Just don't tell me you've been avoiding her.

Tak blinked in astonishment. Avoid Fauna? What had made her think that? True, he hardly knew this Juju, but in the past, Juju had helped him and his sister a great deal. Flora he knew far better, though he hadn't been in touch with her lately either. There had been no reason to — and thank the stars for that, really.

"Of course I'm not avoiding her. I just thought…"

"I've said all I had to say," Luna cut him off, and a purple cloud began to envelop her, lifting her slightly above the ground. "I see nothing in your words that calls for my aid. Be more careful, Tak, and don't trouble the spirits without cause. If the beast appears again, call for Fauna. If she agrees."

Juju vanished in a flash of snow-white light, and all three shielded their eyes. When they opened them again, all that remained were the last silvery stars, fading from the air.

All the way from the altar back to the village, Dzhera gave him no peace. More than once, Tak had regretted bringing his friends along to meet the spirit. Had he spoken with Luna alone, perhaps she would have listened and understood how grave the matter was. Since time immemorial, people had grated on Juju's nerves, and they, for their part, could hardly abide him. Yet Tak felt calmer whenever Dzhera and Kiko came to the altar with him — as though, this way, they were being initiated, little by little, into his world, and the bonds of their friendship were growing ever stronger. As though, if they stopped visiting the spirits as often as he did, they would in time come to fear and be wary of their friend, just as the rest of their tribesmen already did. Tak rejoiced every time they went to the altar with him, even if it meant the spirits did not always consent to help him on that account.

“Just wonderful,” Dzhera was grumbling just then, swatting aside the leaves of the bushes that crowded the path on either side. — Some monster has turned up in the jungle, one that tore a couple of rhinos apart in a single night and very nearly killed Tleylok, whom no one had ever managed to bring down before this day…

“Nobody had ever even tried to kill him…”

“…Juju says he has no intention of doing anything about it, and that if we need help, we should call on his daughter, who can barely manage her own duties as it is…”

“But Fauna…”

“…which most likely means that by the end of this moon our tribe will be done for” there’s your news. Oh, wait — I’ve just remembered something else. The only person who can stand up to the creature at all has started sleepwalking, and something tells me the monster will finish him off next. There — now that really is everything.

Tak sighed. There was no arguing with Dzhera—least of all now, with fear gnawing at her. Still, if they hoped to protect the tribe and uncover what manner of unheard-of monster had appeared in the valley, then Luna’s words were worth heeding. Fauna Juju was the very spirit of nature; after all, who could know everything about animals, if not her?

“We should have told her about your nighttime wanderings, brother,” Kiko suddenly remembered. “Perhaps she could at least have helped with that.”

Tak waved a hand in irritation.

“Enough about that already! What matters now is finding out who attacked Tleylok. And if Dzhibolba’s potion helps him, he can tell us himself.”

“Yeah, that’s like waiting for wild yams,” Dzhera muttered under her breath, but said nothing more.

Yet when they returned to the village, they learned there was nothing to celebrate. Tleylok had improved, but he remained too weak either to speak or to make sense of those around him. Dzhibolba, sick with worry, could not sit still, and Tak—fearing to upset him further—lied that Luna Juju had promised to look after them.

In the village, the men went on raising the wall, toiling under a blazing sun. Zaria had been appointed to supervise them, and she took to the task with relish, sprawled on cushions beneath a canopy, sipping a coconut cocktail. Beside her stood En, wafting cool air over the princess with a great fan, and the warrior Lok, who chattered away to both girls without so much as a pause for breath. His booming voice rang out across the whole village, and Tak, catching the sound, recalled something and set off toward the trio.

"…and after that I hacked my way out of her belly with nothing but a knife, which…"

"Lok!" Tak called out, cutting short yet another of the absurd tales this self-proclaimed hero had been peddling to the poor girls. "You're on watch tonight, aren't you?"

Lok turned around and scowled. It was only for the girls and the Chief that he flashed a smile displaying all thirty of his flawlessly intact teeth. For Tak he reserved just one expression: a snide, crooked little smirk — the smirk of a man who knows full well that he is older, stronger, handsomer, and better in every way.

"What of it?"

Lok threw a wink over his shoulder at the girls. Tall and muscular, he seemed to achieve his splendour without the slightest effort, like a hero straight out of legend. Shoulder-length hair, evenly trimmed and adorned with large striped feathers; a shark-tooth necklace against his powerful chest; a neat loincloth. Together with Zaria, Lok was the crowning glory of the entire tribe — like the tapestries and bright

lanterns brought out for a festival or the arrival of honoured guests, because in everyday life the two of them were good for absolutely nothing.

Tak did his best to ignore the disgruntled tone and the haughty air.

“The wall won’t be finished by nightfall. Take a spear with you, just in case. A real spear — not that feathered stick you’re so fond of waving about.”

Lok squared his shoulders and tilted up his heavy chin. Oh, of course. Here it comes…

“Just look at our little baby Tak,” he said, glancing back at the girls, who immediately dissolved into foolish giggles. “See how frightened he is that some terrible monster will come in the night and carry him off, all warm and snug, straight out of his bed…”

“Lok, this is serious!” Tak barked, his patience wearing thin. Lok was ten years his senior, yet all too often he behaved like a carefree teenager. “We have no idea what manner of beast this is. Maybe it can fly. Maybe it hunts only at night. And if it finished off a couple of rhinos in one go and nearly sent Tleylok to the World of Spirits, it would have no trouble crushing someone like you!”

“Someone like me?” Lok bared his teeth menacingly. But whether it was the drowsy midday heat or the presence of the women, he quickly slipped back into his languid air, with no further intention of picking a fight. “Calm down already, squirt. Monster or whoever it is, Lok can handle it.”

Tak ached to ask when Lok had last managed to handle anything—let alone real monsters and wild beasts—but he knew the question would get him nowhere. His only task was to warn this fool, not to be drawn into yet another pointless argument with him.

“Well, then I can rest easy,” he began in a conciliatory tone, raising his hands, palms forward. “The whole village can rest easy,” he added,

his gaze shifting to Zarya and En, “for our sleep is guarded by the gallant Lok, armed with nothing but his inflated ego. We have nothing to fear!”

Tak turned to go, but before he could take a single step, the warrior called after him:

“Then perhaps our mighty shaman would consent to join Lok on watch? To protect the poor fellow with all that incredible power. Huh?”

The girls giggled again, and Tak swore inwardly. As if he would ever again volunteer to look after the hide of that self-absorbed coward…

“Fine,” he said curtly over his shoulder. “I’ll come.”

The night watch was just what he needed, on top of everything else.

Evening arrived, as it always did, sooner than expected. In a way, though, Tak was even glad to be leaving the house: spending the night under the same roof as the dying Tleylok was far from appealing, especially with the chance that the sleepwalking fit might return tonight. Perhaps it was no bad thing, then, that this evening’s watch had fallen to him. True, it would have been far better to share it with anyone but Lok.

Like it or not, life kept throwing the shaman and the warrior together. Dzhibolba had raised them side by side, and even after Lok moved into the communal house with the other unmarried men, the shaman and the Chief himself deemed it a good deed to send the two of them out on missions together. As if no one else in the tribe could accompany Tak to restore the Lesser Altar — or as if none but Tak could help the warrior track down the spirits that had desecrated the graves. No one else would do. The two had become all but blood brothers, and, as happens with brothers, they simply could not be around each other without quarreling.

Tak could partly understand Lok. Raised as the mighty warrior of prophecy, Lok had been meant to save the tribe and become a hero. But the people had been wrong. They — and Lok himself — had to admit that the real hero had turned out to be Tak, with his magic. It was Tak who saved the village from Tleylok, Tak who restored the warrior's human form, Tak who followed him into the Spirit World. Anyone would have gone mad in Lok's place.

Dzhibolba, it seemed, hadn't even noticed his nephew's departure. He sat for hours at Tleylok's side or pored over scrolls, trying to work out what more he could do for the poor soul. Tak was almost touched — and surprised — by this unexpected concern of his uncle's for a man who had spent so many years dreaming of doing away with his former tribe. In Dzhibolba's place, the sorcerer wouldn't have lifted a finger; that much was certain.

By the platform in the heart of the village, no one remained in sight; people were putting out the lights in their homes and wishing one another good night. Passing the High House, Tak glanced out of habit at the small annex beside the balcony, but the window of Dzhera's room was dark, not a single candle burning.

Near the edge of the village rose an unfinished wall. Not far from it, Lok sat on a log. A blue cloak draped over his shoulders, he had already lit a campfire and was now deep in conversation with a guard who was headed for the Chieftain's house. The warrior's spear lay on the ground — which meant he had heard Tak after all, and that alone was a victory.

"It's going to be a long night," Tak said, coming up to the men and giving the guard a nod. "Hey, Otakon — looks like I've come just in time to save you from Lok?"

He merely gave a good-natured snort, clapped the warrior on the shoulder in farewell, and trudged off toward the House. The rules

forbade guards to speak while wearing their masks, and Tak knew firsthand how men changed once they took up this post. In the morning, a man would chat with you in a friendly way and share your breakfast, but by evening of that same day, once the wooden mask was on, he would silently bar your way with his spear, never letting you come near the High House.

“So you finally showed up.”

By the light of the fire, Tak saw Lok’s face twist into a grimace. No question about it: he had been hoping the shaman wouldn’t come. For a moment, Tak thought it might be better to slip back to his own spot and drift quietly off to sleep — but instead he lowered himself onto a log beside Lok.

“I told you I’d come.”

All the same, he had volunteered for the watch less for Lok’s sake than for the creature’s. What manner of beast was it? And where was it now? Was it prowling somewhere near the village, drawn by the smell of cooked food? Or had it abandoned the valley long ago? Mulling it over, Tak picked up a slender stick and speared one of the taro fruits he had brought along. As his snack roasted over the flames, he surveyed the wall they had raised. It stood twice the height of a man, crowned with jagged logs. Would this barrier be enough to hold back a monster no one had ever laid eyes on?

For a while, silence prevailed, broken only by the crackle of the fire and the faintest whisper of the trees. A thick darkness settled over the valley; the half moon shone dimly, almost anxiously. Pink Taurua, the evening star, rose into view. The Pupununu slumbered peacefully.

“I know why you’ve come,” Lok began, and Tak tensed despite himself, bracing for Lok to hurl fresh accusations and drive him off. But the warrior only winked at him. — Once we’ve caught this beast, we’ll throw a feast. The chief will sing our praises for keeping the

village safe through this terrible time. People will begin composing legends and songs. I was to have been the sole hero of those stories, but no matter — now you'll appear in them as well. As my squire. What, did you think I wouldn't figure out why you'd invited yourself along?

Tak nearly smiled at him. He knew Lok wasn't truly wicked. A bit dim-witted and stubborn at times, sure, but he simply didn't know how to stay angry for long.

In the darkness, the amber embers of the fire winked and seemed to shift, forever trading places with one another. Crimson veins glowed in the blackened wood. Tak prodded the logs with his stick, and a bright spray of golden sparks leapt up. The sweet aroma of roasted taro drifted through the air.

Was the unseen creature afraid of fire? Would it try to slip into the village tonight? Tak remembered the counsel of Luna the Juju. Perhaps she was right, and he ought to seek out Fauna, patroness of beasts and birds.

His mind went back to the last time he had seen this Juju. Fauna had not been nearly as warm and affectionate toward him as her sister Flora. Her voice was haughty, and barbs and spiteful little jokes kept spilling from her tongue. She loved to frighten people, too, transforming from a pretty girl into a huge winged fox. Yet despite her prickly nature, she never refused Tak when he came to her for help—and he had no doubt she would lend her aid again if he told her of his trouble. Still, better not to rush. Luna had surely told her daughters why he had summoned her, and by now the whole Juju realm believed the human tribe was kicking up a fuss and pestering the spirits yet again for no good reason. So what if some animal had killed a couple of healthy rhinos? So what if it had all but finished off the mighty Tleylok? What did the spirits care if every last one of the Pupununu was wiped out

before this week was out, just as Dzhera had warned? If humans vanished, the spirits would certainly be no worse off.

Tak's gaze drifted to his house, dimly visible beyond the hillock, and he sighed in spite of himself. Would Dzhibolba get any decent sleep tonight, or would he lie at Tleylok's bedside without so much as closing his eyes the whole night through?

Apparently Lok had noticed where his thoughts had strayed, for he muttered under his breath, prodding the fire with a stick:

"He'd be better off dead and done with it — may the nerbils devour his soul. Everyone would be glad of it."

"I never took Dzhibolba for a man still so devoted to him," Tak murmured, glancing back at Lok.

Orange gleams played across the warrior's long face, lending him the look of a spirit. The shadows about his eyes, nose, and hair shifted and wove themselves among the dark triangles tattooed on his cheekbones, as though Lok were striving to speak without parting his lips. A chill of unease crept over Tak, and he turned away once more toward his house.

"The old man has a generous heart," the warrior rasped from beside him. "And Tleylok... well... such hopes were pinned on him, you know. Dzhibolba was proud of him. After all, he was the one who taught the boy everything he knew."

"Just as he did you and me."

Tak struggled to drive the distant memories from his mind. This time Tleylok was no enemy of theirs. He had himself fallen victim to someone mightier and more terrible still.

"Ugh, what a dull spear — should've brought my banjo along," Lok yawned, squirming about on the log in search of a more comfortable perch. "Now that would have been fun! But sitting in silence, or

prattling on about this, that, and the other like a pack of half-dead shamans — oh no, that's not for Lok..."

Tak was on the point of teasing him when a sound reached his ears — half moan, half sigh. He straightened at once, listening hard, his breath caught in his throat. Lok carried on as though nothing had happened:

"Just when we..."

"Shh!" Tak hissed, raising his hand.

For several long moments an utter, deathly silence settled over the clearing, as if one's ears had been stopped with water. Then, from somewhere off to the side, came a stifled cry.

Tak sprang to his feet and was on the verge of bolting for his own house when he suddenly noticed Otacon, spear at the ready, hurrying toward the farthest annex of the Chief's House.

Dzhera!

A painful tightness seized Tak's chest, and he raced toward it, leaving the bewildered Lok behind. Every trace of weariness had vanished; his drowsiness had been knocked clean out of him as though with a club.

Otacon stood on the threshold, hesitating before the door of the younger princess's dwelling. Tak nearly bowled him over as he burst inside. By rights, the guard should have run him through for that, but just then it was the last thing on Tak's mind.

Dzhera's house lay shrouded in thick gloom; blue starlight seeped through the woven mesh of the window. Ornaments dangled from the ceiling — shells strung on threads, feathers, dried flowers — swaying gently, and Tak lowered his head so as not to brush against them. In the corner, beneath the second window, a mat had been spread out with pillows laid upon it, and among them slept Dzhera. Beside her fretted

the pet she and Tak shared — Nevis the nosalik. He squeaked softly, scratched at the floor with his tiny claws, and snorted.

At first, Tak assumed his friend had simply fallen into a deep sleep. Yet her breathing came quick and shallow, the way it does in nightmares, and she shifted restlessly upon her soft bed, hair strewn across the pillows. Had something happened to her? Might she have hurt herself while sleeping? Without a second thought, Tak touched the crystal atop his staff, and a pair of luminous orbs burst forth from the magic stone. Like golden fireflies, they hovered in the air above the princess, and by their light Tak could make out what had befallen her.

Thank Juju — she was clad in a nightgown woven from the finest, softest veins of hala leaves; to slip into such a garment, surely, must feel like wrapping oneself in a cloud. Tak was studying Dzhera's furrowed brow, her trembling eyelids, when he heard a muffled muttering at the door. Otakon was straining every means to catch his attention without breaking the rule. The indistinct voice of Lok could be heard as well, demanding to know what was going on. But Tak had no time for them now. With one hand, without looking, he stroked the agitated Nevis; with the other, he lightly touched his friend's shoulder. Could it be merely a nightmare, nothing more?

"Dzhera!" Tak shook her gently, resolved to rouse her from the dream. "Dzhera, wake up!"

Her whole body jerked suddenly, and Tak snatched his hand back. But the princess's eyes never opened; she only moaned, her lips sealed shut. And upon her cheek a wound was spreading of its own accord, as though a knife were being drawn from within the flesh. Dark trickles of blood seeped onto the pillows.

Tak's hands went cold, and his breath caught in his throat. But he quickly mastered himself and bent anxiously over his friend.

“Dzhera!” He shook her by the shoulders, careful not to cause her further pain. “Dzhera, wake up! Wake up!”

It was useless. Some unseen force seemed to be holding her eyes shut, refusing to let her soul return from the Realm of Dreams to the waking world. Dzhera breathed heavily, frowned, and stirred feebly in her friend’s arms, but she was, without question, fast asleep. Frightened and unsure what best to do in his panic, Tak released her, snatched the staff from his back, and without a moment’s hesitation aimed the crystal at his friend.

An orange light flared, there was a sharp crack, and Dzhera shot upright in bed, her eyes flying wide open. Terror and the discharge of magic left her trembling, her hands shaking uncontrollably, her chattering teeth almost audible. Tak tried to grasp her wrists to calm her, but the princess recoiled from him in horror.

“Hush, hush, it’s me. It’s all right—you’re home.”

Dzhera stared, as if mesmerized, at the floating lights drifting before her face. Her breathing gradually steadied, though blood still trickled slowly down her neck. Tak swallowed hard, striving to conceal his alarm.

“Does it hurt?”

The princess turned her gaze to him, but before she could so much as open her mouth, a roar thundered through the entire hut:

“In the name of all the Juju, will you explain what is going on here?!”

Lok stood in the doorway, eyes round with shock. At the sound of his voice, Dzhera flinched toward her friend in fright, nearly leaping into his lap. He had no choice but to hold her and soothe her—though stars bear witness to how awkward and afraid he felt.

And the nightgown truly did prove wonderfully soft...

When the Chieftain’s heavy footsteps echoed by the little house, and moments later he and Zaria appeared in the doorway, Tak decided that no finer ending to this day could possibly have been imagined.

Chapter 3

In the beginning, the island was home only to slippery snakes — they had always lived there — and to chattering parrots. The Juju had made them when they first arrived, so that the place would not feel too dull. Only later did the first people appear, and the great spirits forgot what rest meant... Yes, yes, I mean you. Sit still and stop squirming.

Flora, daughter of the Moon and beloved of the Juju, laid out a splendid garden and planted flowers of every conceivable color and fruit trees of every imaginable taste. It was she who draped the trees with trailing vines, coaxed the fue up their trunks, and spread soft moss beneath the feet. It was she who raised taro and mei, bananas and oranges. Now the Juju could wander at their leisure, breathing in sweet fragrances, feasting their eyes on lovely sights, and satisfying their hunger with ripe fruit. Without the gifts of beautiful Flora, daughter of the Moon, we would not last a single day.

But the cunning Fauna, the Moon’s second daughter and equally beloved of the Juju, burned with envy that everyone sang the praises of her dear sister. She went to the mighty Beetle of the Juju, and he unleashed mosquitoes and flies and every manner of vermin into this perfect world, creatures meant to lay waste to the beautiful flowers and fruits. Yet far-sighted Flora struck a bargain with the insects, commanding them to pollinate her garden rather than ravage it. True, the wretched creatures did torment the people — but as you can well imagine, the Juju cared nothing for that.

Then the desperate Fauna fashioned rhinoceroses out of stones and mud, beasts meant to trample her sister’s garden underfoot. And once again Flora came to terms with the animals: from that day on, they could trample only the people’s crops, while in the jungle they were

left to graze on grass and wallow to their hearts' content in the mud puddles.

Headstrong Fauna made one last attempt to spite her sister. Having spied on the first people, who had only just emerged from Moana and were not yet dry, she fashioned monkeys out of clay and sent them to tear down the sweet fruits and strip away the leaves. At the sight of this, Flora went to her wise mother for counsel.

"When a fern frond withers, another springs up in its place," Luna said with a smile to Juju. — However many fruits and leaves those monkeys pluck, more will grow in their stead — bigger, finer, and more beautiful than before. Your garden will never lie empty.

At last the sisters made peace. Fauna's creatures fed on fruit and grass, and in return carried seeds and pollinated the blossoms. Flora's plants grew larger, taller, lovelier, and very soon they had spread across the whole island.

And then people came to these shores… Well, you know the rest of it. Now go to sleep.

The only consolation was that no one pestered her with questions. Dzhibolba bathed the wound in an infusion of white lily petals, laid a sticky poultice of cattail leaves over it, and left Dzhera in peace. She had at last changed back into her usual clothes, doing her best not to dwell on how half the tribe, led by Tak, had seen her in her nightshirt — though that was still better than if she had chosen to sleep naked tonight.

Now she sat on her father's footstool, watching the unexpected gathering in the reception hall of their House. Her father, Zaria, Tak, Dzhibolba, Otakon, and Lok. She could not imagine what the last of them was doing there.

Though it was the dead of night, the hall blazed with light. Four torches on stands had been brought in, and from the harsh, leaping

shadows they cast upon the lofty walls, Dzhera felt a queasy unease. It was a strange sensation, as though the shadows themselves were alive and plotting harm against them.

Father was in a fury. He threatened to cast Tak out of the tribe, then Otacon, then the two of them together. Then, conceding that this was perhaps not the wisest course, he set about devising some other punishment for the poor wretches. He would not even listen to what the shaman's assistant was trying to explain.

"The wound appeared in her sleep, all on its own! I've never seen anything like it before. What if the same thing has happened to someone else in the tribe?"

"Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes!" the Chief snarled, glaring at him with malice. "Magic cannot be the cause of everything in the world. You wounded my daughter!"

Lok watched from the sidelines, now and then turning toward Zaria and raising his eyebrows meaningfully, as if to show that his former partner had taken leave of his senses. Otacon, who for some reason had put his mask back on, stood in silence against the wall. Evidently he still feared banishment, and so tried to keep from drawing any attention to himself.

"Dzhibolba!" Tak pleaded, searching desperately for support from anyone at all. "Surely you don't believe I did this? Never in my life have I laid a hand on Dzhera! It was someone from her dream! Some... night spirit, I don't know what."

Dzhera realized she had to step forward and tell them herself what had happened. Then they would believe Tak.

But she did nothing. Her jaw seemed frozen; she couldn't bring herself to open her mouth and speak. She was afraid that if she told them about her nightmarish dream, it would instantly become real—would step out of the shadow and take on flesh.

“Chief, Dzhibolba finally spoke up, and only then did the father stop and turn to look at him.” I believe my nephew is right. If he hadn’t woken Dzhera, things might have ended far worse.

“Yes, indeed—my daughter would have slept peacefully through the night. Not to mention the way he humiliated her before half the tribe!”

It really was time to step in, it seemed. Even if that creature from the nightmare came to life at her words, there were people here who would protect her. Dzhera rose to her feet, but no one paid her the slightest attention. She tried to speak, yet the words lodged in her throat like thorns.

“Don’t be such a coward!”

She parted her lips slightly, but didn’t know how to say it.

“Coward!..”

At last, Tak noticed her.

“Dzhera, tell us it isn’t true! Tell us it’s true!”

She swallowed as every face in the gathering turned toward her. A sudden hush fell; only the crackling of the torches broke the silence.

“Father, he’s right, she managed on her second attempt.” I was wounded in my sleep, and if Tak… hadn’t woken me… — her throat tightened. Only when the words had nearly escaped her lips did she realize she might never have woken at all this morning. — We have to wake the whole tribe. Right now. What if this monster crept into someone else’s dream as well?

“Monster?”

Six pairs of green eyes widened, all fixed upon her, and to Dzhera it suddenly seemed she had said something wrong, ridiculous, utterly absurd—as if monsters could not possibly exist.

“Yes, it was an enormous beast… how can I put it into words… It had claws, she said, fumbling over her words.” It… I dreamed it

attacked me in the jungle, and I couldn't run away, and it… — she brushed her hand lightly against her cheek — it wounded me. Then it knocked me down, and… I woke up.

She could hardly believe she had confessed the dream aloud to them — just a dream, the kind a person has every night. Even setting aside that horrifying wound, which had materialized in real life, the nightmare had been far too heavy, disturbing, and vivid. Although people often confuse dreams with reality, it had always seemed to Dzhera that some part of the soul somehow knows the difference. But this time something deeply strange was happening. She hadn't even been able to wake without the aid of magic.

"I knew it!" Lok abruptly stepped forward, and all eyes turned to him. — I knew from the very start that the Juju were behind all this!

Dzhibolba scowled, and even his father crossed his arms in displeasure. It was no secret that Lok despised the Juju, and he cared nothing for whether they were powerful spirits or something else entirely. He was ready to blame them for anything — from a rotten mango at breakfast to the appearance of a monster in people's dreams. If such a place existed in the world where no spirits dwelled, Dzhera was certain Lok would have fled to it long ago.

"Do not dare speak that way about the Juju!" Dzhibolba said furiously. — Luna will help us deal with this. She will not allow Pupununu to perish.

"She already is! the warrior retorted boldly." The Princess nearly died, and where is she? Where is your Luna? She slumbers and dreams of ridding herself of the lot of us.

"Lok!"

But Lok wasted no chance to vent his displeasure in full. Paying no heed to his old mentor, he launched into a furious tirade against Juju and what they had done to him. In doing so, he instantly forgot about

Dzhera and rounded on the warrior instead. His brow darkened, and the tribal pattern across the bridge of his nose contracted into a razor-thin line. It was impossible to tell what he meant to do — hurl himself at Lok with his fists, or incinerate him with that very “cursed” magic of Juju.

Dzhera, wasting no time, went to her father and tugged insistently at his arm. While the rest of them stood about bickering over all manner of nonsense, assigning blame to anyone and everyone, the dreadful beast might just as easily slip into someone else’s dreams.

“Dad, we have to wake everyone right now! That creature could hurt someone else” why can’t you see that?

He lowered his gaze to her, and Dzhera saw how his eyes darkened as he looked once more at her wound. Her father had shielded her from the perilous jungle and from her elder sister’s attacks — he could protect her from everything, except anything that touched Juju. And from the look in his eyes, Dzhera understood that he would do everything in his power to see she never suffered another nightmare.

Her father gave a nod and turned to the quarrelers. At last.

“Silence!” he barked, and every mouth snapped shut at once. — My daughter is right; we must rouse the people. Tak — and you as well, Dzhibolba — I entrust this to you. Have everyone gather in front of my house. Lok, Otacon, prepare more torches and light up the clearing before the House. As for me, I’m off to find something to eat — my stomach is turning from all this nerbilsina!

Lok was none too pleased to have his fiery speech cut short, but he did not protest. As he passed Dzhera, he seemed on the verge of saying something to her, yet Dzhibolba tugged at his arm and hurried him along, leaving him with nothing but the sight of his mouth opening and closing in silence. Dzhera favored him with a brief smile. They would be sure to discuss everything later, once they were left in peace.

Her thoughts turned to Kiko, and she hoped his nightmares had spared him that night. If only the shamans would hurry up and wake everyone…

“You handled that rather well.”

Dzhera turned around. Only she and Zaria remained in the hall. Her sister was sprawled across their father’s throne, legs draped over one armrest, head thrown back against the other. Even roused in the dead of night, she looked flawless: hair carefully combed, face glowing, not a single crease in her dress. The absence of the dori—worn, as it was, in imitation of her suru father—only heightened her charm, as did her faintly drowsy gaze. Catching Dzhera’s eye, Zaria broke into a smile, and Dzhera felt a ripple of unease.

“I can hardly believe you let yourself get scratched for this, but it worked” you fooled Daddy and all the others. “A monster! Wake the whole village!” I never thought you’d go so far. Bravo.

She began to giggle, squeezing her eyes shut and flashing her snow-white teeth. The whole affair seemed to delight her immensely.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Dzhera snapped, wanting the answer just as much as she wanted to face her nightmare again.

“About your date, of course.” Zaria straightened up and leaned on the armrest, her big eyes gleaming. — Did you think I wouldn’t figure it out? I can see right through you, dear. You had a nighttime rendezvous with Tak, and when you were caught, you staged all this, — she waved a hand vaguely, her gloating gaze never leaving her sister. — Stop being such an

airhead. There was nothing like that, and the monster is real. Her sister’s

favorite hobby was putting her in an awkward position, preferably in front of everyone. And the most popular trick was suspecting her of

romantic feelings for a friend. She knew how much this infuriated Dzhera. But today she was too tired

to argue. The endlessly long, strange day had spilled over into an even stranger night. — The monster doesn’t exist, and you

know it. Even Juju can’t wound someone in a dream so that it carries over into waking life. You overdid it a little here, but people believed you anyway. — Zaria stretched luxuriously, arching her slender body. — Be more careful next time. Otakona can’t be bribed, but Kaik will let your shaman pass for a couple of fish. Dzhera didn’t have time to answer

. Her father came down from the second floor into the hall, still chewing something. — My

beauties! Shall we show ourselves to the people? I have a feeling they won’t be too happy right now...

It was a sorry sight. Nearly three dozen sleepy Pupununu, hauled straight from their beds. They blinked against the torchlight, yawned, stretched, and, naturally, muttered their grievances under their breath. Little Tuku was wailing piteously. Dzhera’s eyes sought out Kiko; he stood at the back, inexplicably clutching his banjo. At the sight of him unharmed, a sigh of relief escaped her before she knew it.

The tribe, too, was unharmed. The only trouble was that nobody understood anything, and everyone was angry.

“Just because you have nightmares doesn’t mean you have to rouse the whole village,” croaked old Log the Hermit, glancing from one neighbor to another for backing.

“A little warning would have been nice — then none of us would have gone to bed at all,” grumbled Art, with Blanki’s daughter in his arms.

The herdsman, who never went without his great closed mask, arrived last of all. A single sheep trailed behind him, but the Guy-in-

the-Mask made no move to shoo it away. It would have come as no surprise had he decided to wake the entire flock — just to be safe.

At last his father stepped forward and raised his hands. The people fell silent.

“My dear Pupununu! Something truly strange and dreadful happened this night. Just look at my little Dzhera! A monster from a dream wounded her, and that wound appeared in the waking world. That is why I judged it wise, for all our safety, to wake every one of you…”

Dzhera’s eyes sought out Tak. He and Dzhibolba were standing at the far edge of the clearing, well away from the disgruntled kinsmen they had roused. Dzhibolba kept scanning the crowd as though fearful someone might have been left behind, while Tak rubbed his cheek, still flushed from someone’s blow. Dzhera nearly smiled at the sight of them, though this was hardly a moment for smiling.

“And when can we get back to sleep?” Bruno demanded loudly, scarcely waiting for the Chief to finish his address.

That question was on everyone’s mind just then, and Dzhera glanced toward the shamans again. They had said nothing on the matter.

Her father hesitated, then solemnly stretched out his arm, pointing to the pair at the clearing’s edge.

“Dzhibolba will explain everything to you!”

Dzhera watched the old man exchange a look with Tak and then hurry over to the crowd. Poor Dzhibolba. First that cursed Tleylok had dropped on him like a coconut falling on his head, and now people stood in danger of being injured — or worse — right in their own beds. What could possibly come next?

“Yes, that’s a fair question,” he muttered, taking his place beside the chief — a small, stooped figure next to him, with his spindly little

arms. “I have consulted with my nephew, and this is what I have decided. We shall not all sleep at once. We will divide into pairs and keep watch over one another in turns. If you notice a person in the grip of a bad dream, you must wake them at once. This may not be easy, so do not hesitate to use force. And it will only last a short while, until Tak discovers how to drive the monster out of our dreams. To that end, he is setting off this very moment for the altar of Juju to seek its help.”

The people, at first uneasy with the established order, breathed a sigh of relief at the news. Naturally so. They were certain that whenever anything strange occurred, only Juju could help them.

But Lok, once again, could not remain on the sidelines.

“And what if this is the work of Juju’s own paws?” he burst out hotly, standing at the edge of the clearing beside Otacon. “Perhaps they sent the monster deliberately, to destroy us all! Did that ever cross your mind?”

“There is no monster,” Zaria murmured, barely audibly, her eyes fixed on the warrior.

The people grew wary once more and began exchanging frightened glances, but Dzhibolba shook his head with certainty.

“No, Lok. Luna the Juju will let no harm come to us—remember that. She is our protectress.”

Dzhera caught Tak’s eye. What would happen if the tribe learned that Luna the Juju had refused to help them? What would happen if they discovered that the spirits cared nothing for their fate? What would happen if they were told that their lives now rested in Tak’s hands alone?

Some questions are better left unanswered. Always.

Dzhera feared her father would now watch her closely, but after the assembly he remained with Dzhibolba to help pair up the people, still discussing what had happened. Tak wasted no time in making for the

altar, and Dzhera caught up with him near the edge of the jungle. Kiko never noticed their departure, standing with a group of men who shared the communal dwelling. The antisocial fellow would probably have to join them ahead of schedule.

Great Juju—who would have thought even sleeping came with rules to follow!

“How are you?”

Tak stopped and looked at her. Only the golden-orange glow of the staff, like true flame, lit his face and caught in his eyes. The tattoo around them darkened into a black shadow, lending his gaze a strangely alien quality. Dzhera tried to move closer, but he immediately stepped back.

“I’m perfectly fine.”

She wasn’t lying — the tincture and salve had dulled the stinging pain, and her terror of the monster was slowly dissolving, the way nightmares always do. Yet Tak still watched her warily.

“Perhaps you should…”

“I’m not staying in the village, she cut him off at once. Part of her disliked the thought of being seen as some weak, frightened girl who had better not stray far from daddy. But part of her was glad to see that her friend cared.” I want to hear what Juju has to say about all this too.

“Fauna Juju, Tak clarified.”

And Dzhera understood everything.

He hadn’t meant to take her along because of her wound — he was planning to meet the spirit alone.

A mixture of hurt and embarrassment stirred in her chest at once, sharp as a burning thorn. Of course, Dzhera knew that Tak was well acquainted with the daughters of the Moon, and that they had helped him before — helped with things against which any ordinary person

would have been helpless. And, of course, who knew animals better than Fauna? Even those that lived in dreams.

“I want to come too, Dzhera repeated, though no longer so confidently.”

She had no wish to feel like a fifth wheel at this meeting, yet neither did she want to linger in the village, picturing Tak trading sweet nothings with Fauna. Not that she was jealous — it was simply an unpleasant truth that she could never help a friend the way Juju did.

Dzhera had expected Tak to protest and talk her out of it, but to her surprise he relented at once.

“All right. But you’ll describe that animal to Fauna in detail, understand?”

Without waiting for her answer, he hurried off into the jungle, and Dzhera scrambled after him. Strange — she didn’t feel the least bit sleepy, and even her fear of the jungle after dark had melted away. It was as though they had been swept up once more in one of those mad escapades where the fate of the whole tribe — or merely their own hides — hung in the balance before their kinsfolk’s wrath. When there was no time to weigh what they were doing, or to wonder whether it might be dangerous, when all they could do was plunge headlong into the abyss, into the jungle, into Juju’s domain, untangling fresh troubles on the fly. Those adventures were their air, their manna. And Dzhera would have given anything for this affair to prove just such an adventure. Deadly perilous and utterly terrifying, yet with no one truly harmed — scratches and bruises would heal, a couple of wrecked huts would be rebuilt, Father would deliver a stern lecture and forbid them ever to do it again, and they wouldn’t even bother to listen...

They had been through this a thousand times. This would be the thousand and first.

“What did it actually look like?” Tak asked as Dzhera caught up with him. — You got a good look at it, didn’t you?

She frowned. Unlike ordinary dreams, whose details tend to fade upon waking, she remembered every moment of this nightmare with perfect clarity. And it disturbed her to carry those details — the residue of her nightmare — into the waking world.

“Yes... something like that. It was dark, and... and it was moving so fast... Anyway, I doubt my description will be much use.”

“And yet?”

Dzhera thought for a few more seconds. Tak glanced at her sideways, unable to contain his curiosity.

“It looked like an antelope. A white antelope, except it had claws. I know how strange that sounds...”

“Who, pray tell, is more accustomed to strangeness than I am?” Tak chuckled. — A white antelope with claws is perfectly ordinary. Anything else?

Dzhera preferred not to dwell on how Tak was connected to Juju’s realm. Aside from the fact that he carried a magic staff that could hurl you into another world — or simply toss you into a tree, turn you into a sheep or a stone statue — he seemed unremarkable. Normal. And she wanted him to be “normal” as often as possible.

“It was very dark,” she repeated, — and cold, though it was probably a jungle. The creature appeared out of nowhere — it might have dropped from a tree — and lunged at me at once. I tried to run, but it was so fast.

Dzhera was certain that before this, she had dreamed of something entirely different. But the harder she tried to recall that first part of the dream, the further it slipped away, sinking somewhere into the depths of her memory and vanishing there forever.

“I hope Fauna will be able to identify this creature, Tak said, holding a heavy monstera leaf above their heads, its ragged tendrils splayed out menacingly. —And I hope she can help us. After what Luna said... I don’t know what’s come over Juju. What could they possibly be angry with us about?”

Dzhera said nothing, knowing Tak could work it out for himself. Juju had been displeased ever since the first human climbed ashore from Moana. One only had to recall the legends to understand why the guardian raged against the tribe of men.

But that was all so very long ago. Luna was bound to protect their people for the next six decades — that was the agreement. So why was she in no hurry to come to their aid?

“I don’t know what’s on their mind, Dzhera admitted, fighting the urge to rest a hand on Tak’s shoulder as they walked, —but I’m certain it isn’t about you.”

“Yes, one can only hope. He sighed and gave her a faint smile, glancing her way. —Let’s hurry, before the tribe stumbles into fresh trouble.”

Dzhera had visited Juju’s altar at night only once before — on the very first occasion she found herself here. On Tak’s last birthday, Dzhibolba had given him a pink crystal and a map of the island, which the two of them had discovered together thirteen years ago. Armed with these “gifts,” he, Dzhera, and Kiko combed the jungle up and down, trying to work out what Tak’s parents had meant to show him and where they had intended to lead him. It was only at night that they found the altar. One of them — whether Tak or, in the end, Kiko — spotted a rope bridge stretching across an abyss. It seemed sturdy enough, and they crossed to the far bank, overgrown with dense trees and tangled bushes. On the verge of giving up their search entirely,

they only by a miracle resisted turning back, pushed through the thickets, and emerged onto the altar.

Back then, the sanctuary had struck Dzhera as the most unsettling place she had ever visited — even creepier than the cemetery. She sensed she had no right to be there: both the ancient chieftain and the ancient menhirs resented her presence, and the magic of the place was so potent that even she could feel it. Dzhera had hoped never to end up there again, yet she grew accustomed to the altar surprisingly quickly — in broad daylight it no longer seemed so sinister. Merely an old chunk of stone rising out of the middle of the void.

But today the old dread came flooding back. The nighttime altar seemed alien and hostile, plainly resentful of uninvited guests. The air hung with cold dampness; millipedes and lizards stirred in the crevices, and the stone beneath her bare feet was faintly sticky. Dzhera's heart quickened as she glanced about and realized that the light of moon and stars lent an eerie glow to the carvings on the menhirs. As though some rite had already been performed here — something ancient, magical, and most likely perilous.

"Tak," she whispered, but her companion did not hear.

Nothing appeared to trouble him in the slightest; he strode calmly to the center of the altar and waved his staff. Dzhera had just enough time to cast a glance at the suspension bridge vanishing into the darkness and to wonder whether the mysterious monster might be lurking somewhere nearby at that very moment. In the real world.

Two little lights flared at the heart of the platform — one green, one orange. They swirled briefly before Tak, and from them simultaneously fluttered Juju.

They looked remarkably like ordinary girls, save that one had skin the green of tree moss, while the other's gleamed golden as flame. Their clothes were quite human as well — simple tops and skirts of

tapa, no ornaments, no bright hues. Only, amid Flora's green, vine-like tresses, a diadem woven of grass could be seen. How much that recalled Zaria — a pointless display of rank, as if to ensure no one ever forgot who she was.

And although Tak had only come to speak with Fauna, her sister was not slow to appear either. That was Zarya for you—always poking her nose in where it didn't belong. Dzhera even wondered whether these two girls from such different worlds could ever get along. She herself probably resembled Fauna in some ways, yet she strongly doubted they could ever have been friends.

No sooner had Flora appeared than she began to wail, and her mouth kept running for the next several minutes without pause. Dzhera nearly groaned aloud. She had barely escaped one chatterbox in the village, only to run straight into another at the altar. At least, thank goodness, the place no longer looked so eerie.

"Oh, Tak! How wonderful that you've come! Luna Juju told us you had summoned her, and told us about your trouble. At first we couldn't work out what sort of animal it was, and Fauna was already on the verge of coming to see you…"

"Nothing of the sort! the second Juju snapped at once." You asked me to do it yourself.

Fauna hovered in the air, a little higher than her sister, and now glanced about with a disgruntled air, hands on her hips. Her bright orange pupils glowed faintly; her gaze darted this way and that before fixing straight ahead, like a predator's. Only then did Dzhera notice that even her features were sharper than the second Juju's. Everything about her was angular, fiery—and therefore somehow dangerous. The complete opposite of the soft, gentle Flora, who wouldn't hurt a fly.

"…but then we guessed what kind of… "animal" it was," Flora went on as though nothing had happened, drifting lower until her face was level with Tak's. — It's a monster.

"I can see that without you, you silly girl," flashed involuntarily through Dzhera's mind.

"What kind of monster is that?"

"From the Edge of Nightmares. His name is Tsarad."

The name grated on Dzhera's ears—every bit as sharp as the creature's claws. The scratch on her cheek began to throb.

"His power lies in his gift for blurring dreams and reality. Do you understand, Tak? If he appears to you in a nightmare and harms you there, then..."

"Yes, we know," Tak cut her off impatiently and turned to Dzhera. She came up beside him and stood shoulder to shoulder, regarding Juju from beneath her brows. "That's exactly what happened tonight. That's why we're here."

"You got off lightly," Fauna snorted, looking Dzhera up and down.

The latter paid her no attention whatsoever.

"How dreadful," Flora sighed, barely sparing her a glance. "We should have guessed from the very start it was Tsarad. I'm so sorry we were too late."

"You could have fooled me!" Dzhera protested inwardly. "The two of you would have been about as much use as a pair of monkeys anyway."

"How do we deal with him?" Tak got straight to the point. "Do I need to enter the World of Nightmares and hunt him down there? Kill him?"

Even Dzhera shuddered at the mere thought of the World of Nightmares, though she had never set foot there (bad dreams aside) and never could follow Tak in. By his accounts, it was the most dreadful

place imaginable: teeming hordes of monsters, treacherous illusions, and an ancient, brooding darkness. The laws of the Waking World held no sway there, and its creatures proved far more terrible than they appeared. Tak generally shied away from speaking of that realm, even though he loved recounting his adventures in the worlds of Juju.

“Yes,” Flora replied at once. “You must kill him. But I can’t promise it will happen in the World of Nightmares. Tsarad hides, and he could be lurking anywhere. At first he dwelled in the Dark Juju’s menagerie, among the monsters he treasured most — bonecrushers, devourers, nerbilses...”

“All of them tirelessly unleashed against our village,” Dzhera added silently, with a pang.

“The Dark keeps Tsarad for a special occasion. This predator feeds on souls; unlike ordinary beasts, he touches no flesh, and the Dark kept him starving. After his master’s death we locked every monster away in the World of Nightmares, where they belong. But Tsarad is no mere monster. He can slip through rifts into other worlds — and open such gates himself. The World of Spirits, the Waking World, the World of Dreams or of Nightmares: it makes no difference to him. Nor does he care whose souls he devours — beasts, humans, even the Juju themselves.”

Throughout this grim account, Fauna hung upside down in the air, pulling faces and aping her sister. But no one paid her the slightest attention.

“Then why didn’t you kill him at once, if you knew how dangerous he was?” Dzhera blurted out, furious at the spirits’ carelessness.

“We didn’t know, dear,” Flora sighed, gazing down at her. — Luna forbade Juju to slay monsters who aren’t to blame for what they are by nature. It never occurred to us that the Dark One could manage to create such a complex creature.

“So what do we do now?” Tak brought the conversation back to the matter at hand. — People can no longer sleep in peace; this must be dealt with as quickly as possible. Where do I find him?

Dzhera all but turned to stare at him. Was he seriously planning to go off hunting the monster right this moment?

“Since he attacked the princess in a nightmare,” Flora began slowly, no longer looking at Dzhera, — he may still be there. Or perhaps he fled to another world. But I have no doubt Tsarad will not keep us waiting long. He is a predator, Tak; he stalks his prey until he catches it. Both awake and in your dreams, you must be extremely careful. All of you, — she cast Dzhera a fleeting glance, then immediately turned her gaze back to Tak and added quickly: — There is something else I need to tell you. In private.

“Kone…”

Before Dzhera could so much as blink, Flora seized Tak by the hand and vanished with him in a flash of green. Only a few fresh leaves hung in the air, drifting gently down.

The altar fell utterly silent.

“Well, she’s a piece of work, isn’t she?” Fauna was still there, still hanging upside down in the air, her eyes fixed on Dzhera. — Led the fellow away right from under your nose.

Dzhera waved her hand as casually as she could manage.

“Pff, who cares? Good riddance, honestly. Their chatter nearly gave me a toothache.”

“That’s Flora all over. Cuddles up to you, snatches whatever she needs, and off she goes.”

Fauna finally descended smoothly to the ground, and Dzhera saw that Juju stood just a touch shorter than she did — though her fiery red hair, sticking out in spikes like a porcupine’s quills, added a little height, and lent the girl such a fierce, wild look.

Then again, why complain — her own hairstyle was hardly any better.

“Did you get a good look at him?”

Fauna, eyes half-closed, was examining the scratch on her cheek, and Dzhera caught herself thinking how pitiful her own face must look. A smeared clump of crushed leaves clung to it — exactly as if she’d been wallowing in a swamp. Juju’s wounds, no doubt, gleamed like pearls with multicolored mana spilling from them, while Fauna’s cheeks bore a pattern of elongated triangles, as though someone had clawed her too, leaving scars behind.

“It was dark,” Dzhera replied flatly, having no desire to talk with the spirit. — He looks something like an antelope, doesn’t he? Only white.

She had no wish to relive what she’d been through. It had all been too strange, too frightening, and utterly unforeseen. Now that she knew what that monster was — and what it was capable of — she felt sick at the mere thought of having crossed its path.

“And he had claws,” she finished quietly, before Fauna could speak. — He wounded me with his claws, not his horns.

Fauna had only just opened her mouth to reply when a green flash burst out beside her, and Flora and Tak reappeared on the altar.

Tak spun quickly on the spot, as if trying to work out where he had landed, then rubbed his eyes and announced cheerfully:

“Well, now that we’ve learned everything we need, we’d best head back to the village.”

He even gave himself a sharp shake, as though just waking from a nap, and turned back impatiently, eyeing the rope bridge that led into the jungle. Flora stood a little apart, modestly hugging herself, as if she felt the cold.

“Hey—haven’t you forgotten something?” Fauna turned to her sister. “Did you tell him what Tsarad looks like?”

“I… um…”

“I see. No time for that, of course. And our dear princess never got a proper look at him in all his glory either,” Dzhera felt that one more moment and she would strike that Juju — and to the devil with whatever punishment followed. “So tell me, you clever ones, how exactly do you plan to catch Tsarad when you don’t even know his face? Brainless human tribe…”

She grumbled a little more under her breath, then broke into a conciliatory smile, and her pupils narrowed to slits, like a snake’s.

“Lucky for you, I’m here — and I’m in just the mood to show you a few tricks. Behold!”

Before Dzhera could make sense of anything, the girl clapped her hands with a sharp crack, and a white beast materialized at her side.

“Quiet — it isn’t real!” Tak hissed, straining to wrench his hand free of her iron grip. “It’s only an illusion.”

Dzhera knew, deep down, that even Juju would never have invited a true monster to the altar. She knew the beast stood motionless—neither breathing nor blinking—and could harm no one. She knew she ought to release Tak, yet it seemed impossible; her fingers clung to his hand and shoulder until they ached.

Beside Fauna loomed the very creature from her nightmares, but now, at last, she could look at it plainly—the way one studies, in daylight, a shin scraped raw in the jungle by night and discovers that half the lower leg is gone.

Tsarad stood taller than an antelope, yet was every bit as graceful, with slender legs and a long, delicate neck. His muzzle was small and tapered, and neat triangular ears stood erect. His coat was a startling white, almost luminous, broken only by a few elongated black spots

along his back. His long, thin tail curved with elegance, ending in a fluffy tuft.

But this was no mere charming little creature of Juju's kingdom, like the nosatics. Tsarad's eyes burned with a dull golden light, holding no pupil at all. His slender legs ended in soft, catslike paws, from which sturdy claws peeped, half-hidden. And where an antelope would have borne its familiar thick horns, thin, branchlike outgrowths rose from his head instead—something Dzhera had failed to notice in her dream.

"There he is, your Tsarad," Fauna said, unable to suppress a smirk.

Dzhera could feel the sisters watching her, and her frightened expression was surely delighting them no end. How gladly she would have stepped back from Tak, closed her eyes with studied calm, and declared that she had faced monsters far more terrifying than this overgrown sheep — but who was she fooling?

"Tsarad is agile and quick as a cat," Fauna began, gazing at the illusion with evident affection, — he can climb trees and swim. His horns lack the power of an antelope's, but they're sharp enough to skewer you like lizards. And his claws are so formidable that a single blow can tear away half your skull. He must have been standing at some distance from the princess, since he barely grazed her. At least he has no sharp teeth, for he never devours the bodies of his victims. All he requires is to slay an animal or a person and absorb their soul. Now you all know what he is. — Fauna waved her hand, and the monster beside her dissolved into the air like a wisp of steam. — But whether you could handle him — that, I doubt.

"What did Flora tell you?"

Juju had disappeared; they had barely set foot on the rope bridge before Dzhera was ready to burst with impatience.

She was no longer afraid, even after hearing about Tsarad. But she was angry at the daughters of the Moon, and not without cause. Let them think her a coward, “just a human” they had no right to separate her from Tak, nor to keep things hidden from her.

Her friend fell silent, and in the hush that followed, only the creak of ropes and planks could be heard as the bridge swayed gently above the dark abyss. Dzhera gripped the railing tighter, running her palm along the cold, damp rope. The long yellow-and-violet feathers of Tak’s, jutting from his hair, rocked softly in rhythm with the bridge. The golden glow of the staff had grown faint, as though the surrounding darkness were bearing down upon it, refusing to let it burn at full strength.

“She was just going on about how worried she is for all of us. She asked us to be careful,” he finally replied, without turning to her.

The moment Tak opened his mouth, Dzhera knew he was lying. That was the last straw. Of course she wanted to know what was going on between those two — she was the best friend of that little fool, and who better than she to be kept abreast of everything that happened to him?

Dzhera was still weighing how best to say all this when Tak hurried on, abruptly changing the subject:

“So we’re up against an antelope? Just look at the state of these monsters! Where’s the mouth bristling with sharp teeth? Where’s the invisibility to catch a traveler off guard? Why doesn’t it spit venom? And what of the poisoned spikes it hurls from a spear-flight’s distance? You could safely send… let me think… probably even Loka on a job like that!”

He glanced back at her over his shoulder, and Dzhera could see, behind his smile and slightly narrowed eyes, a flicker of anxiety. He was trying harder and harder to deceive her, though he knew it was

useless. And yet it seemed to her that arguing with him now, hurling accusations and all the rest, would be unfair. Tak would never conceal something from her on a mere whim. He had his reasons, and if he preferred not to speak of them — so be it. What mattered was that he was here with her now, not with Juju.

“Do you think this monster could make me walk in my sleep?” he went on. — And what else might it be capable of? I can’t imagine how I’ll ever explain it to your father. Thank goodness he believes everything lies under the Moon’s control, otherwise the tribe would have sunk into a real panic. Hey, remember how we fooled them when all the Juju left? They never found out a thing — not to this very day.

Dzhera couldn’t help smiling at the memory. Dressed up in disguise, Tak had impersonated Juju so that the Pupununu would stay calm and never learn of the real spirits’ departure. The people would have lost their minds had they discovered they were alone. And their ruse had gone rather well — brilliantly, in fact — for never in their lives had they seen such an abundance of delicious food and lavish gifts as the tribe showered upon them. And then everything unexpectedly dissolved into giant, hungry sheep rampaging through the village…

Would this adventure be like the others — the kind they would one day recall with laughter? Someday, gathered around a campfire, someone would begin: “Oh, remember when we all had to keep watch over each other’s sleep? Why, old Hermit Log still won’t close an eye unless someone’s sitting right beside him!” And another would chime in: “The whole tribe believed Luna was helping them, ha! Only Tak and I nearly got crushed flat when we drove Tsarad out of the Dream World!” And someone would surely add: “I’d give half my life to live through it all again!”

Dzhera longed to believe that, especially now — deep in the midnight jungle, carrying a wound dealt in a dream by a beast no one had ever laid eyes on. How desperately she wanted to believe that this time, too, would become, if not her dearest memory, then at least a thrilling one. Not painful, not sorrowful, not frightening. Thrilling. Like all the rest before it.

“I just know we’re standing on the threshold of another mad escapade,” Dzhera declared, as though speaking the words aloud could will them into being. “Whatever comes, we’ll face it. You and I.”

Chapter 4

Thank Juju that you can sleep in peace. I'll tell you one last story for tonight, and then you can count yourself lucky and drift straight off to sleep. Deal?

Of course, people couldn't live as a single tribe for long. As the saying goes, it takes only two people to start a war. And so one great tribe split into six communities.

Some went to settle by the Tiokai River. Their eyes grew as cold as the flesh of the fish they ate, their skin carried forever the scent of mud and cattails, and their fingers grew strong for seizing and killing their catch. And their pride swelled until it rivaled Moana herself! They say they even look down on Juju. These people came to be known as the Proud Warriors of the River, and nothing more. I wouldn't advise you to ever meet them.

A band of women banded together and ventured deep into the densest part of the jungle. There they discovered a magical spring whose waters granted immortality and eternal youth — one of Juju's pranks, forgotten long ago in the Seven-Cliff District. These women became the finest hunters: swift, agile, and cunning. For centuries they honed their craft, for their bodies stayed forever young and supple. Only, the magical water could not preserve their minds. Though the women remain beautiful on the outside, their souls have withered and shriveled like a dried-up worm. They still honor the ancient ways, and they'll slit your throat without a word if they find you on their land. They were nicknamed the Babuzonki.

Others wandered so far afield, and mingled so seldom with neighboring tribes, that today no one can make sense of their tongue. These are the Jibba-Jabba. Little is known of them, and I counsel you to keep well clear of them.

The fourth group settled the lands near a volcano. It is a wicked, perilous place, and the tribe took on its character: a people strong as stone, cruel as lava, and sly as smoke. Their tribe is called Black Haze, for a dark smog often broods above their home.

A band of merry companions journeyed deep into the raki-fana-kenga. There the cold is biting, and the people must bundle themselves in many layers—garments stitched from animal hides rather than tapa. So dependent are they on Fauna's creatures that it is said they honor her more devoutly than any of the other Juju, and worship the beasts themselves. These are the tribe of Zverian, and you know that beneath their cheer and carefree laughter lurks an animal hatred for all who defy their ways.

The remaining folk cleared a patch of ground in a thin ribbon of jungle at the edge of the upper valley. The altar of Juju lies not far off, yet they are distant enough from their neighbors that they see one another no more often than is proper. These people grow corn and yams, pasture sheep on the slopes, and raise chickens. Life in the jungle has turned their eyes as green as young foliage, and their hands have grown heavy from tilling the earth. The other tribes looked down upon them, deeming them naive and too peace-loving; but when a young shaman's apprentice received the power of the Juju, and Luna herself stretched her arms over them, the neighbors turned hostile in an instant.

Perhaps that's why they say a Pupununu can only ever be friends with a Juju. I couldn't say for certain. Once these sixty years of the Moon's patronage have run their course, we shall see.

There was nothing in the world worse than deceiving your dearest friend.

After their visit to the altar, Juju felt no real relief. True, they now knew what their enemy looked like and what he called himself, but

neither Flora nor Fauna could actually explain how to defeat the monster. Simply hunt it down and slay it like some ordinary antelope? Was that all there was to it?

And then there was Flora herself... She had pulled Tak straight off the altar and into Juju's realm so she could share her worries with him without frightening Dzhera and Fauna — yet in his view, it was her very meddling that had upset Dzhera. Like most people, she hated being kept in the dark, and when the one doing the hiding was Juju — who regarded humans as feeble and simple-minded — anyone would have been livid.

Flora explained that although Tsarad devours every soul he comes across, he naturally covets those richest in mana. They are his first and foremost prey. It was hardly surprising, then, that having gorged himself on animals, he had turned his attention to Tleylok. Jujus, woven from pure mana, are not so easily caught off guard, let alone slain, so the spirits were not overly troubled by the monster's escape. Especially if, at this very moment, he was lurking somewhere in the human World of Dreams.

And of all humans, Tak possessed the most mana of all.

Flora pleaded with him to be careful, never to let his guard slip. Luna of Juju would do everything in her power to protect people, but Tsarad was elusive, and she might not arrive in time. Flora begged Tak not to endanger himself—not even for the sake of his own tribe. Alive, he would be of far greater use to everyone. And she begged him to understand that.

He did understand, but he had no intention of hiding in his room while a monster stalked through people's dreams. Besides, he had already devised a plan for catching Tsarad. Half-baked and terribly risky—precisely his style. Flora would hate it, and Tak hoped she wouldn't learn of it anytime soon.

All the way back, he rubbed his wrists absently. Where Juju's fingers and palms had brushed his skin, he could still catch the fragrance of orchids. Or perhaps he was only imagining it.

Before they even reached home, Tak and Dzhera caught the scent of smoke and roasting meat drifting on the air, and exchanged looks of dismay. Just wonderful—their tribesmen could think of nothing better than a midnight snack, so confident that the unheard-of beast hunted only in dreams and could never reach the waking world. They might as well hang strips of meat from the branches near the village so Tsarad would know exactly where to find them.

Although… if Fauna was to be believed, meat held no interest for him. Still, Tak wouldn't gamble on it.

Not far from the unfinished wall, a great bonfire had been built, and people now sat around it on logs, roasting chicken and talking in low voices. Tak counted seven of them, the Chief among them.

He was the first to spot the pair, and rose from his seat.

"Dzhera! My little wildflower! Where on earth have you been?"

His booming voice reached them before they even reached the wall. Dzhera flinched. Well, who wouldn't have flinched in her place?

"Tak and I went to the altar of Juju. He spoke with Flora and Fauna."

"And what did they say?" The Chief spun around sharply to face him, his enormous belly swaying. "Will they drive the beast out of our dreams?"

The second most terrible thing in the world, after betraying your friends, was delivering bad news. Tak watched every person by the fire turn toward him. Lok, Otacon, Slog, Zaria, Tau, and the Guy-in-the-Mask. All eyes were on him now, hoping for good news—and he was about to frighten them even more.

“This beast came from the World of Nightmares. It once lived with the Dark Juju.”

Someone gasped; someone let out a heavy breath. The Dark One had brought Pupununu plenty of grief, and everyone had been certain they would never hear his name again. But could spirits ever truly be banished? They weren’t people, who leave nothing behind when they die.

“This monster is called Sara... Tsara... In short, I’m not sure how to pronounce it—something like Sarad. It can pass through rifts.”

“Through what?”

Before Tak could open his mouth, Lok turned to Zaria and answered eagerly, hurrying to get his own word in:

“Rifts are gates between worlds. They look like glowing hollows right in the air.”

The people exchanged frightened glances once more. Tak noticed the Chief’s face darken. He even set down the drumstick he had been about to eat.

“And yes, he really can hurt you…” Tak went on reluctantly, avoiding everyone’s gaze, — or worse… in your sleep, and it will follow you into the Waking World. The way it happened to Dzhera.

At once, every head turned toward her, as if on cue. Dzhera sat alone on a log before the fire. In the flickering light her hair seemed scarlet, while her eyes, by contrast, were dark as well water.

“Is it a predator?” Tau, the hunter, asked matter-of-factly. — And it can kill a person, right? And then the poor soul never wakes up?

Tak gritted his teeth. He was grateful to Tau for saying it so plainly aloud, yet unsettled all the same. The dead of night, jungle pressing in on every side. Who could tell who—or what—might be listening to the hunter’s words, ready to weave them into his fate?

“You’re right, Tau. Sarad may look like an antelope, but he is a true predator. Only he doesn’t devour flesh—he devours souls. And it makes no difference to him whether the victim is beast or man. I’m certain it was he who killed the animals last night. In their sleep, while they slept.”

Another wave of horrified gasps rippled through the crowd, but the Chief stepped forward.

“And how are we supposed to kill this monster now? In our sleep as well?”

“And how are we supposed to sleep at all now?” Zaria shrieked. It seemed only now had the full horror of what was happening truly sunk in for her. — And wh-what if no one wakes me in t-time?..

The Chief turned to Tak and fixed him with a fierce glare, making it plain that only one answer would satisfy him.

“Actually, I do have a plan,” Dzhera turned to look at him now, eyebrows arched in surprise, quite ready to scold him for not sharing his thoughts sooner. — Sarad cannot be in several worlds at once, — at least, he dearly hoped not — which means all we have to do is lure him away from the village so he can’t slip into anyone’s dreams. Then, from the World of Dreams, we draw him over to the Waking Land. And kill him here.

Tak let out a breath. The plan had come to him on the fly, on the walk back from the altar, and he had no idea whether it would unfold the way he imagined. But nothing better suggested itself, and time was not on their side.

“And you’re certain it will work? the Chief asked, sensing his doubt.” Why would this what’s-his-name follow you — or anyone — away from the village instead of staying here, where there are plenty of people?

It was a perfectly logical question, and the others turned toward Tak, regarding him almost accusingly. There was nothing for it but to say it aloud.

“Because Sarad will choose the soul with the most mana.”

He tried not to look in Dzhera’s direction, but she sprang to her feet all on her own.

“What? What makes you so sure?”

“Y-yes, what makes him so sure? the Chief echoed anxiously, stroking his belly for some reason.” Although, if he preferred… mmm… how shall I put it… those with more meat — I mean muscle — that wouldn’t be good either, but…

It took Tak a moment to grasp why the Chief was so alarmed.

“That’s what Flora Juju said. And don’t worry, Chief” no one will be coming for you. I will be the one to lead Sarad away from the village, because I carry the most mana.

Under any other circumstances, the Chief might have taken offense at such a candid remark, but at that moment he felt only an overwhelming wave of relief.

The same could hardly be said of Dzhera.

“You can’t manage this alone!” she cried, clenching her fists in frustration. “You can’t possibly lure him away from the village all by yourself, cross him over into our world, and then track him down and kill him! It’s simply impossible, Tak, even for you!”

Those last words nearly flattered him, but the Chief had already thrown himself into shaping the plan, and there was no holding him back.

“Why alone? We’ll send the tribe’s finest warriors with him to protect Tak and watch over his sleep. Yes, that’s it exactly: we’ll assemble a squad to lead the beast away from the village, and then we can finally rest easy.”

Dzhera groaned in exasperation, pressing a hand over her eyes. Her father, paying her no heed, turned eagerly to the gathered people.

“Any volunteers?”

Naturally, no one spoke up. Loc was shaking his head in open disbelief, but the Chief was already striding toward him, arms outstretched in his enormous paws.

“Loc! It will be an honor for you to accompany Tak on his mission once again! You are most certainly going on this expedition.”

“An honor?” he spluttered. “Going with him? Have you all forgotten, or shall I remind you, that it was always a great honor for the boy to accompany me on my travels! If not for me, he…”

“Splendid, I’m glad we’re agreed!” the Chief declared, clapping him on the shoulder. The famed warrior nearly toppled off his log. “Well then, who else?”

“Me! Me!” Slog thrust her thick arm into the air, waving it right under the Chief’s nose. “Loc will go with Tak, and Slog will go with Loc! And then we’ll all be safe!”

“Hmm…”

Apparently, the Chief’s plans had never included taking women on the expedition — not even someone like Slog. Strong and broad-shouldered, Slog could floor any warrior, wielded hammer and axe with skill, and had no equal at hurling a spear. No one could outwork her: she would toil until nightfall building the frame, clear away fallen trees in no time, and carry a basket heaped with coconuts on her head as though it weighed nothing. She would lift it without a groan and set it down without a grunt. Her voice, too, was deep and resounding, like a man’s. Nobody cared to cross Slog — not even the Chief. Only Lok had the nerve to argue with her openly.

“If she goes, then I’m staying home,” he announced.

“But if Lok doesn’t go, then I won’t either…”

“I’ll go only if she stays behind!”

Brave, mighty Slog had but one weakness — Lok. For his sake she would have broken herself to pieces, yet he didn’t care. His eyes strayed toward far prettier girls.

“Silence! the Chief barked, quashing the childish squabble.” Lok is definitely coming on the expedition, and Slog will remain here, in the village. We need you to look after the children — you know the women can’t manage without you…

Lok gave a satisfied grunt, shooting her a triumphant glance.

“In the morning we’ll speak with the rest of the people, the Chief continued, making it plain the matter was settled.” We’ve paired everyone up — only those who couldn’t sleep are here. I trust that very soon we shall all be sleeping soundly once more.

Tak was mildly surprised that Dzhera hadn’t said a word since learning of the expedition, but it was far too early to hope he’d get away with his silence. He settled onto a log beside her while the Chief launched into a speech about what the journey would require, recalling the rare occasions when the Pupununu had ventured beyond their home. Slog took offense and stormed off, but Lok, unexpectedly animated, joined the conversation, eager to wedge in his own opinion. Tak could only hope that mood would hold until the expedition itself; trekking through the jungle while enduring Lok’s whining would be unbearable.

Dzhera pinched his arm, but Tak barely stirred, knowing she wouldn’t relent until she had emptied everything from her mind. His friend drew close and whispered in his ear, low enough that no one else could hear:

“Which way will you go? I’ll catch up with you not far from the village.”

Her hot breath tickled his cheek, and he pulled away from her.

“We’ll talk in the morning,” he muttered.

Dzhera’s gaze burned no less fiercely than a coal from the campfire.

“Why?” she asked, a little louder.

Tak said nothing. If he told her right now that she wasn’t going anywhere, she would shriek, and he would find himself explaining everything to the Chief.

It was hard enough to admit even to himself. He could endure anything, survive any misfortune, so long as his friend stood at his side. But Tsarad seemed far too dangerous, far too powerful, to risk it. He could not let anything else happen to her — he would never forgive himself for as long as he lived.

And he understood perfectly well that such an answer would not satisfy Dzhera. Most likely, she would still slip away from her father’s watch and catch up with him somewhere along the way. He ought to have a proper talk with her so she would stay. Perhaps tell her how much she meant to him and all that — girls love such things, even Dzhera.

But not now. In the morning. For now, he truly needed at least a little sleep.

Tak woke with the first rays of sunlight stealing into his room, yet felt as though he had not slept at all. At least, thank goodness, he found himself in his own bed, not wandering somewhere along the edge of a cliff. He had left the night meeting shortly after they had settled the plan. At home, he had found Dzhibolba keeping vigil at Tleylok’s bedside, and offered to sit with the patient while the old man rested. Watching over the sleeper proved quite the torment. He dared not stray far from his uncle’s side, yet drowsiness weighed on his own eyelids, and he fought with all his might to keep from dropping off then and there.

When Dzhibolba finally woke and it was Tak's turn to rest, as ill luck would have it, sleep would not come for a long while. Then he slipped unnoticed into slumber, only to wake with a start, as though some magic had yanked him out of it too. The wretched, endless night promised an equally heavy and long day.

Sunbeams crept ever more boldly into the room, and birds chattered noisily by the window. From outside drifted the familiar sounds of the village stirring to life. It was already a relief, of course, that no one had burst into their house with a yell, kicking the door off its hinges — but he could not deny that such a thing might well happen a little later.

In the main room, Tak came upon Dzhibolba, who sat on the doorstep, dipping a piece of moss into a bowl of fragrant infusion. At the sight of his uncle, Tak's heart gave a pang of disquiet. Dark circles had settled beneath the old man's eyes, his back was bowed, and his hands trembled faintly. And it was all the doing of that cursed Dark One and his Tsarad.

"Good morning, Dzhibolba," Tak greeted him with all the cheer he could muster, careful not to show how unsettled he was by the old man's appearance. — Is everything all right?

Beneath that question lay many others at once — the state Tleylok was in, Dzhibolba himself, what was afoot in the village, and how the night had gone overall.

"Ah, yes," he answered absently and, without looking, held the bowl out to him. — Go and check on Dzhera. If the wound is still bleeding, bandage it. I'll stay here for now.

"Shouldn't you get some more sleep? I could look after Tleylok for a while" and after you, too. How is he, anyway?

"No, no, there's no need," Dzhibolba waved his hands and, without sparing his nephew so much as a glance, shuffled off toward the sickroom, leaving the last question unanswered.

Everything in the village looked as it always did — people went about their everyday business and seemed neither frightened nor weary. Perhaps things were not as bad as Tak had imagined?

But as he passed his kinsmen on his way to Dzhera's hut, he caught their eyes on him. And not only their eyes.

"Is it true that you're setting off on the campaign with Lok today?"

"Will you lead the beast away?"

"Will we sleep soundly tonight?"

"Is it true that it's hunting you, Tak?"

Well, imagine that — the morning had barely begun, and already he was being hailed as a hero! How quickly news travels in the village, whether you like it or not.

He did his best to keep his answers brief and brisk, but soon the villagers had dropped everything they were doing and pressed in around him so tightly that Tak had to stop. In the eyes surrounding him he read fear, hope and—sweetest of all—respect. It was rare for anyone to look at him as an equal, much less with recognition. The memory of that hapless foundling, around whom strange things happened and who was best avoided, was still too vivid in their minds. It was hard to accept that this was now their intermediary with the Juju spirits, their mighty shaman. But the instinct for self-preservation can drive people to far stranger things.

"Everything will be fine," he said, raising his voice with all the confidence he could muster. "You have nothing to worry about! Tomorrow we will go far from the village, and our party will lure the monster away from your dreams—it will never trouble Pupununu again. Then I will draw it into the real world and kill it. It won't take long."

That was all they needed to hear. With his announcement made, Tak could almost feel the tension draining away around him. Heads

nodded, applause broke out, and a few clapped him warmly on the shoulder.

“How lucky we are to have you!”

“Praise Juju for our shaman!”

Tak’s heart melted at the people’s approval. Flora would never have understood why he was willing to risk his own skin to protect these weak, “useless” folk. The Juju were not accustomed to caring for anyone, let alone putting themselves in danger for another’s sake.

The reassured tribesmen began to drift away, and Tak suddenly noticed Dzhera standing behind them.

He squinted, studying her face, trying to make out whether the dark circles beneath her eyes were the mark of a sleepless night or an actual tattoo. Had she slept at all today? When he had left, she was still sitting by the fire.

“There you are!” Only then did he remember the bowl with its scrap of moss, which he had been clutching this whole time. — Dzhibolba asked me to take a look at your scratch.

“I wiped the herbal salve off it,” she admitted, pointing to the open scrape. — But it doesn’t hurt anymore.

Tak glanced at the wound and saw that it was healing cleanly, the bleeding all but stopped. Well, at least this Tsarad’s claws had belonged to an ordinary animal — he might just as easily have inflicted wounds that never healed, or spread disease through them…

“I heard you talking to the people,” Dzhera went on. — You lied to them beautifully. You’d make a decent chief.

She gave a short smirk, wrinkling her little nose. Tak merely shrugged, not knowing what to say to that. He hadn’t really wanted to deceive the people. He simply understood that the whole truth would send panic sweeping through the tribe — and that was the last thing they needed right now.

“I hope it does turn out to be the truth,” he conceded. — It hardly seems such a difficult task.

He faltered, his gaze drifting in spite of himself to Dzhera’s cheek once more — and she noticed.

“Of course! Now we’re ready to face him” Tsarad won’t catch us off guard a second time.

“How did you manage to pronounce his name?”

“I’ve no idea myself.”

“Hey, you there!”

Tak and Dzhera turned around at the same instant — and grimaced in perfect unison. Zariya was being borne toward them on a stretcher, propped up among her pillows and glaring at them in plain displeasure. Every so often the elder princess accumulated such reserves of self-importance and pride that the whole tribe suffered for it. Her delicate feet must never be permitted to touch the ground, so naturally the stretcher had to be lined with the softest pillows! She was feeling starved of attention, and a festival simply must be laid on that very night, tearing all the women from their work and dispatching them to the cooking fires. The instant anyone allowed themselves a moment’s ease, Zariya would begin to feel she wasn’t loved nearly enough, and her tribesmen would once again roll their eyes on the sly as they ran her errands.

“And there’s our daytime monster,” Dzhera managed to whisper.

The bearers gently lowered the stretcher, and the elder princess stepped to the ground with languid grace. Nothing about her betrayed the fact that she, too, had spent half the night by the fire: her face, as always, glowed with health and freshness; there was not a trace of ugly dark circles beneath her eyes; and her adornment, as ever, had been chosen to perfection.

“Sister, darling,” she cooed, glancing at Dzhera from beneath half-lowered lashes, “I need a word with your match. Meanwhile, you can... oh, I don’t know — go leap into the crater of a volcano, for instance.”

“He is not my match!” Dzhera snapped, not budging an inch. “What do you want with him?”

Zariya raised her eyes to the heavens with a bored air. Her small, plump lips — precisely like Dzhera’s own — pushed out into a pout.

“Oh, stop being so jealous — I have no intention of stealing him from you.”

“I already told you—!”

Dzhera had even gone red with fury, and Tak half-feared that any moment now she would hurl herself at her sister. He laid a hand on her shoulder and offered a faint smile.

“Come on now — let the princess have her say.”

With an angry shrug she shook off his hand and stalked away beneath Zaria’s mocking gaze. Tak swallowed as he turned to face her. Whatever she had to say, he was certain he wouldn’t like it.

“I’m not pleased that you’re taking people with you,” Zaria said, coming straight to the point as she slowly folded her arms across her chest. “Father thinks you can’t manage on your own, but I’m sure you can. You have your strength, and your Juju, and all the rest of it. Go into the forest alone and leave the people here. I won’t have my future people dragged through deadly jungle and straight into the clutches of a monster.”

Tak blinked, taken aback. This was, as far as he could recall, only the second time Zaria had ever shown concern for anyone but herself. The last time, she had feared for her father when he was forced to fight the monster Juju in open battle. But now — could she actually be worried about Pupununu?

Or had she simply lost herself in her new role as tribal chief and was merely playing the part now?

“I can’t do it alone,” Tak began to explain, doing his best to avoid the elder princess’s direct, disapproving stare. “I’ll have to hunt Sara… that monster in the World of Dreams — and I need someone who can wake me if it attacks me.”

“Then take one person with you,” Zaria insisted. “I can spare you a guard.”

“But that won’t be enough,” Tak said, his voice as gentle as he could make it, still hoping—as one might with a capricious child—to convince Zaria that she was wrong. “An expedition needs at least three people, and you know it.”

I’ll give you two guards.

Even so, your House will be left without a single one. Besides, I doubt your father would let even one of them go…

I am letting them go! Zaria interrupted impatiently, her eyes flying wide open. “I will be chief, and you are bound to carry out my orders as well!”

Tak was beginning to tire of the conversation. Zaria didn’t care in the slightest who went on the expedition and who stayed behind—she had simply resolved to flaunt her power yet again. He had no time for such games.

“When that day comes, you may order me about to your heart’s content,” he replied, his tone sharp enough to make it plain that the conversation was over and that he was done being courteous. “For now, I will follow your father’s instructions. And frankly, I could not care less whether you like it or not.”

Zaria said nothing more. She regarded him in silence, eyes half-closed, lips pressed tightly together. In this she and Dzhera were alike:

angry or offended, the sisters would turn suddenly, dangerously calm and quiet, and not a single word could be drawn from either of them.

As Tak walked past, Zaria did not look at him, and her face betrayed nothing—as though she, like a guard, had donned a mask of her own.

Chapter 5

Let me tell you how the Sun Juju, one fine day, discovered a splendid mei tree.

This was no ordinary mei, such as grows by the houses of Burg or Tau. This tree bore fruit so sweet and so succulent that even Juju could not resist it. The Sun caught seven nimble lizards and climbed up into the branches.

Once he had satisfied himself that the fruit was indeed as large and luscious as it looked—unlike anything he had ever seen before—he plucked one and tossed it down to the ground together with a lizard.

At once, out of nowhere, an evil spirit appeared. He meant to discover who had been picking fruit from his magnificent tree, but just then he caught sight of a lizard scurrying away, and off he dashed in pursuit.

And in that very moment—quick as a flash!—the Sun plucked a second fruit and dropped it to the ground with the lizard as well.

Again the evil spirit appeared, and again he had no time to see who was plundering his tree. He rushed off chasing the second lizard.

Five more times the Sun Juju picked the mei fruit and flung it down to the ground with a lizard, and five more times the evil spirit had no chance to see who was stealing his harvest. When he ran off after the seventh lizard, the Sun leapt down, gathered up the wonderful fruit, and made his way home to his own village.

In the village he was spotted by the Death Juju, that merry prankster who needed only half a chance to crack a joke or throw a feast.

“Brother Juju, wherever did you get such wonderful mei fruit?”

The Sun told him the whole story and warned him that the tree was guarded by an evil spirit. But the Death Juju only laughed.

“What do I care for some spirit! I shall gather the wondrous fruits of this tree myself.”

Thereupon the Sun of Juju counselled him to take a few nimble lizards along. Death laughed once more, yet followed his advice.

But there lay the trouble: no sooner had Death gathered the nimble creatures into his bony hands than they dropped dead on the spot. Heedless of this, Death Juju set out for the tree, carrying seven dead lizards with him.

Up he climbed, plucked the first fruit, and let it fall to the ground together with the lifeless lizard. In an instant, as if out of thin air, the evil spirit appeared. He darted toward the lizard — but it lay motionless upon the earth. Then the spirit raised his head and beheld Death Juju on the branch.

“Ah, so it is you who have been robbing my meyi tree of its wondrous fruits! And you even tried to deceive me! Well, just you wait” I am coming for you now…

The evil spirit hurled himself upon Death Juju and thrashed him soundly. And afterward, in his fury, he hid his tree from all sight — which is why we shall never taste those marvellous fruits. And should you ever stumble upon such a tree, there will be no escaping the evil spirit’s wrath.

Thus Death Juju brought one more misfortune into our world. In letting fall the dead lizard from the tree, he unwittingly established a law: from that day forward, whoever falls from a tree must die.

Tak watched the Chief giving orders to the people, testing the points of spears and knives, doling out instructions about how much food to carry — and he could scarcely believe any of this was truly happening. True, of course, he had all but single-handedly stopped Tleylok the first time and restored the people to their human form. But back then he had dealt only with Juju, or with people — never with

soulless monsters. He hadn't the faintest idea what he would do when he came face to face with Tsarad.

If only sensible Dzhera were at his side — she sometimes came up with ideas Tak would never have dreamed of in a lifetime. She shunned complicated paths, and to nearly every puzzle she found a simple, effortless solution. She would have been a help on this expedition, and his heart would have rested easier with her near — yet Tak would never, ever breathe a word of that to her. She had to stay in the village.

"Is it true? Are you really setting off for the border of the district?"

Tak turned. Kiko! Should he bring his friend along on the expedition? Kiko was neither the most nimble nor the swiftest fellow in the tribe, but his head was always brimming with strange notions, he never lost heart, and Tak could count on him through anything. But ask him to risk his life for this?

Besides, he secretly hoped that if Kiko remained in the village, he could keep an eye on Dzhera and make sure she didn't slip away. And he knew perfectly well that the two of them would thrash him soundly for entertaining such thoughts.

"We need to lure the monster as far from the village as possible. The Forgotten Temple, I think, would be just the thing. It lies far from here, and no other tribe's border runs through it."

"But wouldn't it be nicer to lead the beast straight over to the neighbours'?" Kiko smirked. — One strike, and it would be their problem, not ours.

Even so, it had to be admitted that Kiko's thoughts could at times be disquieting — even faintly frightening. Yet Tak knew perfectly well that he was one of the gentlest, most peaceable souls in the world — unless you took something dear from him, or tried to talk him out of it.

"Who's going with you?"

“Just Lock, for now.” Tak was certain the Chief would find him another companion as well, though he hadn’t the faintest idea who.

“Lock,” Kiko let out a snort before he could stop himself. “That fire of yours will go out, brother.”

There was a grain of truth in that — Lock knew how to look fearsome, raise a rousing battle cry, and spin marvelous tales of heroic deeds. But in a real fight he was next to useless.

“What about Dzhera?”

Tak shot wary glances to either side. Dzhera had left him and Zaria — whether she had taken offense or something had distracted her, she had not come back to him.

“You know how she is. Father forbade it, and off she goes all the same. I have to talk to her, make her stay in the village. The last thing we need is for that monster to attack her again,” he muttered.

Kiko smiled, baring his jutting upper fangs.

“Well, good luck with that impossible errand. And may I come along?”

Tak sighed.

“I don’t know,” he answered truthfully. “It’s dangerous, for one thing — and besides, Dzhera is bound to howl and bolt if the two of us leave the village…”

One look at Kiko’s face told him at once that none of this troubled him in the slightest — that, in fact, he had never expected a refusal, and already knew Tak would be taking him along.

“I’ll go pack my things,” he said with a nod. “That will be the perfect chance to put my new invention to the test.”

“And what is it this time?”

“Secret!”

They lingered a while longer, watching the villagers as they made their preparations. Everything looked so utterly ordinary, as though

they were simply setting out to fetch coconuts from the forgotten Vog Valley or pelican meat from the Lake of the Cobweb Stone — and not being offered up as bait to lure the cruel monster away from the village.

“What if nothing comes of it this time?” Tak asked quietly. “What if this is the time we lose, and every last one of the Pupununu perishes?”

Kiko gave a phlegmatic shrug, his heavy eyelids drooping shut for a moment.

“Well, then you had best pray the Chief doesn’t find you in the World of Spirits and banish you from the tribe.”

Right up until midday the tribe was busy outfitting the expedition, but when Tak saw the veritable mountain of baskets, belts, water-filled coconuts, a cage holding a pair of hens, and a single tethered sheep, he understood at once that his tribesmen either hoped not to set eyes on them for the next three moons or believed they were bound for the very edge of the earth. Then again, that hardly came as a surprise. The Pupununu rarely ventured beyond their own lands, struggled to make sense of maps, and could scarcely have said where the nearest neighboring villages even lay. Every departure from home was looked upon as a journey into the unknown, and travelers were all but mourned in advance. What came to mind were the Chief’s tales of the band that had set off many years before to explore the frontier of the Seven-Cliff District. It should have been an easy undertaking, yet more than half of them perished along the way, for all manner of reasons.

Tak returned home in hopes of a word with Dzhibolba. Grumpy as the old man was, forever foreseeing the worst, a talk with him was certain to set the heart at ease. If only he could be brought to turn his mind from that cursed Tleylok, if only for a little while — the very man who, as everyone remembered, had once come within a hair of

killing his former kinsmen without so much as a blink! He deserved no one's care, no one's worry.

Tak had scarcely crossed the threshold of the house when his uncle's voice reached him:

"Tak, is that you? In here — quick!"

The shout came from behind the screen of the sickroom, and Tak went to it with a heavy heart. So: either the dark sorcerer was on the mend, or he had breathed his last — praise be to Ju…

He had barely drawn the curtain aside when he felt Tleylok's gaze fasten upon him. The sorcerer lay half-reclined on a mat, propped against a soft pillow that Dzhibolba must have coaxed out of the High House. His round eyes had sunk deep into their sockets, and the red tattoo — the design all shamans of Pupununu wore, and only about their eyes — had dulled to the hue of congealed blood. Yet the stare itself remained as keen as ever, piercing a man to the very core.

His chest was bound tight in bandages, dark stains seeping through the dressing. His skin had turned a dull gray and clung taut to his bones, going downright white at the knees and elbows. His short beard was stiff with dried blood, crusted like dirt.

Enfeebled, wounded, barely escaped alive from the World of Spirits. Even now he looked dangerous — dangerous as a taipan.

Tleylok beckoned Tak closer with a long, withered finger, a faint smirk twisting his thin lips. Sensing his nephew's hesitation, Dzhibolba gave him a firm nod of encouragement. Tak made his way unhurriedly to the mat and stopped beside it, careful not to betray his unease.

"I have a few questions for you," he announced, having resolved not to stand on ceremony with Tleylok.

It seemed Kiko had been right after all: the only good the shaman could do for them was to speak of the monster that had attacked him — Tsarad. Could Tleylok have known of him before? Tak tried to recall

whether the sorcerer had any connection whatsoever to the Dark One, but nothing came to mind.

“Is that so?” came the quiet reply, as Tleylok fixed Tak with a mocking look from below. “I should like a word with you as well. Dzhibolba, be a good fellow... leave us alone.”

Tak could see how hard it was for Tleylok to force out the words, how his chest strained with every sound, yet his voice remained calm, almost friendly even.

Dzhibolba withdrew reluctantly, and at once Tak felt his disquiet deepen. He barely restrained himself from snatching up his staff, just in case. After all, what harm could a half-dead man possibly do him?

“Who attacked you?” he asked quickly, while Tleylok gathered his strength to speak. “Did it happen in a dream?”

Tleylok smiled faintly once more and slowly shook his head, his eyes never leaving him for an instant. Tak let out a breath, willing himself to be calm. He would do nothing — the man could scarcely breathe as it was. Still, Tak’s gaze swept over the sorcerer’s body, checking for the potions and magic powders he might be carrying. Tleylok’s tupan was long, falling nearly to his knees, its belt fastened with the sharp teeth of some predatory fish. No pouches or vials showed anywhere on him, yet Tak still doubted the man was harmless, that he posed no danger at all.

“It was… a white antelope with a tail and… the paws of a cat,” he whispered, so faintly that Tak instinctively tipped his head toward him to catch the words. “Its horns are like branches, and its eyes… they gleam like a spirit’s. The white beast of death. Lean closer… to me, boy, don’t be afraid…”

Tleylok’s voice was soft and ingratiating, and even the word “boy” carried none of the dismissiveness or scorn it did from other lips. With

a heavy heart, Tak knelt down beside the sick man. Smiling, Tleylok beckoned with a crooked finger, urging him to draw nearer still.

“I haven’t the strength to speak loudly,” he rasped. “My lungs are full of blood — it is hard for me to breathe.”

Tak tried not to picture what that must look like, and still less what it must feel like. With an effort, he forced himself to bend a little lower toward the shaman, his bony shoulders hunched, his fists braced against the floor. The strap that held his staff across his back had slipped awkwardly out of place, and its hard hilt kept jabbing him under the ribs.

“This monster,” Tleylok hissed, his lips working frantically — now baring his great teeth in full, now puckering his mouth into an O — “is from… Juju. They themselves s… sent… him here… Do you know why, b… b-boy?”

Tak made no answer and did not stir. Then, all at once, Tleylok seized him by the dangling band and yanked him toward himself with a sharp tug. Tak very nearly toppled on top of him, throwing out his hands just in time. He jostled the shaman’s side by accident, and the shaman winced — yet did not release him, did not take his eyes off him, and did not let his savage grin falter.

“Because of you. Juju have al… always hat… hated people. And you became… the last straw. They don’t care for you. They… will never ac… accept… you. Won’t make you equ… equa… equal. To themselves. You are nothing. You only get in… in their way.”

Suddenly he went slack, released him, and shut his eyes. A contented smile spread slowly across his face, no longer a snarl.

“They mean to kill you,” he went on, calmer now, his eyes still closed. “And your people. For what you are.”

Tak kept his silence. He guessed the accursed sorcerer was merely slandering him, striving to hurt him as deeply as words allowed, since

his hands and his magic were powerless to do it. It couldn't be true. But the cruel words did their work all the same, sowing doubt, unease, and something like guilt in his soul.

"You're lying — every word of it," he said with conviction through clenched teeth, and rose to his feet. "Juju will help us deal with him. Luna…"

"Luna of the Juju has abandoned you," Tleylok breathed softly. "People have wearied her. She has grown tired of being the protectress… of this weak tribe… endlessly…"

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Tak snapped, turning to leave. "Luna of Juju will never abandon us. Not in the next sixty years, that much is certain. We have met all their requirements. We proved ourselves worthier of her care than Black Haze or the River People ever were. She has to look after us, and you know it!"

Tleylok gave a sound that was half sigh, half chuckle, as much as his strength allowed.

"Naive boy... You were... in the World of Nightmares. You saw it. You know it. Tell me: can a... can a being pass through the fis... yes—pass through, and bypass Juju's realm? And vanish? Unseen. By the spirits. Can he? No. You know the answer. The Juju themselves... sen—sent him. Here."

He opened one eye a crack and fixed it on Tak. Dzhibolba had taken off his rich headdress with its firebird feathers, osprey skull, and antelope horns, and with his head bare, Tleylok looked older. More dangerous. Tak wanted to leave, but not a muscle would obey him. It was as if invisible threads of magic bound him to the sorcerer.

"I know who you are," the sorcerer said slowly, his voice firm and clearly audible. "Only ordinary, wretched humans cannot see it. The tribe has no idea whom it has taken in. You carry more mana than any

human could bear. That is what will draw the monster. To you. To all of them."

He coughed, a hollow sound, pressing his fist to his mouth and shuddering all over. Tak saw that the dark stain on the bandages had spread.

"Quiet. You need rest," he ground out, wanting only one thing—for the shaman to fall silent.

Though they had learned what they had come to learn... or had they?

"Where did the creature attack you" in a dream, or here in the waking world?

Tleylok's coughing subsided, and he glanced up at Tak over the fist still pressed to his mouth. His eyes, once the same vivid green as those of every Pupununu, had faded to a dull shade — nearly the color of bare earth. In every way he could, the shaman labored to shed any resemblance to his tribe, yet even he had never dared strip the sacred marks of Juju from his skin.

"Here. He was too… too weak to hunt… in dreams. That is the only reason I am still alive."

Those last words carried an almost sinister ring, though they were meant to convey relief.

"Too weak?"

"He requires mana to enter the World of Dreams. Tell me… has he already crossed over?"

Tak nodded slowly. In a dream, prey was far easier for the monster to find — which meant it would be no small task to lure the beast out again. Tleylok read the confusion gathering on Tak's face.

"You won't be able to hide from him…" he murmured, barely above a whisper.

"I don't intend to!" Tak snapped. — I'll hunt him down myself.

Tleylok gave a quiet laugh, and Tak's anger flared hotter still. The least the shaman could have offered, in return for Dzhibolba sparing his life, was something useful. But expecting that from a traitor was plainly a lost cause.

"You'll never change, you fool…" Tleylok breathed as a parting shot, and Tak walked out.

Toward evening, as custom demanded, the Chief held a festival to mark the morrow's journey. Ordinarily Tak adored festivals — unless they happened to be the feasts held in Zaria's honor, whenever she had her way. Tonight, however, his heart was heavy.

Tleylok's words refused to leave his head. He was supposed to speak with Dzhera and persuade her to stay home, yet at the festivities he had contrived to avoid her at every turn. A dark premonition had stolen his appetite, and not a single bite would go down his throat, though the cooks had outdone themselves: the tables sagged beneath boiled fish and chicken slow-cooked in an imu earth oven. Mountains of fresh fruit and berries crowned the plates; juice was poured, tea brewed from orange leaves, and cocktails blended with coconut milk made the rounds. Sugarcane candy — hard as stone yet impossibly sweet — sat in little bowls, and one of the women, Zimdi, stood guard so the little ones couldn't snatch it all up. On the table before the seat of the Supreme Family, a whole roasted piglet sent up a mouthwatering aroma.

At the edge of the stage, the musicians had already gathered, quietly picking out a simple melody on drums and flutes. Colored lanterns strung on lines between the trees and posts cast a soft, warm glow, and garlands of flowers, feathers, and brightly dyed triangles of tapa fluttered in the breeze. The Pupununu adored celebrations and seized on any excuse to hold one. Tak suspected the whole affair was arranged at the Chief's instigation, for the Chief never missed a chance

to enjoy a good, hearty meal. Then again, no one else would have bothered either — the decorating, the cooking, and the cleaning up afterward were simply too much fuss…

"Tak!"

He nearly leapt out of his skin and spun around, but it was only Lok. He stood by the table with his squire, the short Tobar, lazily gnawing on a baked chicken leg. Tobar, for his part, was sipping juice.

"I heard Tleylok managed to have a word with you," he grunted as Tak came up to them.

"He says Tsarad attacked him in the Waking World. Claimed the beast was too feeble to hunt in dreams."

Tak had no wish to recount the whole conversation, but Loku didn't need him to anyway.

"And now he's there…"

"Yes."

The warrior snorted and said nothing, twirling a gnawed bone in fingers glistening with fat. Tobar jabbed an elbow at him, aiming for his ribs, but caught his thigh instead.

"The princess will be performing soon."

Tak turned toward the stage, already knowing which of the princesses it would be. Just as her father loved feasts, so Zaria loved to shine before a crowd. She knew exactly how striking she looked in her festive finery, and she knew, too, how well she could move.

The people clapped and cheered. The stage glowed as brightly as torchlight could manage without the aid of magic. Fresh flowers garlanded the arch, and the backdrops of turquoise tapa cloth had been gathered into elegant folds. Zaria made her unhurried way to the center of the platform. She wore a new gown Tak had never seen before: long, falling below the knee, dyed a deep blue. A wide leather belt encircled the princess's waist, stitched with rows of wooden beads, while several

more strings of beads and multicolored stones hung about her neck and chest.

But then Zaria raised her arms, and a gasp rippled through the crowd. Bracelets clasped around her wrists and forearms bore real wings! Great feathers of yellow and orange — the hues of the supreme House — had been sewn onto the broad strips of tapa; there were so many of them, packed so tightly together, that they might have been actual birds' wings.

The men pounded their drums harder, and Zaria began to turn slowly in place, arms lifted above her head. She had always been blessed with a lovely figure — tall, toned, and supple — yet in the dance she was beyond compare, so light and swift she seemed; and today, with those wings, she looked utterly otherworldly, like a spirit.

The dance opened with unhurried turns in place, in which she displayed her headdress and "wings" more than her body. Then the music quickened, and Zaria seemed to wake. She spun faster, then leapt, arms flung wide in midair, landed, and at once began whirling again — this time raising one "wing" and sweeping the other out to the side. Her feet took tiny, tiny steps in place, glided across the floor, then she rose onto her toes and spun once more.

Tak could not at once tear his gaze away from her, even to snatch a morsel from the table. His eyes nearly ached from watching the princess's swift movements, the bright feathers, the ornaments of her dress. Most likely she had already forgotten their conversation, and the part she was meant to play as chief. Just now, the only thing on her mind was herself — and perhaps, just a little, the impression her dance was making on the people. Though surely she knew the tribe was delighted. As always.

Tak bit into the chicken, raised his eyes, and unexpectedly met Dzhera's gaze. She was standing a short way off from the platform, in

the shadows, watching him intently. He swallowed with an effort, barely managing to force the unchewed morsel down his throat, and his friend looked away. Did she want him to come over now? Did she have something to say to him?

Already flushed and damp with sweat from her swift movements, Zaria stopped short and pointed ahead with a smile. Her eyes were shining brightly, and even from across the clearing it was easy to see how fast she was breathing.

No one could say for certain whom she was pointing at, but it hardly mattered. Seizing the moment while those at the heart of the crowd stood taken aback and hesitant, Lok swiftly pushed his way forward and leapt onto the platform. Oh, just great — the two people in the whole tribe who most loved being the center of attention, both up on stage at once. They won't be getting off that thing until morning.

Lok and Zaria danced on together, twirling in circles opposite each other and stamping their feet. For a big fellow who had just polished off a hearty meal, Lok moved with surprising lightness, barely a step behind Zaria. And his long, thick cloak, which shielded him from the night chill, now billowed behind him in time with the sweep of Zaria's "wings," as if the two of them had planned it all in advance.

After watching them for a little while, Tak decided this was certain to drag on for a long time yet, so he quietly headed over to Dzhera.

Near the platform, the music and the pounding of the dancers' feet rang out more clearly — but that also meant none of the crowd would notice a hushed conversation behind their backs.

"Your sister looks truly beautiful today," Tak whispered as he finally reached Dzhera.

He suspected she would raise the subject of their journey at once, so he chose the worst possible tactic — he mentioned Zarya. Yet it

worked, at least for a while. Dzhera frowned and glanced toward the stage.

“From a distance, and in the dark — then perhaps, yes,” she drawled. “Those feathers of hers nearly drove everyone mad; the women will be seeing them in their nightmares now...”

She broke off abruptly, remembering that nightmares held far worse things to be encountered these days.

“Still, she does look beautiful,” Tak rejoined, and added, so as not to wound his friend’s feelings: “Among all the parrots, she would certainly take first place.”

Dzhera gave a faint smile and turned to face him fully. Beside her sister, she had always seemed plainly dressed, and today the contrast was especially noticeable. Indeed, she dressed like a man and never wore dresses: a short top of cat hide and a skirt of green tapa, with a sweet-scented hibiscus blossom in her hair for her only adornment. That was all. Were it not for her outward resemblance to Zarya, no one could ever have mistaken her for a member of the Supreme Family. And that was exactly what Tak liked about her.

“You’re heading to the Forgotten Temple, aren’t you?”

In spite of himself, he averted his eyes and turned his gaze back to the stage.

“How do you know?”

“Kiko told me.”

“Nerbils take that Kiko,” Tak could not help swearing to himself. He had told him plainly that he had no intention of taking Dzhera along, whether she liked it or not. Sometimes Kiko acted out of sheer spite; or perhaps he simply failed to grasp what was expected of him.

“Don’t you dare say I’m not going anywhere,” Dzhera said sharply, folding her arms across her chest and tossing her pointed chin up in the

same motion. “You know perfectly well I’m going, and I don’t care what Father thinks of it. And you, it seems, don’t like that.”

Reproaches were the last thing he needed. As if it weren’t his head — Tak’s — that the Chief would tear off should anything happen to his little daughter, and he couldn’t care less that she had run off on her own.

“Dzhera, listen to me,” he began, as gently as he could manage, at last summoning the courage to look her straight in the eye.

The right words fell neatly into line in his mind, as if they had been waiting there all along. And the moment was perfect — no one was watching them, a silence had fallen…

Silence?

Tak spun around just in time to see Zaria and Lok standing frozen, face to face, their dance over. The feathers draped over their arms and tucked into their hair still swayed faintly. A heartbeat later, everything around them was swallowed by shouting, applause, and the stamping of feet. Even Dzhera flinched at the din. The tribe seemed to have gone mad.

The Chief appeared on the stage and flung his arms wide, as though about to gather Zaria and Lok into his embrace.

“A magnificent dance from my beautiful daughter Zaria and the illustrious warrior Lok!”

The crowd went on cheering for several minutes more, quieting only a little after Zaria left the stage. Lok stayed where he was, adjusting the boar tusks that hung at his chest and held his cloak in place. The Chief stepped closer to the edge.

“And now I ask our heroes to come up here! Tak! Tobar! Kiko!”

Without so much as a glance at Dzhera, Tak hurried over to them— glad, perhaps, that their conversation was being put off yet again, or

perhaps angry about it. The crowd clapped once more, though not so heartily as before.

Standing now on the platform between Kiko and Lok, listening to the Chieftain's pompous speech, Tak thought that this really was it—there was no going back for them now. Tomorrow they would set out and either catch that monster, or…

No—Tleylok is lying. Tak is not leading these people to their deaths. It is death they carry with them.

At last the Chieftain finished his proclamation and dismissed the people to the feast. Bulky and clumsy as he was, by some miracle he had contrived to outpace them all and already sat waiting at the center of the table.

Tak climbed down to the ground, firmly resolved to have it out with Dzhera once and for all, then slip away quickly—before she came to her senses and beat him to a pulp. After that he could stand watch near Dzhibolba and Tleylok while they slept. As for himself, he would scarcely sleep a wink tonight.

Zaria had settled at her father's left hand, her feathers set aside, and now seemed once more an ordinary, mortal girl rather than a creature from the realm of Juju. Beautiful she was, of course—but that was all. Her eyes were cold, and a smile seldom touched those lovely lips.

The seat on the right side stood empty, but Tak had already caught sight of Dzhera at the far edge of the clearing and was striding toward her.

"I thought you'd never come down from there!" she scolded the moment he reached her, though there was no malice in her eyes—only merry little sparks glittering within them. "Did you enjoy being up on that stage, just like Lok and Zaria? You should have danced as well, and then perhaps…"

"Dzhera."

He would tell her everything now, while he still could, and then go off to his own place so as not to set eyes on her again until morning.

She fell silent and arched her eyebrows, ready to listen. In the half-darkness the scratch on her cheek was all but invisible, yet her enormous eyes gleamed in the warm glow of the lanterns — as though the little lights of the yorbls had taken shelter inside them. The tribal tattoo on her face bore a certain resemblance to a shaman's: the right eyelid was painted over entirely, and a magical sign ran upward through the brow. Until recently the other eye had been painted too, though only the lid, without ornament. Tattoos also marked her right arm near the shoulder — two fine lines, one above the other — while on her left leg a magical zigzag coiled about her ankle. The ink was coral pink, like Tleylok's, and Tak studied the design on her face as he gathered his thoughts.

"I want so much for you to come with me," he began, but no sooner had Dzhera opened her mouth to say "I'm coming with you anyway" than he cut her off, laying his palm on her shoulder. "I want so much to live through this with you, the way we always have. But you can see for yourself how dangerous it is" provided he didn't so much as glance at her wound — "and this is one of those times when I won't be able to stay at your side every moment, do you understand? I won't be able to protect everyone. But you'll be safe if you stay in the village."

There it was. Tak held his breath, expecting a shriek, a punch on the arm, or something else entirely. But Dzhera merely blinked a few times and asked:

"You want me to stay?"

"I want you to be safe," he said, mustering all the sincerity he could. "That Sarah—what's-her-name—will be leaving the village, and at least here it will be safe to sleep at night. At any rate, that's what I hope. I want everything to turn out well for you, because…" He

faltered, then forced himself to go on: “because… you’re my best friend. And I’m asking you to stay—for my sake, and for the sake of our friendship. Please.”

It had been hard to say, but it seemed to work. Dzhera sighed and lowered her eyes. For a while, silence hung between them; only the people behind them went on talking and laughing.

“I’d like to come with you,” Dzhera muttered, like a child who knows she won’t get what she wants but, purely out of stubbornness, means to whine for it a few more times anyway. “You’ll never manage without me. You, Kiko, and Lok make quite a bunch—you’ll land in trouble the moment you set foot outside the village.”

“Tobar will be with us.”

Tak decided not to breathe a word against it—she could mock him all she pleased. He understood her, after all. He would have flown into a rage himself had she set off on the most dangerous expedition in the world and left him behind in the village.

“Perhaps it really would be better to stay home,” Dzhera conceded at last, looking him straight in the eye to show him that she wasn’t lying.

Tak hesitated still, searching for the slightest trace of deceit. Had he really managed to persuade her, after all? He felt almost sad. And yet, deep down, he had wished to fail—wished that she would not be dissuaded, that she would join them on their journey. That was a selfish wish—the exact kind of thing Lok would do. And the last thing Tak wanted was to resemble him.

“Thank you.” He made as if to embrace her, but didn’t quite dare. “Everything will be fine.”

Let’s hope so.

Nothing in her manner betrayed whether being made to reverse the decision had wounded her or left her seething. Tak watched her, trying

to make out whether she was pretending. He had known Dzhera all his life — longer, even, it seemed — and he was well accustomed to his friend flashing into anger at a moment's notice, or dissolving nearly into tears whenever something slipped beyond her control. But if she stayed calm, trouble was sure to follow. Every lull is only the hush before a storm — a saying that fit her, and her sister, to a tee.

"Tak? Can you hear me?" Dzhera even waved a hand in front of his nose, and only then did he snap out of it and return to the real world. "I'm asking: has Tleylok come round?"

"Yes, he's better. And do you know the first thing he did? Tried to frighten me. Then he described Sa… I can hardly bring myself to say the name — described it exactly as Fauna had shown it. It's a white antelope with claws and strange horns."

Dzhera's eyes flew wide, and Tak hastened to change the subject:

"On the whole, he's on the mend — if that's what you mean."

The princess let out a breath and smiled faintly.

"I do hope Dzhibolba doesn't ask me to look after him while you're away. Where do you keep the poison, by the way?..." Her smile vanished all at once as her gaze caught on something behind Tak's back, and her thin brows slid slowly downward. "Don't turn around — the Ungachaka are bearing down on us."

That was the last thing he needed. Without a single backward glance, Tak seized Dzhera's hand and drew her after him.

"Might I suggest we run," he whispered cheerfully, "before they force us to commit murder?" And Dzhera quickened her pace.

Voices rose behind them — or perhaps they only imagined it — but either way, the friends broke into a run, skirting the clearing. To their left stretched a newly built wall, its sharpened tips jabbing at the night sky.

“Where are you dragging me? whispered Dzhera, not yet daring to raise her voice.”

“Here.”

Tak led her to a kvila tree that grew at the very edge of the village, its mighty branches spreading wide on every side. Climbing it was like scaling a sheer cliff; a fall from even the lowest bough would have left Dzhibolba nothing to piece back together. But then again, who ever bothers with the lower branches?

Tak and Dzhera edged their way out onto a thick, slightly crooked bough that reached out over the clearing. From here, nearly the whole village lay spread before them; only the shamans’ dwelling was hidden from view — though, truth be told, it was seldom visible from anywhere anyway. Tables laden with food stretched across the heart of the open ground, and a little farther off stood the stage, now deserted. The Chieftain was plainly in sight — he sat at the central table, and every now and then his booming voice drifted their way, though what he was saying was impossible to make out. The rest of the people either crowded round those same tables or whirled about the great bonfire.

Seen from outside, it might have been a betrothal the tribe was celebrating, or one of the Juju holidays. Something merry — but surely not a send-off for kinsmen bound on a perilous expedition.

“Look!” Dzhera jabbed her elbow into Tak’s side, and he very nearly tumbled off the branch.

He peered down. From such a height, and in the darkness to boot, it was hard to make anything out, yet he knew Zaria at once by her bright orange-and-yellow plumage, and in the whole tribe only Lok wore a blue cloak. The two stood at the deserted edge of the table, apparently deep in conversation, flinging their arms about now and then—as if a dance together were all they were missing.

“I bet they’re vying to out-talk each other,” Dzhera smirked. “Or weighing which of them is the more in love with himself.”

They laughed, plotting what prank they might play on this detestable pair. Pelt them with rotten fruit? Drop a slippery snake into their midst? Perhaps drench them in paint? The last idea pleased them best.

Tak leaned out, steadying himself against the branch, and gave his wand a wave. The orange-and-yellow cloud, conjured especially for the princess and the first warrior, drifted slowly through the air until it hung directly above the pair, swaying gently.

“Now...” Tak leaned out still farther, his body tipping precariously, and nearly lost his balance.

A tiny spark darted from the wand and struck the very heart of the cloud. Like a monstera leaf heavy with rainwater, the cloud tipped and burst, and a whole torrent of brilliant paint came pouring down.

Tak sprang back at once, and he and Dzhera clapped their hands over their mouths. A piercing shriek threw the jungle into an uproar, and somewhere overhead an entire flock of pomars burst into flight. The friends could hardly keep their perch for laughing, yet still they did their best to go unheard.

Zariya was wailing louder than anyone — she must have been in the grip of a first-rate fit of hysterics. The Chief’s booming voice rang out, and Lok was shouting something too. It would be a while yet before anyone worked out who was behind it all.

“Let’s go,” said Tak, getting to his feet and beckoning Dzhera to follow. “We’ll climb up even higher, where they won’t see us.”

“As if nobody would guess it was your doing,” Dzhera giggled in reply, pulling herself upright and setting off after him.

“In any case, they’ll have to catch us first! Just picture it — your daddy climbing up a tree…”

Even at that height, Dzhera managed to give him a shove, gauging her strength with such precision that her friend was not sent tumbling.

“They deserved it,” she replied with conviction. “Lok and Zariya are the two most insufferable Pupununu there are — and we suffer them more than anyone. What we’ve done today is a mere trifle beside everything we’ve had to put up with on their account.”

“Bossing younger sisters and helpers about is the sacred duty of every person,” Tak replied, working his way still higher up the trunk. “If we were in their place, we’d carry on in exactly the same way.”

They settled in snugly where two branches grew close together. Moss and fue had woven a cushion there: damp, cold, but soft. From up here, the village was lost to them both in sight and in sound. Directly overhead stretched a rectangular patch of sky; everything else was swallowed up by branches, leaves, vines, lichen, and the tiny flowers of dodder, while greedy aerial roots groped this way and that, eager to latch onto anything within reach. Had you not known there were people far below, you might easily have believed yourself in the very heart of the jungle.

“How much longer will this trek drag on?”

Dzhera smoothed back her hair, which the damp had already begun to weigh down. There was barely room for the two of them; they sat wedged close, side pressed against side.

Tak wriggled a little, feeling his shoulder scrape against Dzhera’s damp one. The rough bark of the tree gnawed at his bare back, but he reckoned it better to sit as he was than to edge aside and land practically in his friend’s lap. She, for her part, was far more comfortable — a cushion of soft moss lay behind her, and she lounged at her ease, head lolling back.

“No more than five days,” Tak answered with conviction, though in truth he had no idea.

Time had never come easily to him. He was forever forgetting one holiday or another, losing count of the days, and could scarcely say when his own birthday fell. The sundial in the shaman's house bewildered him even more, and he preferred to judge the hour by where the sun hung in the sky.

Who had invented time in the first place? Who had carved lives into segments, breaking eternity into days, moons, and years? Why, of course — no one but Juju could ever have dreamed it up. The immortal spirits had devised time expressly for their mortal wards.

"Five days!" Dzhera huffed furiously. "That's a whole eternity! I'll go mad out here."

Tak was tempted to point out that she was better off going mad and staying in one piece, but thought better of it. He would have lost his own mind had he stayed behind in the village, cut off from his friends, knowing they had set off for the far end of the island with no telling whether they would ever find their way back home…

It was a strange thing: whenever he stopped to consider that he was the friend who was leaving—perhaps never to return—the thought held no terror for him at all. He simply could not believe it. In his life he had stood face to face with death more than once (quite apart from Juju's Death). He had descended into the World of Spirits. He had conversed with ghosts. Indeed, he had seen so much that the idea of perishing beneath the paws of some beast such as he had never laid eyes on before struck him as almost comical.

"Look," Dzhera said—half a threat, half an attempt to cheer him —"if you're not back within five days, I'm setting out to find you myself."

Tak made no reply. They were to leave tomorrow morning, and the last thing he wanted was to talk it over. Had Dzhera been coming with him, he would have been counting the days with eagerness, already

turning plans over in his head. But now he could not so much as picture what the journey would be like without her.

“Will Flora and Fauna be helping you?”

Only then did he turn to his friend. Of course—the Juju sisters. He had all but forgotten about them.

“I believe so. Though if Fauna comes at all, it will only be as an absolute last resort; Flora, on the other hand, is certain to be somewhere close at hand.”

Just as it had been on his first journey, when he went searching for herbs and magic stones to turn his kinsmen back into humans. Back then it had embarrassed him that Juju himself—who did look like a girl of ten—was the one helping him. He had not known then that he himself was exactly half Juju; but Flora—Flora surely knew something of it.

“Are you glad of that?”

Dzhera was prodding listlessly at the moss near her foot, never once looking his way. She had asked as though in passing. Could it be she was jealous—that the almighty daughters of Luna would be at his side while she could not?

“Glad? Hardly,” Tak replied offhandedly, watching her reaction out of the corner of his eye. “Flora is certainly sweet, but one soon tires of her.”

Dzhera nodded, comforted by that answer, and pushed a few leaves apart, straining to make out what was happening on the ground below.

“Do you think we can climb down now without cracking every rib?”

Tak listened, but could discern nothing beyond the chirping of grasshoppers and the soft rustle of the treetops. Zaria and Lok, apparently, had nothing better to do than circle beneath the tree, waiting for them to reappear. Why, at this very moment they were

probably off resting somewhere, cursing the two of them to high heaven.

“I think so.” Then Tak remembered something and asked, a touch reluctantly, “Who will keep watch over you tonight?”

Dzhera turned, her eyes widening in bewilderment — and then she understood.

“Zaria,” she muttered, and suddenly her eyes flew wide open again. “Oh no. Tak, what if she doesn’t wake me when that one attacks? What if she decides to take her revenge on me?”

Tak had heard plenty about Zaria’s cruelty and treachery, but he still tried to reassure his companion:

“Never. Just think it through yourself: if you were slain, the Chieftain would kill her in return.”

There was no arguing with that.

They picked their way down from the tree, only to find neither an enraged Lok nor a furious Zaria. Hardly anyone remained in the clearing at all — everyone had drifted off to sleep, pairing up once more. Tak found himself thinking of Dzhibolba, who would be keeping vigil over Tleylok yet again. Poor uncle. If Dzhibolba was worn down to nothing by that cursed sorcerer, then Tak would finish what Tsarad had started.

He turned to Dzhera to wish her good night as usual, but the words suddenly caught in his throat. They were not merely parting ways until morning. This was his last night in the village — and then there was that monster to consider. Say what you liked, but the nights could hardly be called peaceful just yet.

“Good night,” Dzhera said first, though the look in her eyes made it plain she was thinking the very same thing. “And don’t even think about slipping away in secret tomorrow.”

She drew breath as though to say something more; her gaze came to rest on Tak, and he understood that if she embraced him now — or so much as clapped him on the shoulder — he would not be able to bear it.

“See you tomorrow,” he answered curtly, spun on his heel, and set off for his own place.

Chapter 6

You know, of course, that mana — the magical energy — is bestowed only upon chiefs and shamans. Juju, however, are made of mana from the crowns of their heads to the very tips of their claws, just as coverlets are woven from the veins of a hal. The spirits command this power with ease — no more effort than it takes the Guy-in-the-Mask to drive his sheep from one place to another. Mana suffuses the air: animals breathe it in, and plants absorb it with the sunlight. It glitters on gossamer spiderwebs, hides beneath river stones, murmurs in the voices of trees, and howls in forgotten caves.

A mortal is seldom granted a share of mana, and when fortune does smile upon someone, it falls only to warriors as brave as our Lok, or to wise elders like Log the Hermit… though here I may well be mistaken…

But there is another power, one open to ordinary folk: ofinda, the feminine energy. Ofinda came into the world with the first rays of Luna. It fills a woman's heart, lending lightness to her step, straightness to her back, and radiance to her eyes. Ofinda makes women capricious one moment and affectionate the next — now cunning, now compassionate. They will feed every starving soul without hesitation, yet at the barest hint of a husband's unfaithfulness they will devise an elaborate scheme of revenge. They will take pity on a lost fledgling, yet cut the throat of a pig that has stained their carpet without a second thought. And the women themselves can do nothing about this nature of theirs — it is all the work of Luna and ofinda.

Every woman is a little bit of a witch. Sometimes she seems to read your thoughts, and sometimes you can be certain she has laid a curse upon you. Women somehow know what lies in your heart and what you think of them. There is no deceiving them (one fellow here tried)

— they see straight through you, as if they possessed the eyes of Juju. As the proverb goes, it is better to fight a whole squad of warriors than to stand against a single woman. Bear that well in mind.

Women draw ofinda when they weave, when they paint pots, bake berry pie, or braid one another's hair. Luna taught them all these arts back in the days when the spirits still dwelt among people. Few can meet the protectress of Pupununu nowadays, yet the women have kept every one of her lessons and now pass them on to their daughters.

I shouldn't be telling you this, but now you know why Dzhera is so unlike an ordinary girl. She has no mother to hand the woman's art down to her, and her elder sister would sooner do anything at all than raise her little sister. Dzhera keeps no company with other girls, wears no long dress, and never dances beneath the full moon. You would think she should carry less ofinda than anyone — and yet...

But never meet her gaze head-on, least of all during the full moon, and never touch her right forearm, where she bears a tattoo. We remember all too well how that witch once made our entire tribe vanish.

Despite every reassurance her friend could offer, Dzhera made her way home with a heavy heart. She had all but forgotten the hike and the monster while they were fleeing the twins — laughing, perched together in the tree. And Tak, as though he hadn't the faintest sense of how serious it all might be. He hadn't paused even once to consider what she might be feeling now.

The clearing lay deserted; only a bluish-grey smoke still drifted slowly up into the sky from the extinguished campfire. Dzhera waved to Tau as she passed — he stood watch that day. His wife Leya and his brother Itu had stayed on with him, settled on a log close by. She would gladly have joined them: listened to stories, sat by the fire, traded chatter with friends.

If only this were an ordinary celebration, and the tribe faced no danger at all.

Father's chamber was on the second level of the High House, where he now slept under the vigilant care of the attentive Kaik. The sisters' rooms stood apart, likewise at the second-floor level. Zaria's little house nestled right against the House itself; it was tall, crowned with a yellow wooden "feather" that jutted two cubits above the roof.

Dzhera's own bedroom was quite small, resting on the mighty roots and trunk of a kvil tree; a bridge-balcony ran between it and the main House, curving past Father's and Zaria's chambers.

Now her sister's room glowed softly from within, like a lantern. Dzhera braced herself for a fight to the death and went inside.

Two oil lamps burned in Zaria's bedroom, and a candle stood on the mirrored vanity table. The shutters were drawn, and the stuffiness of the hot day still hung about the room. As usual, the air carried the delicate scent of koa, its tiny blossoms strung in garlands beneath the high ceiling, and through it all drifted the sweet perfume of coconut and mango oils — Zaria had just finished smoothing them into her skin.

Once, a papikins named Karampi had lived with her. Papikins are endearing little creatures: soft-furred, huge-eyed, with three pairs of paws. They follow their person everywhere, fetch things, whirl in circles, and squeak. Everyone seems to adore them. But as the animals grow older, their sharp teeth make themselves known, and they begin wrecking everything in reach, often snapping at their owner as well. After Karampi gnawed through the chief's throne and it collapsed beneath him, her father ordered his daughter to be rid of the beast. It sparked one of the loudest quarrels their House had ever known, for father and daughter were equally stubborn, equally convinced that no one had the right to tell them what to do. Where that protracted scandal

might have ended, no one could say — but then Karampi went and devoured the little box that held all of Zaria's cosmetics: antimony eyeshadow, lip rouge made from loa seeds, and a blush ground from mulberries. After that, the fate of the wretched papikins was sealed.

"So, is it my turn?" Dzhera asked innocently, pausing on the threshold.

Zaria had washed away the paint, yet flecks of yellow and orange still glimmered here and there — at her chin, at the corner of one eye, among the roots of her hair. She sat before the mirror, running her fingers through the damp strands. Her dress hung drying on a line beside the house, and she had thrown on a loose, plain tunic into which her delicate figure seemed to sink as into sea foam. A bath, of course, had been made ready for her straight away — a fire kindled beside the pool, fresh water poured in, chamomile petals scattered across the surface — and one of the girls, En or Alicia, had handed her an impossibly soft towel of sheep's wool. Loku, in all likelihood, had been sent trudging all the way to the stream, right in the dead of night.

"Yes, from now on you'll be watching me," Zaria replied calmly, glancing at her sister in the mirror. "Don't take your eyes off me."

Dzhera grew wary. Zaria was neither raging nor fuming; she looked altogether too composed for someone who had been doused in paint half an hour before. She knew perfectly well that Tak was behind it — and that Dzhera had been with him at the time. Of that she was absolutely certain! She had never openly picked on the shaman, but it cost her nothing to shout at his accomplice.

"Fine!" Dzhera replied in the same even tone, and sank into a soft chair.

Chairs like these were found only in Zaria's room; she had ordered them made to her own design. Wide, with a comfortably reclined back and a plump cushion stuffed with chicken feathers, they were an

unearthly pleasure to settle into. Yet right now Dzhera felt as though she were perched on the hardest stone in the world.

“That mate of yours is a proper idiot, of course,” Zaria began her scolding at last, rising lazily to her feet, “but Lok and I agreed there’s no sense in doing away with him just yet. We need him to catch the monster.”

“But you said there was no monster,” Dzhera blurted out before she could stop herself.

“Which is exactly why,” Zaria replied, taking no notice as she drew a tunic off over her head, “I’m putting my revenge on hold for now. But it will catch up with you in the end—make no mistake.”

“Oh, so you’re sparing my life too? How merciful of you.”

“I need someone to keep watch over me tonight,” she admitted reluctantly, stretching out on the bed. “All the girls have gone home to their families, and Papa has declared he won’t have a single man anywhere near me. That leaves only you.”

Over her bare body she threw a weightless cape knitted from the veins of hala leaves, then wriggled about, trying to get comfortable. She had so many pillows they would have sufficed for an entire tribe, and the bed itself was soft, stuffed with sheep’s wool. Dzhera remembered the stiff tapa hammocks and woven floor mats her friends had.

“Open the window a crack—I want to see the stars.”

Dzhera rose unhurriedly, crossed the length of the room, and eased the wooden shutters slightly apart. The window overlooked the jungle, and below lay the bathing pool behind its fence. The constellation of the Boat glittered in the sky, drawing the eye at once. It was Dzhera’s favorite, though she could never have said exactly why. Since childhood it had seemed to her that the three bright stars of the Boat

were friends, and that this was why they stood so close together, lined up in a row.

On her way back, she stole a glance at herself in the mirror and saw that a few strands, along with the ends of her hair, had curled and were sticking out at the sides — the work of the jungle's humid night air, from sitting in a sodden nest high up in a tree. Her arms itched faintly where the mosquitoes had feasted on her. Even so, she had enjoyed every moment of it. Tak had come up with a splendid idea.

She extinguished the lamps, leaving only a single candle burning for herself, and sank back into her armchair. From outside rose the loud chirring of crickets, and every now and then a night kakapo parrot let out a hoarse cry somewhere in the distance. Yet hardly anyone slept soundly, even on so peaceful a night.

"Is it true?" Zaria asked suddenly, her voice low. "Is it really that dangerous?"

"What exactly?"

"Do people truly have to travel to the far edge of the district?"

Once more the old fear chilled her chest, but Dzhera gave no outward sign of it.

"You heard what Tak said. He's thought it all through — it must be done, so the tribe won't suffer."

"But the squad will suffer. Some of them will die, won't they?"

Dzhera could not answer. Her throat tightened, and the skin inside her nose drew taut, so that tears nearly welled in her eyes. All evening she had been trying not to think of it — not to think of it — and now…

"I don't understand why so many people have to go," Zaria pressed on. "The more who leave, the more will die. And while they're gone, we'll be left without any protection at all. The whole tribe will die out within days — we're doomed..."

"Don't exaggerate. Besides, weren't you about to fall asleep?"

Zaria fell silent, and Dzhera was relieved that sleep would finally claim her. Talk of the expedition was more than she could bear. She was utterly exhausted.

“When you see someone every day, you come to believe it will always be so — that nothing could ever shatter it,” Zaria began abruptly, her voice low. She wrapped her cloak more tightly about herself as though she were cold, the fabric drawn across her mouth. “And then something terrible happens out of nowhere, and they all go away. And you are the one left behind, wondering whether you will ever see them again. You know how that feels, don’t you?”

Dzhera swallowed. Was Zaria speaking of her, or did she truly mean herself? Her sister rolled onto her other side and said nothing more.

Dzhera sat at her sister’s table, sorting through the little bottles, pouches, and bowls of oils, fruit waters, herbs, and berry purées that Zaria used to tend her skin and hair, to keep her lips smooth and her lashes full, to lend her nails their shine and her face its even tone. Dzhera took no such pains with herself. When her shoulders began to peel or her forehead turned flaky, she reached for the plainest coconut oil, the kind that served for everything — from frying food to greasing door hinges so they wouldn’t creak. Her freckles troubled her not at all; her nails were forever splitting, with dirt perpetually lodged beneath them. She could not have cared less whether her lips were soft, for there was no one to kiss. And there was more to her scent than hibiscus or mango oil, too.

Dzhera hardly thought of herself as a beauty — least of all beside her sister. And yet sometimes she all but dreamed of having someone of her own — not a spiteful sister like the one she’d landed, nor a mother, but a friend (a real friend, mind you, not a “Takita,” may he be torn to pieces) — someone to confide all sorts of girlish things to, to

swap secrets with, to whisper about boys and the like. They would fashion each other's elaborate hairstyles like Leia and Kaona, read one another's private journals, and never be parted. At times the whole fancy struck Dzhera as utter nonsense — of course she needed nothing of the sort; she felt perfectly at ease among the boys. And at other times, like now, she found herself wondering what a hopeless loser she must be if even a friend like that was beyond her reach.

Once she had satisfied herself that Zaria was asleep — and that no wounds, bites, or anything else of the kind were breaking out on her body — Dzhera darted to her room and came back with a clean scroll and her writing things. She kept her personal records on separate short sheets, tucked away in a box. Paper was in short supply, so she made as few notes as she could manage, writing in a minuscule hand with lines that all but crowded atop one another. What was more, a fair portion of every page was claimed by the "seal" a circular drawing with Juju's magical symbol at its heart — and the "map" two crossed spheres, one large and one small, bearing a schematic sketch of the two worlds: Juju's own, and that of the humans. These two figures had to appear on every sheet that carried even the slightest significance — anything beyond a mere note — no matter how little room remained. So she was often forced to weigh which events were worth recording at all, for there simply wasn't paper enough to spare. But she didn't begrudge the scroll a little space for what was unfolding now.

Had Dzhera been Blita, money would have been no object. Unga Ungachaka had established the craft of paper-making from bark and its fibers, and even from straw. He sold it to his own tribesmen at a steep price, and to other tribes for three times as much. That was why Ungachaka owned so grand a house—almost as fine as the supreme one's. That was why Blot and Blita had so many curious things and toys. That was why the whole family turned their noses up at everyone

else. Paper. Without paper, you couldn't even dash off a note to your father.

Setting a candle on Zaria's little table, Dzhera pushed her jars and bowls aside, weighted the scroll down, swiftly sketched the necessary drawings, and with a fine quill began to trace tiny but tidy symbols.

"Our life has been darkened by misfortune. A monster has broken loose from the kingdom of Juju…"

She hesitated, unsure how to spell "Tsarad" correctly. Their language had neither letter nor sound with which such a name could begin; she would have to make do without the particulars.

"…that can kill people in their dreams. He wounded me last night. Thank the stars, Tak woke me…"

She had not yet finished the sentence when a cry rang out from the street. Dzhera nearly upset the ink bottle and glanced quickly back at her sister. Zaria went on sleeping peacefully, having heard nothing. She appeared to be all right. Besides, the monster, it seemed, had found himself another victim.

Dzhera rushed out of the House, the scroll still clutched in her hand — there was no time to run back to her own place and hide it there, and she would never, not for anything in the world, have left it with Zaria. The memory was still fresh: how Zaria had found those notes, come straight to Dzhera, and read that page aloud right in front of Tak… It was the second most terrible moment of Dzhera's life, second only to the day she had been forced to confess, before the whole village and one chatty Juju, that she loved her best friend…

"It attacked me!" Art yelled loud enough for the whole clearing to hear, circling near his house as though the beast were still at his heels. "It came at me in my sleep — look! In the name of all the magic of Juju and…"

His voice would climb into a shriek, then sink away into an indistinct mumble. By the door stood his wife, Kaona, pale as death, with little Blanki cowering behind her legs. Tau, Lei, and Itu had been the first to run to the house, but they kept their distance, eyes wide, at a loss for what to do. Little by little, the commotion drew others, and more and more villagers gathered in the clearing.

Dzhera went up to Art and reached for his hand to calm him. But the instant she touched him, he cried out in pain and recoiled.

“It’s all right — it isn’t here,” she began, though her own voice could barely hold steady against the fear rising in her. How badly had it hurt him? “Nothing here can harm you. The monster stayed behind in the dream.”

At last Art was beginning to calm a little. In truth, he was not the sort to give way to panic, being known for his quiet, gentle nature — which was precisely why the sight of him in such a state was unnerving everyone else as well. This had to be brought to an end, and quickly.

“It’s all right,” Dzhera repeated. “You’re safe here.”

“Oh, so you saw him too.” Art stretched a hand out toward her, as though he meant to prod her cheek with a finger, but checked himself just in time.

“Art, what happened? Were you hurt?”

Dzhera instinctively clutched the scroll tighter in her hand, as though someone were trying to wrest it away from her. She watched Art hurry over to Tak and hold out his hands, as if overjoyed to see the shaman. In truth, he was merely showing off his scratches.

“Just look at this. I threw my arm up to shield my face…”

Above the wrist of his right hand, a long gash ran across the gray tattoo. The bleeding had not yet stopped, and Art’s hands trembled faintly—more from fright than from pain.

“I woke him the moment the scratch appeared,” Kaona said as Tak examined the wound. “How frightened I was! I thought he would never wake. I had to strike him with the spear.”

Dzhera’s eyes went wide, and Kaona corrected herself:

“I only thumped him with the shaft.”

Dzhera glanced around. A dozen or so Pupununu had spilled out onto the street and now stood in a half-circle, too afraid to come any closer to Art, yet just as afraid to go back to their beds and sink into sleep again. Her father, with his soothing words, would have been a blessing just now—but he lay fast asleep.

“It’s a miracle I came through at all,” the warrior muttered once more, and a wave of wails and sighs rippled through the gathered crowd.

This would not do. Dzhera stepped up to Tak and whispered:

“Say something. They’re frightened.”

“And who might the future chief be around here?” he answered just as quietly, yet still stepped forward and raised his hand. — Nothing to worry about, folks. See? That’s exactly why we keep watch over one another now. As long as we stand together, no one gets hurt.

“But I…” Art began, but Kaona squeezed his shoulder, and the words died on his lips.

“All we have to do is see this night through,” Tak went on, and his voice gathered strength, ringing out louder. The door of the nearest house opened, but whoever stood there stayed inside, listening. — Tomorrow you’ll sleep soundly once more, for the monster will have left your nightmares. And now, everyone home! — he clapped his hands. — Everything will be all right, Pupununu. I promise.

A collective sigh of relief swept through the crowd. Some made straight for home; two men came up to Art to clap him on the shoulder and have a word. But Tak was not finished yet.

“Art, you’d best go see Dzhibolba” he’s still awake. He’ll take a look at your hand and help you. And people, if anyone fancies a soothing cup of noni tea, Dzhibolba has everything you could want. Come on over — no need to be shy.

Only then did he finally catch his breath, watching the crowd disperse and Art, together with his family, make his way home. Unga Ungachaka and the elderly Nula trailed after him.

“Well done,” Dzhera praised him, and even that was only a fraction of the delight and respect she felt.

When the need arose, Tak could deliver a perfectly decent speech, and it was just as well that this happened to be exactly such an occasion. As for herself, she could barely string two words together. Truth be told, she loathed addressing the tribe in that particular role of the “future chief,” especially when people needed to be calmed down or given their orders.

“Oh, come off it,” Tak waved it off, though his smug smile made it clear he didn’t mean a word of it. — How are you feeling? Did he wake you?

“No. Zariya’s asleep for now.”

Dzhera knew that, ideally, she ought to hurry home at once and resume her watch over her sister. But oh, how she hated to leave this place, especially now.

“So she hasn’t eaten you alive, I see. And what’s this?”

He jabbed a finger at the scroll she was still holding, and Dzhera nearly blushed.

“Oh, never mind that. I had to… take this somewhere. And then I heard Art. Thank goodness Kaona managed to wake him. The wound looks positively awful.”

“Not really. It isn’t deep; he can still move his arm.”

Tak fell silent and rubbed his eyes, stretching the dark purple tattooed skin taut.

“You need to get some sleep,” Dzhera realized with a start. — You’re leaving in the morning, and you…

“The night has only just begun,” he protested, eyes flying wide open at once. — I’ll have plenty of time. Dzhera, sometimes when I listen to you, you start sounding exactly like Dzhibolba or the Chief.

She bit her tongue at once — and immediately struck back.

“Oh, like Dzhibolba or Dad, you mean? Do they also go around threatening to shove feathers up your ass if you don’t get at least a couple of stupid hours of sleep?”

“Now this is more like it.” Tak smirked in satisfaction and hurried off toward his hut. “Until dawn, then, O moonlight of my eyes!”

Dzhera made as if to strike him with the scroll, but quickly thought better of it. She had to make do with a string of curses mingled with a wish of good night, and with that she set off for her own hut.

The sun had only just begun to stretch its rays among the treetops, yet the whole of Pupununu village was already up and stirring. People spoke in hushed voices, as though standing at an altar, and formed a semicircle around the small company.

Tak, Lok, Kiko, and Tobar. Their things were already packed—chosen with an eye to traveling fast and light—and now they were taking leave of their kinsmen. Dzhera couldn’t shake the feeling that they were parting for good. The thought had lodged itself firmly in her head, and nothing could pry it loose.

Slog kept trying to get her hands on Lok, but he had buried himself among the other girls, with no desire whatsoever to end up in her powerful embrace. Tobar stood among the men. Dzhera looked about for Tak, but her father had claimed him in conversation, so for the moment she went over to Kiko. No one else had come near him.

“Are you scared?”

Kiko had hoisted a strange contraption onto his back, looking at once like a woven basket and a sack of tapa cloth. A sharp, gnarled root was tucked behind his belt, a banjo dangled from one shoulder, and on the red braided cord that never left his neck he had strung a handful of spikes.

“Me? Scared?” He tried to shift the strange pack on his back into a more comfortable position and nearly toppled over backward. “Not in the least! Just look how I’ve packed—why, I spent the whole night slaving over this.”

“What is this? What’s it for?”

Dzhera made to touch the spikes, but Kiko jerked sharply away from her.

“Careful! They’re steeped in the venom of mad frogs. It’s my protection against the beast.”

Dzhera had been about to point out that his own safeguarding might do him harm should he forget himself and tilt his head, but the chance never came. A horn let out a long, droning note across the clearing, and she gave a start.

That was it? That was it—they were leaving!

“Good luck, Kiko.”

She moved to throw her arms around her friend, then remembered his “protection” just in time and settled for clapping him on the shoulder instead. The blow nearly knocked him off balance again.

Not wasting another moment on him, Dzhera hurried to Tak, around whom Tobar and Lok were already gathering. Father was bringing his solemn address to the detachment to a close, and at his side stood Burg, a great conch shell in hand, poised to sound it once more.

“Tak!”

He had donned a maroon cloak and shed his chest band, and he looked older now, almost resembling Lok.

“And here I was thinking you’d forgotten all about me.”

He smiled, carefree as ever, but Dzhera could see how grave his eyes had grown. Green, like those of everyone in the tribe, they shone brighter than usual, as though tiny crystals glimmered deep within them. The dark tattoo ringing them seemed somber at that moment, as if foretelling some misfortune. Then again, there are days when a person sees ill omens in everything. When your best friend is leaving on a dangerous mission, for instance.

Tak had brought no weapon of any kind, and Dzhera could gladly have scolded him for it. He imagined his magic alone would see him through — yet who could deny that a good spear or knife was sometimes a far swifter and more dependable ally than all the powers of Juju?

“I…” she faltered, her gaze settling on Loka, who stood nearby. There was so much she longed to tell him, but she couldn’t — not with all of them looking on. “I just… Be careful,” she forced out at last, though she wanted to say so much more.

Tak gave an indifferent shrug. He was no longer looking at her; his gaze drifted over the kinsmen gathered behind her back. And who was he searching for there…?

“As always. We’ll be back in no time — don’t miss me.”

“Yeah, right,” she muttered through clenched teeth.

If only she could have taken his hand… But her father, Zariya, and the rest of the tribe stood right behind her. She had to content herself with a shove against his forearm — no one would think twice about that. Tak laughed and rubbed the spot she had struck.

“And that’s exactly what I won’t miss!”

“You talk as though you were leaving for a whole moon,” Dzhera whispered. “It’s only a few days, isn’t it?”

Before Tak could so much as open his mouth, the chief’s booming voice rang out behind them:

“A fair journey, our valiant warriors! May Luna light your path, and may the feathers shield you from harm!”

“The other way around,” Zariya corrected — but he never heard a word of it.

Once more the conch shell boomed, and the people began to applaud, stamp their feet, and raise an enthusiastic clamor of delight that the band of the tribe’s most indispensable souls was marching off to certain death. Slog clapped her hands and shouted battle cries louder than anyone — and the space around her quickly emptied.

Dzhera bit her lower lip, feeling as though her hands were bound and her mouth gagged into the bargain. She hadn’t even been able to bid them a proper farewell! The expedition wheeled about and made for the main gates of the village. The great wooden “horns,” the emblems of Pupununu, loomed black and menacing, their sharp tips inclined toward the departing crowd.

Lok glanced back at the tribe more often than any of the others, now throwing up his arms in a show of courage, now winking and blowing smiles. Tak turned round only once — he waved a hand without really looking at anyone, then faced forward and never looked back again. Until the very last moment, Dzhera hoped he would glance at her after all — if only just to look. This might be the last she ever saw of that dimwit, and they hadn’t even said goodbye like normal human beings.

He was the first to vanish among the trees, as though the darkness of the forest had swallowed him whole. Tobar and Kiko melted away after him. Lok gave one final shake of his hands, clasped together into

a single fist, then bowed ceremoniously and dashed off to overtake the column.

For several long moments everything fell very still — only the birds went on whistling in the branches.

“Well then! The canopy has been taken down and everything carried away!” Her father clapped his hands in satisfaction. “We return to our usual business. Soon we shall sleep in peace, my people!”

The crowd clamored with delight, chattering over what had happened, and dispersed in every direction. Only Dzhera and Slog stayed behind by the arch.

When everyone had gone, Slog gave free rein to her grief. She dropped to her knees, pounded the ground with her enormous fist, and wailed loudly enough for the departing warriors to hear:

“My Lok will never come home! The beast will tear him to pieces, and I won’t be there to save him! Oh, my poor, poor Lok!”

Dzhera herself grew uneasy at the girl’s sobbing, and she leaned close at once to comfort her.

“Everything will be fine! Tak will protect them,” she had spoken those very words not so long ago. When? To whom?... Oh, right — to Zaria. — They will be back before the five days are out.

Slog lifted her round face, flushed now from weeping, and Dzhera’s heart went out to her. Slog could not help loving the warrior, could not help being so tender-hearted — none of it was her fault.

“I should have gone with them. If Lok dies, I should die too…”

“He won’t die,” Dzhera cut in, desperate to distract her. — Lok is strong and hardy; he can weather anything. And besides, you’re needed here. Tonight is the full moon, remember? The whole village depends on you.

“The full moon?” Slog seemed to return to herself. She sprang to her feet and scrubbed the tears from her cheeks. — I’d nearly

forgotten. You're right, little sister, there's so much to be done here. But if Tak lets Lok get killed — oh, then he'd best never come back at all!

She rushed off, and Dzhera was left entirely alone.

There was nowhere for her to go. Both of her friends were gone, and she could not fathom how she would endure even a couple of days without them. Only once before had such a thing happened, and it still stood as the darkest chapter of her life.

One fine day, for no reason at all, people began to explode. With a bang they were swept into oblivion; in their place, only a brief scatter of multicolored sparks. First Lok and Slog vanished. Then her father and Zaria. Before Dzhera could even begin to recover from such a loss, the remnant of the tribe came flocking to her for protection and aid — for she was their chief now.

Dzhera's rule did not last very long. The people quickly decided that everything was her fault, and after she touched Kiko and he exploded, they were finally and completely convinced of it.

And Tak believed it too.

At the very moment when she was left all alone in the world, with the whole tribe against her, that fool got scared and ran away, abandoning her on her own.

Dzhera could not remember exactly how she survived that night. It was very painful, deeply hurtful, and terribly lonely. She sat alone in the House and all but howled with despair. The next morning Tak came back to her and saved her from the maddened people, and then it turned out that it had all been arranged by Juju (well, who else), and everyone returned home safe and sound. But Dzhera would never forget that terrible night. And it seemed to her that after that incident, despite everything—everything—her friend had done for her, she would never again be able to trust him fully and completely.

“Strange that you’re still here.”

Dzhibolba came slowly up to her, smiling warmly. Dzhera smiled in return, then cried out in alarm:

“But what about Tleylok! He…”

“Sleeping like a baby, the old man said with a dismissive wave.” I fed him some herbs and he conked out. I left Blot Ungachak to keep an eye on him—Tak would have liked that. Surely you don’t think I left Tleylok alone in my right mind? Oh no, that crafty rascal can stir up trouble even with broken bones.

He spoke as though about some second teenage nephew of his, whose worst offense was runaway sheep and a broken vial of medicine.

“And what will become of him afterwards? When he gets better?”

Dzhera had no idea how deeply attached Dzhibolba was to his former partner, yet she understood that if that idiot simply slipped away in silence after everything that had been done for him — or worse, saw his chance and tried to seize power in the tribe once more — it would break the old shaman’s heart.

“We still have to live long enough to see that. And I doubt Tleylok will manage it.” Dzhibolba’s gray brows drooped again, and the light went out of his eyes. Dzhera regretted ever having asked. “He’s still in a very bad way. How I hope Tak can deal with that monster.”

A cold shiver ran down Dzhera’s spine. She could not help glancing at the jungle again, toward where the squad had gone. It had to be just another scrape, the hundredth of its kind. Nothing truly terrible could possibly happen…

“And yet,” Dzhibolba smirked again, watching her, “I was certain you’d flee the village before the squad even set out. Could it be you’re afraid?”

“Of course I’m afraid!” Dzhera snapped, feeling weaker and more helpless than ever. “It’s the most loathsome monster I’ve ever come across.”

She had no wish to tell Dzhibolba the truth — what if he went and complained to her father? Then Daddy would personally assign Otacon to her, just so he could keep an eye on her every single second. True, she was hardly likely to have to sneak out of the village and go looking for the squad, but… but there were far too many “buts” in this whole business.

“Well then, if boredom gets the better of you, come and see me,” Dzhibolba offered by way of farewell. “We’ll be bored together.”

Dzhera nearly went out of her mind waiting for evening to come. First she sat in her room right up until lunchtime, pouring her heart out onto a scroll — and then decided that even for a private journal the result was far too raw and clumsy, and grew all the more upset at having spoiled the paper. After that she confided aloud to Nevis the Nosey everything she had failed to set down, and he snorted in reply and nuzzled her cheek with his little muzzle.

Then, dying of boredom, she went off in search of the Ungachaka twins, hoping for a game of ball. Blot, who had already run off from Dzhibolba, declared that he had no time for such nonsense, and as for where Blita was loitering, he hadn’t the faintest idea. Dzhera’s spirits sank, and her anger flared higher still. Everyone was against her today!

“But if you like,” Ungachaka’s son suddenly offered, just as Dzhera was on the point of leaving, “we could stroll down to Numa Bay. There are loads of lobsters there right now.” He shrugged without looking at her. “Just like that, nothing personal. I’ve got nothing better to do at the moment, anyway.”

Dzhera stared at him as though he had taken leave of his senses.

“I’d sooner swallow a frog,” she muttered, and hurried away.

The very last thing she needed was to go traipsing about with this dimwit! They kept company only when there was a team game to be played, for no other youngsters were left in the tribe. Here, like it or not, you found yourself lined up either against the twins or shoulder to shoulder with them. But that was all! Strolls together were not part of the bargain — not for anything.

Admittedly, Blot on his own was neither particularly brave nor particularly vicious — it was only under Blita's command that he turned cruel and confident. Well, and those few days spent inside the body of a snaggletooth cub had done him a world of good, too: for a whole moon afterward, Blot gave them a wide berth. And yet! Her friends' traces hadn't even had time to cool, and there she was, off strolling with Ungachaka? The very thought of it was revolting.

Dzhera started toward her own place, then changed her mind and set off in search of the females.

It was full moon tonight, after all!

Chapter 7

Life was hard for people in those first days after the spirits departed. Monsters and hungry demons, swarming the jungle like worms beneath a stone, devoured people with relish. They were stronger and more cunning than ordinary beasts, and no simple torch or fence could keep them at bay. People had become just another snack for the monsters, and this upset them a little.

Once the tiki doll had been carved, oiled, and carried to the altar, the shaman was able to commune with the Juju and ask their advice. How could they protect themselves from the bloodthirsty spirits?

“You cannot manage without us—but now we cannot stay by your side every moment, either,” sighed the Juju of Love.

“If only you had even a spark of magic to defend yourselves,” lamented the Juju of Death.

“You are doomed,” snickered the Dark Juju.

“I know what will help you,” the Juju Seer replied unexpectedly.

The Juju Seer is one of the few spirits whose appearance bears any resemblance to a human’s, at least in part. But don’t you dare think that works in our favor: his temper is as explosive as a volcano newly awakened. Never cross the Seer, and bow low, oh so low, before him, until your forehead touches the ground.

“We cannot remain at your side, nor may we share our magic with you—but our magical signs can save you,” continued that wisest of spirits. “Take paint and trace these signs upon your houses, and the demons will keep far from your village. Bid the women paint them upon their pots, and your food shall never turn to poison. Take the sharpest of plant thorns, or fish bones honed to a point, dip them in the pigment, and prick these signs into your flesh. Then the evil spirits shall never harm you again.”

The Seer himself bears a magical sign upon his brow, and that is why he is so wise.

The people did everything just as Juju had instructed. They adorned their modest dwellings with vivid patterns, both without and within. The women took to painting their clay pots and dishes. Even before the supreme House itself they laid stone slabs in a spiral, to shield the chief and his family all the more surely. This place is now known as the clearing, and people delight in gathering there, never suspecting how this circle protects them.

The hardest part was applying the pattern to one's body. The first tattoos came out crooked and uneven and could not shield a person. Evil spirits would enter through the wounds and infect the blood. It took a very long time before the designs turned out sharp and bright, and before they healed quickly. Look at my face. A beautiful spiral, isn't it? More than forty years have passed, and it's still just as bright and even. And what a crisp outline rings your arm! You've quite forgotten how much it hurt, or how long the design took to heal, haven't you? That's because our craftsmen, the tahuns, have since perfected this art. Why, Po can tap out your tattoo with one hand, pluck a chicken with the other, and even play the nguru at the same time.

Now you know what this design means and why you see it everywhere. Without magical protection, people would have perished long ago, and they keep up their guard to this day. You know, whoever the parents of children like Tak and Kiko may have been, they acted wisely in managing to have their children tattooed before abandoning them. As you can see, the spirits never touched them, and so Pupununu was able to take them in.

Remember: we will never take anything that does not bear Juju's magical mark, be it a pot of food or an abandoned infant.

“This is the story of how a noble detachment, led by the incomparable warrior Lok the Brave, defeated…” No, that’s not right. “This is the story of how the most ordinary detachment of the most ordinary people, under the command of the magnificent, mighty warrior Lok the Bravest…”

“Lok, shut up!” Tak snapped, turning toward the tail end of their line.

“Hey, what else am I supposed to do?” he protested at once. “Since I’m here, I intend to make the most of this cursed expedition — namely, to come away with a story about myself. What do you think I’ll tell the Chief when we get back?”

Tak was no longer listening; he stared grimly straight ahead. Everything felt wrong, as though they had no business being here at all — as though they had forgotten something, left something undone, broken some rule or other. Fate would surely not be kind to them.

They had been walking for about an hour, though they had not yet left the village far behind. The paths here were well-trodden and easy underfoot, and from some of the trees and bushes hung trail markers of tapa and feathers. To their right stretched stately trees — mostly coconut palms, planted here by human hands. Farther on began the dense, wild forest, which everyone took care to avoid: animals dwelt there, one might stumble upon an evil spirit, and forcing a way through was hard. That was why their party would have to skirt this stretch in a small loop before they could reach the old trail that led to the Temple.

The journey had scarcely begun, yet already it seemed endless.

“Let’s head straight for the edge of the valley,” Tak suggested dryly, without turning to the others. “It might shorten our way a little.”

“Why don’t we cut through the jungle?” Kiko spoke up suddenly, and every head turned to him. “Otherwise we won’t reach the Temple until morning.”

In fact, they had been counting on reaching the sanctuary only the following day. At one spot along the rim of the upper valley the way grew treacherous, and hurrying through was a risk not worth taking.

“I don’t think we ought to risk it,” Tak said cautiously, choosing not to voice his misgivings.

“Well, I like this idea,” Lok objected at once. “I have no intention of stumbling about along the cliff in the dark — do you?”

Tobar nodded in silence, siding with his master on every point. Now all three were looking at Tak, and his temper began to rise.

“But we always take the cliff path to the Temple…”

“Not me,” Kiko interjected. “I go straight through the jungle. It’s far easier.”

“But a great deal more dangerous. The forest there grows twice as dense as the one beyond the volcano.”

“Don’t be such a coward,” Lok snapped, his patience wearing thin. “This whole expedition is a mistake as it is, and I want it over and done with as quickly as possible. The sooner we reach the place, the sooner you can kill what’s-his-name and we can all go home.”

Tak drew a deep breath. He understood Lok and the others perfectly well — he himself longed to have the whole business behind him. Besides, what could possibly go wrong in the jungle in broad daylight? Especially when they were armed as never before in their lives.

“Very well, let’s try it,” he answered quietly. “It will never be too late to turn onto the uru-fanakenga and come back out at the cliff. Let’s be off, then.”

The journey had barely begun, and already his opinion counted for nothing.

Of course, they should never have gone into the jungle. Strong warriors, armed to the teeth, enter the forest and vanish without a trace. Whole detachments had been swallowed by it, and only their skeletons

were found afterwards, entwined in the roots of monsteras. The forest is a pure creation of Flora and Fauna, which means it was made for spirits, not for people.

Kiko, Tak, Lok, and Tobar came within a hair's breadth of the jungle's most familiar trap: false ground. If ever you see before you a carpet of moss with young trees reaching out of it, turn back with care and give the place a wide berth. Heavy Lok very nearly set his foot upon this quiet little corner, but Tobar caught him by the cloak in the nick of time. Beneath anyone who fails to show due caution and prudence, the false ground yawns open; the traveler plunges into the abyss, the moss closes over him once more, and supple plants knit themselves across, hiding the treacherous spot.

Deep in the jungle the sky cannot be seen, and it is all too easy to wander in circles, having lost every sense of direction. Plants and stones deceive and will not tell you where the raki-fanakenga lies, nor from which side the sun rises. The trees know only how to thrust sharp thorns underfoot and entangle everything in stout vines; they will never point the way you need to go. The jungle is never on the side of humans, and the sooner you learn this, the better.

Tumbling down a hillock, Kiko bashed his knee on the rocks. Yet thanks to him, the others caught sight of the hidden rise and were able to make their descent in safety. Tak, lost in thought, all but trod upon a viper, and only by sheer miracle did they slip past without a single fang finding their legs. As for Tobar, he sank chest-deep into some puddle that had once been a swamp. Leeches and mosquitoes feasted upon him, and everyone agreed he had gotten off lightly.

They had not yet covered half the wild expanse when the sky abruptly darkened, and without warning a terrible downpour burst upon them. The party hastily huddled beneath the spreading crown of a mamarav, though gnats swarmed there in droves. But Tak handed out

eucalyptus leaves all round; everyone rubbed them over their hands and necks, and the mosquitoes left them in peace.

As they waited for the deluge to pass, they chewed on hard cornmeal flatbreads with purple jamun berries. No one felt like talking; the darkened sky, the clammy air, and the roaring jungle stirred a wistful longing for their snug village. Most likely it was dry and warm back home at that very moment — the rains usually lingered about the mountains or the jungle, skirting the coast and the desolate rim of the upper valley where they lived.

The rain ceased after their midday meal, and the party pressed on to make up for lost time. Before nightfall they would have to find a good spot to camp and put at least a little more distance between themselves and the heart of the jungle.

“Look — over there, under the koa.”

Tak spoke in a whisper, just to be safe. Lok, Tobar, and Kiko crowded beside him, peering into the shadow beneath the flowering tree.

Chilled to the bone, utterly spent, and spattered with mud to the knees, they had given up all hope of finding a comfortable place for the night when suddenly Tobar spied an empty clearing tucked away in a small hollow.

The spot seemed altogether too peaceful and still, and for a while the party lingered at its fringe, scanning their surroundings; and just as they began to descend, Tak caught sight of a black figure lurking at the far edge of the clearing.

Careful not to make any sudden movements, Tak drew a rod from his sash and gave it a slight wave. The glowing golden orb drifted smoothly forward, spilling light across the bare ground. His companions watched intently as it floated toward the shadow beneath the koa,

where the plant's motionless silhouette slowly took shape in the circle of light.

A large, fleshy "head" lay on the ground atop a thick stem, its maw gaping wide. Two supple yet powerful stems bristling with sharp leaves were curled like the legs of a dead bird. The roots bulged around the trunk, black and withered, sinking deep into the moss.

"But it's dead," Lok said, raising his voice. "We can rest here."

Tak shook his head without glancing at him. The nubu was a creature born of both Flora and Fauna at once — an intelligent plant that devoured beasts and humans alike. Its favorite ruse was to play dead until its prey strayed too close.

"If it were truly dead, this place would have grown over long ago," he hissed in reply. "But we can kill it. Tobar, do you have your darts?"

"He plucked a pair of sharp arrowroot shoots from the squire, took aim, and hurled the first into the middle of the clearing. In the dim light, the nubu seemed to twitch, and something scurried across the ground. Tak threw the second dart and sank it beside the creature's trunk."

The monster jerked upright, its long roots bursting from beneath the carpet of moss and knocking the dart aside. The nubu began to swing its "head" slowly from side to side and raised its leaf-paws in menace.

"See? It was faking," Tak said, straightening up. "It's trying to catch our scent now. I'll finish it off in a moment."

"Five years ago, when he had first set out to save Lok and the whole tribe, he'd had to learn the nubu plants inside and out. Kill one, and you can pry a seed from its "head" a seed imbued with mana. Bring enough of those seeds to the altar, and Juju may deign to come to your aid."

Nowadays he no longer needed to risk his life summoning spirits, yet his nubu-hunting skills hadn't deserted him. And one rule above all others: watch where you step.

Leaving his companions behind, Tak crept carefully toward the clearing and leveled the wand at the plant. The grip warmed gently in his palm, and a dazzling yellow flash shot from the magic crystal. It hit the nubu, but not hard enough to kill. The nubu began thrashing wildly, whipping its leaves about, and its long roots erupted from the soil mere finger-widths from Tak.

He sprang back and, without wasting a moment, fired at the monster again. Back then, wandless, he'd had to work up a proper sweat clubbing a nubu to death with a stick, sneaking up on the thing in a way that kept it from grabbing him.

The second flash proved fatal. The roots twitched a couple of times, then slowly curled in on themselves; one leaf-paw tore away, the "head" dropped to the ground, and the plant went still. Tak took his time watching it, then prodded one of the roots warily with the wand, but the nubu did not stir again.

"That's that," he muttered, and strode boldly out into the open, setting an example for the others. — Thanks to the nubu, we've got ourselves a fine spot to rest.

"...and then I said, "What do you think" why does he wear a mask?"

Tobar's joke sent Tak and Kiko into peals of laughter — the kind of story that isn't quite embarrassing, yet somehow never gets told in front of the whole tribe, though for a small gathering it's just the thing. Especially with no girls around.

Lok was the only one who didn't laugh. He hadn't said a single word since they had settled down to rest, only sat in silence, turning the chopped nubu roots in the fire. Just to be safe, Tak had suggested

cutting the plant into pieces, and Tobar and Kiko had hacked it apart with bloodthirsty relish. In the nubu's head, Tak had found the magic seed and tucked it into his pouch, meaning to give it to Dzhibolba.

But Lok still couldn't calm down. He kept twisting his head about, listening to every sound of the jungle or straining to make someone out. Tak decided to offer a reminder:

"Lok, Sarad is in the World of Dreams right now. He isn't here."

"I know!" he snapped at once. — And I'm not afraid of your monster. But the Babuzonki might be hunting in these jungles.

Oh, those Babuzonki… No wonder Lok was on edge. His last encounter with these singular women had been… strange. Strangely awkward, to be precise.

At the last Juju contest, Lok had been taken in by the Babuzonki's looks and tried to strike up an acquaintance with the warrior Stonebreaker. While the girl batted her eyes and smiled, all was well, but the moment she opened her mouth and growled what the nerbils the boy wanted from her, his day was ruined beyond repair. Ever since, he had steered clear of that tribe by every means imaginable.

"Relax, they're not here," Tak said, suppressing a smirk. "I've never once come across them in this part of the valley. They probably don't care to stray far from home—or else their memory suddenly fails them and they lose their way."

Lock gave his broad shoulders an uneasy roll all the same and darted a sideways glance at the nubu "head," cleft in two, which they had left lying beside its body.

"Something here isn't right," he muttered. "Nubu grow only in the lower valley and near the graveyard. So what could be keeping the Babuzonki from getting here?"

There was reason in what Lock said, and Tak found himself at a loss for an answer. Tobar, however, knew just the right words.

“What could women do against four men, anyway? Hey, Lock, tell us something, why don’t you!” the squire said, holding out a coconut shell of water to him.

Lock rarely turned down a chance to spin a tale. That was why the Chief was so fond of him—the man adored stories and could listen to them from morning till night; all things considered, he and Lock made quite a fine pair.

“Tell us something,” the warrior echoed Tobar, and took a long swig from the halava. “How about the time I snatched a feather right off the fire bird while our illustrious hero Tak was busy swallowing the dust of Black Haze’s team? It was a wonder I even managed to leap high enough to reach that bird, but—pop!—and there the feather was in my hand, hot, blazing like a torch…”

While Lock reverted to his usual pastime — chatting — Tak tried to imagine how they would spend the coming night. He would need to fall asleep to enter the World of Nightmares and, from there, bring Tsarad out into the Waking World — which would make killing him far easier. In theory. In practice, he had no idea how he would go about it, much less whether he even could. And what if he started sleepwalking again? Should he tie himself to a tree, just in case?

He hadn’t breathed a word of this to anyone, least of all the Chief and Dzhera — and yet he had no notion how to defeat Tsarad. How to lure him, how to catch him and, above all, how to kill him. Never before had he dealt with a creature of this kind, and somehow nobody had thought to tell him what to do.

Perhaps he should summon Luna again and ask her advice? Or better still, Fauna?

“Hey, Tak,” Lock said, suddenly turning to him. “Come on, tell me that puffed-up flying fool cheated you out of the Juju contest. He

claimed he would read our minds, but no way was Lock falling for it…"

At first Tak took no notice of his words — then it dawned on him.

The Clairvoyant Juju! That spirit was famed for its gift of foretelling the future and reading other people's minds. Ever since that incident at last season's dirt pits — the one better left unthought-of — Tak had done his utmost to steer clear of the Juju, lest he accidentally hear something else… strange about his future.

But what if he could help their cause? What if he knew how to draw Tsarad out of the realm of Nightmares? Even Luna couldn't possibly know as much as the Clairvoyant!

"You're the best, Lock!" Tak exclaimed, springing to his feet. "Don't go anywhere — I'll be back soon."

Before anyone could utter a word, Tak seized the staff, rapped its tip against the ground, and vanished.

The realm of Juju was unlike any other place in the world, though perhaps Tak was certain of this only because he had never once set foot beyond the bounds of the Seven-Cliff District. It was hard to imagine that other lands existed somewhere out past the island. Almost impossible.

Juju's realm was radiant, bewildering at first glance, and so steeped in mana that it clung to the air itself; Tak breathed it in and could taste it on his tongue. This was a free world—no rules held sway here as they did in Pupununu, and no taboos bound all the tribes alike. Every spirit of Juju lived by its own laws, and when those failed to square with a neighbor's ways, well, so be it. An ordinary neighborly squabble might break out. A war might ignite. But more often than not, the spirits simply went their separate ways and tried to see as little of one another as possible.

The kingdom of the Juju was no work of nature. It was a cluster of islands hanging in nothing and nowhere. The ground was covered in bright patterns and splotches of color, and the dwellings — along with the many statues, staircases, fences, and towers — were painted in vivid shades. The houses of the Juju took after the spirits themselves: colorful, odd, and endlessly varied. Just as it was rare to come across two Juju who looked alike, so in their kingdom every building, every statue was one of a kind. Unlike humans, the spirits preferred to build in stone; they adored staircases, even ones that led nowhere or coiled into spirals. They raised houses of several stories, complete with annexes, turrets, bridges, and balconies. The trees, if any grew here at all, did not grow as trees ought: hanging upside down by their roots from tiny islands adrift in the air, jutting straight out of house walls, or entwining the houses like vines.

It was as though the Juju had surveyed the world they were leaving to humankind and fashioned a place for themselves that bore no resemblance to their old home.

At first, merely looking at it all made Tak's eyes ache. Then it began to intrigue him, and he would spend hours studying the place. And now he thought of the kingdom of the Juju as his second home. Perhaps he never fully understood why the staircases led nowhere, why he could not enter the houses, or why the trees yielded neither fruit nor timber, but he had learned to accept this world as it was. Just as the kingdom, in turn, accepted him without objection or judgment, even though outwardly he looked nothing like a spirit.

Even his staff, it seemed, looked different in this world. The round amber pommel, veined with dark threads, glowed nearly as bright as the crystal itself. The handle, carved from some wood he could not name, fitted his grip so perfectly that Tak ceased to feel it in his hand at all. Crowning the staff was its curved head, wrought from vivid blue

stone and adorned with magical light-blue markings. Set within it rested the crystal itself—roughly cut, a soft pink in color. In the world of Juju, it would sometimes flare to life of its own accord, against Tak's will.

Tak still remembered the hurt and fury that had seized him when he learned that a stone and a strange map were all his parents had left him. No note, no drawing—nothing to tell him who he was or where he had come from. Merely a stone, slightly smaller than a palm. How humiliating it had been.

How could he have known, then, that the crystal was magical? That it had belonged to his mother, and worked in the hands of only two beings: her and Tak. To everyone else, Juju and humans alike, the stone was useless. But the Dark One had no intention of resigning himself to that...

Tak materialized in the middle of the bazaar square, though the place bore little resemblance to the bustling centers of trade and barter that neighboring tribes would sometimes convene at their gatherings. At the bazaar of the Juju, one might encounter spirits prepared to offer you something and accept mana in return.

For now, only the Joy-Killer of Juju and one of the gremlins—the Judge's assistant—were present. But soon the tent of the Merchant of Juju came stretching up out of the ground: the very spirit for whose sake this bazaar had come into being.

"Looking for something, huh?" He leaned over the counter. "Maybe I can help, hm?"

The Merchant looked remarkably like a great orange octopus. Only his round head could detach itself from his body at will, and his five slanted eyes put one in mind of a spider. Four long tentacles coiled and twisted, their damp skin glistening, while his mouth, crowded with

crooked teeth, stretched into a smile. His speech was none too clear — even to Juju — as though he, too, were not of this world.

Tak smiled back at him.

“Do you happen to know where I can find the Seer?”

“Ah—“ The “octopus” drew back, pressing the tips of his tentacles together in pairs. “The Seyer her own self always finds ya, no matter how ya hides from him. But I cans help ya find him quickers.”””

“That would be nice.”

Tak was glad he had brought the nubu seed along. Perhaps the Merchant would accept such a trade. This Juju was ready to do anything for mana, and Tak remembered all too well how painfully he took his payment.

“Here.”

He tossed over the seed, and Juju caught it deftly with a single tentacle. He twirled the green seed, held it up first to one eye, then to the other, and sighed.

“Not so goods...”

“Then I’ll find the Seer myself,” declared Tak.

He held out his hand for the seed, but the Merchant clamped it tight in his tentacle and broke into a wide grin.

“We’s agreeded!”

And the very next instant, a violet cloud flashed brightly beside the Merchant’s tent. It unwound in a slow spiral, and the upper half of a human body took shape within it.

Of all the Jujus, the Seer looked the most human. True, his bloated, bald head was roughly twice the size of an ordinary person’s, emblazoned with a magical mark on his forehead, and a small black goatee jutted from his chin — though he bore no sign of age, none whatsoever, for Jujus are immortal and have dwelt in this world since its very foundation.

The Seer had no legs. Below the waist, his bare body faded into a lilac hue and ended in a plume of violet smoke shot through with pink glimmers — the very smoke from which he had materialized.

“And why have you summoned me, deceiver?” His voice always rang shrill and high, as though he had spent a long while living among the hard of hearing, and he was equally famous for his habit of hurling insults at everyone around him. “I was on my way here of my own accord — how could you fail to grasp that?! You’re disrupting my whole order, robber!”

“I did tell you,” the Trader remarked quietly, paying no heed to his brother’s shrieks, and every one of his eyes settled on Tak. “He always finds you. Good luck, laddie.”

He vanished, booth and all, as swiftly as he had appeared — simply sinking through the ground, quite literally. Tak turned to the Seer and swallowed.

“You know that…”

“Silence!” the spirit shrieked, and Tak hastily shut his mouth. “Do I know? Come on, look at me, human shaman — what do you see?” He held his silence for a few moments, granting Tak time to gather his thoughts, and then howled at the top of his lungs, nearly deafening him: “I am the Juju Seer! Of course I know everything!”

In this he was a little like the Chief, who also loved to start yelling out of nowhere, right on the heels of striking up a confidential conversation with you.

“Of course I know that Tsarad escaped from the Kingdom of Nightmares,” the spirit went on, his tone calmer now as he folded his thin arms across his bare chest. “And of course I know that you — a tiny, pitiful band of humans from Pupununu — struck out for the Temple to draw him away from the village. The whole of the Juju world knows about it; the spirits, incidentally, have already split into camps,

wagering on which of you will die first. But that isn't what you came to hear from me."

His voice sank to a quiet, insinuating murmur, and his small eyes took on an almost regretful cast — if spirits were even capable of such a feeling. Tak quickly licked his lips; it would never do to stall and try the Seer's patience.

"No, I wanted…"

"Tsarad is far stronger than you imagine, Tak," the spirit cut him off at once. "He is no ordinary Juju monster — he is a devourer. He is always hungry, and nothing will ever be enough for him. And once he catches the scent of mana like yours, he will stop at nothing."

Tak barely restrained the retort that rose to his lips. Flora and Fauna had been chanting the very same words in unison — the spirits were accustomed to thinking all humans stupid and weak, and made no exception even for Tak.

"Thank you for the warning, Juju Seer," he ground out with an effort of will. "But what I wanted to know was how to defeat him. I'm going to kill him, aren't I? Yes?"

The Seer faltered and drifted a little higher into the air. Tapped his fingertips together. Sighed. It was always like this: the moment things reached the crucial point, he would back down.

"Do you truly want to know?"

"Of course I do!"

Like everyone else, Tak had grown used to learning what the future held — from spirits, through divination, or by other means. A prophecy could arrive at the most inopportune moment (as with the last earth-pit season, best not dwelt upon) or be pried out slowly and painstakingly. People were not in the habit of fearing their own fate. What was meant to happen would happen, just as it had in hundreds of stories before — stories foreordained many, many years ago.

“Then listen,” the Seer said at last. “Yes. You will destroy him. Not a crumb of the beast will remain. The whole world will shudder at that explosion…”

Words, sweeter than candy...

“Excellent!” Nothing else reached Tak after that. He would defeat the monster! That was all that mattered. “You didn’t want to admit it? Didn’t want me to be glad?”

“You will not be glad,” the spirit answered quietly.

“Why? Will he kill someone? Who? Tell me — who!”

The Seer threw up his arms in exasperation, closed his eyes, then soared higher still, and Tak tilted his head back to pick him out against the sky. Breath snagged in his throat, and his chest felt heavy. For a moment he almost regretted coming here.

But if the Seer wished it, he would find him anywhere and tell him everything.

“People will die, and among them will be someone especially dear to you. I see no names, Tak, but I see that he is bound to you. Like the family you’ve been denied. And that person’s mana will be enough to feed Tsarad.”

Tak’s breath caught. He tried to answer, but nothing came.

“That is all,” the Seer went on. “I will say nothing more, and you are not asking anyway.”

Another blinding flash seared his eyes, but Tak didn’t even raise a hand to shield them. He stayed rooted to the spot, gazing upward, though the spirit had long since vanished.

Tsarad will kill Dzhibolba.

Tsarad will kill Dzhibolba.

Tak couldn’t say why, but the passage from Juju’s realm back into his own world hurt far more than the journey out. Slipping down into the land of the spirits was quick and effortless, as though it cost no

mana at all, and the crossing felt perfectly natural, like stepping from one room into another. Soul and body stayed inseparable, and he felt nothing upon finding himself in Juju's domain.

But the return… it wasn't the most agonizing thing in the world, yet it was certainly among the most unpleasant sensations — that moment when you realize your body is forging on ahead while your soul has lagged a little behind, still dangling somewhere in the spirit realm. And every single time came that dread: what if this once his soul failed to catch up with his body? Now that would make quite a picture — his soulless body sprawling out into the human world while he himself lingered on as a ghost in the other. Brr! And even that would have been the lucky outcome, because sometimes, for whatever reason, he arrived in midair, high above the ground. An entrance like that certainly looked impressive and snapped you back to your senses fast enough, but oh, how it hurt…

But even without such mishaps, the return was nauseating. Tak felt as though he'd been stunned; it took him a little while to work out where he was and, well, get his bearings. And mana drained away noticeably in the process, the way blood pours from a deep wound. That was why Tak usually took his time about returning home from Juju's realm.

But today was not one of those days.

Barely aware of the firm ground beneath his feet, of the fading crackle of magic in his ears, of the last sparkling lights, like yorbls, winking out before his eyes, Tak bolted from the spot and set off at random toward the campsite.

"Guys!..."

"We're here, brother!" Kiko called from behind him.

Whirling around, Tak raced back to the group and blurted out, so agitated he all but bit his tongue:

“Dzhibolba is in danger! The Seer Juju said that Tsa... that this certain someone could kill him!” Without giving anyone a chance to get a word in, Tak rushed on, turning to Tobar: “You must go back to the village and warn him!”

“He’s my squire,” Lok remarked. “Send yours.”

“Kiko isn’t my... He’s showing us the way, Lok — don’t be such an idiot!”

“It’s all right,” Tobar replied, already on his feet and briskly gathering up his spear. “I understand. Warn Dzhibolba. Got it.”

Short but hardy and easygoing, Tobar could never have made a great warrior, yet he was content with his role as a helper — to Lok above all. He was used to carrying out tasks of every kind, never complaining and asking as few questions as possible.

“Tell him not to leave the village, day or night,” Tak implored, interlacing his fingers and pressing his palms together. “Have someone stay with him while he sleeps. Someone who definitely won’t fall asleep. Have the Chieftain send one of the guards so that...”

“Tak.” Lok came up to him and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, cutting him short. “Dzhibolba wasn’t born yesterday — he knows how to look after himself.”

Tak straightened up, keeping his eyes lowered, his cheeks burning — he could not have said whether from anger or embarrassment. True, his uncle was no stranger to plots against his life, and every time he had managed to see them off. But the years had caught up with him, and absentmindedness made him forget things all too often. He could doze off on his very feet, and he no longer had the quickness and strength he once possessed. At times it seemed to Tak that he was becoming the old man’s guardian, and not the other way around. At the mere thought that Tsarad would get to him, his heart ached so bitterly that he could have wept.

“Please, Tobar,” he went on quietly, “give him this.”

The squire gave a firm nod, meeting his gaze squarely, then turned to fetch his things.

“The journey has barely begun — we haven’t even reached the Temple yet — and already I’ve lost my assistant,” he muttered. “What next? Will they take my cloak away by nightfall?”

Chapter 8

Blow out the candle and look out the window. Now I shall tell you how the stars came to be.

Long ago, the sky lay empty and dark at night. Luna still dwelt among people, and there were no stars at all. But when the Juju departed our world, kind Luna left us her largest and brightest moonstone. She cast it into the heavens, a light to guide lost travelers even in the dead of night. Day after day the stone grows a little dimmer, until at last it disappears altogether. Then Luna polishes it, and it shines once more.

Yet the Juju believed that even with Luna's magic stone, amid the creations of Flora and Fauna and the labors of the other spirits, people might forget their greatness and lose all fear. And so the Juju resolved to adorn the vast, empty sky with reminders of their exploits, emblems of their inventions, and portraits of themselves.

The Juju Trader flung down a scattering of bright stars called the Little Eyes.

The Juju of Death set his beloved Boat in the sky — the very vessel on which he sailed the whole world over.

The Juju of Love threw just a single star into the sky, but a red one, which, like love itself, is fickle: it appears only when it sees fit, only to vanish again ten minutes later. This is the Blazing Star.

And the Dark Juju — the vain and evil Dark Juju — traced the brightest and most momentous figure in the sky: the Cross of War. Did that spirit know, even then, that in drawing those stars he was foretelling his own future? That one day he would declare war on the tribe of Pupununu, and with that war come to hate all other people as well? The Dark One is gone now, yet the emblem of his war burns in the sky every night, and we shall never forget those dark times.

Every one of the spirits left a memory of itself in the sky, and more than once at that. There are so many stars up there now that your head begins to spin the moment you look at them. One after another they appear, each with its tale to tell. They say Jibolba, with the help of his trumpet, can find every last sign of Juju, and that he knows all the names of the constellations.

And you — can you at least show me the Altar or the Great Palm? Stop pointing at the Boat and the Cross; any fool, even one like our Kiko, can find those.

On especially bright and crisp nights, they say, Luna of Juju herself joins the women at their gatherings. At first you cannot tell her apart from the other girls; she dances around the fire and sings just as they do. Only when you look closely do you notice that her skin shimmers like starlight and her eyes glow in the dark. Luna slips away unnoticed: you blink, and she is already gone. But after that visit, right up until the very next full moon, the women know neither hardship nor pain.

And yet another time, a strange young woman came to the feast — she, too, from the world of Juju. She was dressed in a tunic that fell to her heels, and dragonfly wings fluttered at her back. The stranger laughed aloud, spun faster than anyone else, and then suddenly vanished, as though the earth had swallowed her up.

Dzhera didn’t know what to make of such stories. She had met Luna of Juju outside the festivals as well, and—shameful as it was to admit—she could summon little awe and no rush of love at all. Nor could she quite accept that Luna was her protector: she couldn’t picture herself asking for her help, or ever feeling safe at her side. And she certainly didn’t believe that Luna of Juju would come down to them this night. Surely she had plenty to occupy her without that—assuming, of course, that she still remembered she was the guardian of Pupununu at all.

Under cover of darkness, she and Zaria made their way through the jungle without torch or candle, their feet knowing every pebble, every root and every hole by touch. A strange ringing filled the air—rising from the chirring of grasshoppers, perhaps, or from the ofinda that hung everywhere, mingled with the moonlight. It seemed to Dzhera that she could almost touch the magic, though most likely it was only her imagination. Zaria and Chaka said she was unlike the other girls of the tribe, and that this was why she carried no ofinda within her. For some reason, it was a little eerie to dwell on. As if that made her any worse off.

At last, the cave where the gatherings were held came into view. It lay hidden not far into the jungle, dry and claimed by no animal. The shore or the mountains would have made finer meeting places, but the women of Pupununu counted themselves lucky enough as it was to have found so safe and quiet a spot.

Dzhera had nothing against caves, and she had grown quite used to Kiko's cold home — but right now, it was the last place on earth she wanted to be. She was chilled enough as it was, and the damp ground had long since numbed her feet. Still, she walked on, following her sister. These days the women gathered only once a month; to miss it would invite questions, and besides, she had always loved the meetings. Just not now… right now she wanted to be alone. Or better yet — to be with her friends.

"Greetings, sister!"

As always, Slog kept watch by the entrance, scarcely more than a shadow in the gloom beside the dark stone wall. She pressed her palms to Dzhera's and Zaria's, then stepped aside to let them pass. Zaria melted quickly into the darkness of the grotto, but Dzhera lingered — partly to steal one more hug from her friend, partly to put off, just a little longer, the moment she would have to go inside.

“I hope Chaka can lift our spirits today,” Slog whispered to her, and it suddenly struck Dzhera that the two of them were the only ones in the whole tribe (well, Dzhibolba too) who truly cared for the squad with all their hearts.

“Me too,” she murmured under her breath, though she hardly believed that Blot and Blita’s mother could truly help her.

Within, the cave was almost cozy. Tall candles and several great torches burned, bathing the grotto in warm light. Garlands of flowers hung beneath the vaulted ceiling, and vases holding slender sticks of orange wood stood here and there, their delicate fragrance mingling with the earthy scent of the stone. A small table was crowded with cups of warm berry tea for anyone who had caught a chill, with simple refreshments set alongside: sweet cornmeal flatbreads and slices of watermelon.

Against the far wall of the cave hung a bright tapestry adorned with flowers and beads. Feathers were the choice of shamans and wanderers, while the women favored the world of Flora. Before it stood Chaka — tall and slender, her face set in an expression of indifference. Her oil-anointed hair gleamed softly in the firelight, and her half-closed eyes sparkled with mystery. She wore a long gown the color of gold, patterned with small dark-brown circles. It was gathered at the throat by a wooden ring painted green, and bracelets to match encircled her right arm.

She had bartered this gown from the Zverian tribe, paying for it in paper. Such a garment would have hampered one’s labour, but Chaka had no need of labour. Her duties in the tribe demanded neither dexterity nor strength, yet there was no getting by without intelligence and experience — and she possessed both in abundance. In her hand she already held a thick scroll of sacred texts, which she read aloud before the women.

Everyone regarded her with a certain reverence — Chaka had accomplishments to spare; Chaka knew the medicinal herbs better than any of the women; Chaka had borne healthy twins, the most auspicious of omens. Dzhera, though, considered the Ungachaka children rather more of a curse upon their village.

“Silence!” Chaka proclaimed with two sharp, ringing claps of her hands. “Let us waste no time. We begin at once.”

Chaka knew exactly what her duties entailed, and she demanded as much of others as she did of herself. The only ones she was ever prepared to forgive for any weakness were her little ones.

The women fell silent and gathered around her. There were a few pillows and chairs, but some still had to make do with the ground or remain standing. Dzhera took her customary place on the long bench; Blita settled in on one side of her, and Zimdi on the other.

“Hard times have befallen our tribe once again,” Chaka began, “and so we must stand together now more than ever. Let us set aside our grievances and quarrels, sisters, and not stoop to the ways of men. We shall act in unison, as one. For if we are strong, our men will feel our support beneath their very feet...”

She expounded at length upon her favorite subject, the family, for the Ungachaka were the largest and most complete family in the tribe, and it would have been a sin not to boast of it yet again. Dzhera merely thought that all the support in the world would count for nothing if the man himself knocked it out from under his own feet.

“I propose we take a moment to reflect, and feel the tie that binds us to all our sisters,” Chaka concluded. — Let us join hands and feel the heart of the whole tribe beating within us. We are its mother. It was we who bore it into being, and we who will hold it together.

Dzhera already regretted the unenviable company she found herself in, but there was nothing for it. She held out her hands: into one of

them slipped Zimdi's thin little fingers, while Blita's cool palm settled into the other. Closing her eyes, Dzhera tried not to think about the girl whose hand she was holding, but a memory surfaced all the same: how that spiteful Ungachaka had tricked Tak into turning away from Dzhera of his own accord, and had then all but destroyed his soul into the bargain. Or how she had brewed some potion and kept pressing it on him with tiresome insistence. Before Tak could work out what was happening, Dzhera had flung the brew straight into that witch's face. The tattoo by her eye had very nearly washed away.

"Thank you, I felt you."

In the utter silence, Chaka's voice rang out once more, and Dzhera hastily opened her eyes and tore her hand from Blita's fingers. Lost amid all those nagging memories, she had even forgotten what exactly Chaka had asked of them. All she could do was hope that Chaka had not sensed the hatred and fury rising from one of the sisters.

"And now swear that nothing you hear will ever leave these walls." Her long lips barely moved as they wrung out the words. — Whoever means to swear, let them say "aye".

"Aye! the women cried out as one."

Chaka shook her head, and her heavy clay earrings, daubed in bright colors, smacked against her cheeks. She and Blita wore the same tribal pattern around their eyes — a red streak rising from the lower lids to the brows, with the customary curls trailing out toward the temples. As a child, Dzhera had racked her brains over why Chaka and Blita bore exactly the same tattoo as Tak and Dzhibolba, given that they were no kin of theirs and not even shamankas — after all, only shamankas could paint their eyes like that. Only as she grew older did she come to understand what role this woman truly played in the tribe.

Chaka was no healer, yet it was to her that women turned when the pains of the moon curse beset them, when a pregnancy took a strange

turn, or whenever anything else arose concerning a woman's health. No one would ever have dreamed of carrying such questions to Dzhibolba. Chaka knew herbs inside and out, never once misdiagnosed an ailment, and could always be counted on for sound advice about men or children. If anyone had ofindy in abundance, it was certainly her. The women all but worshipped her.

Blita was being groomed to take her mother's place one day, but Dzhera could not imagine ever going to her for help. She would sooner suffer any torment than tell that splinter what was troubling her.

"Let the reading of the sacred text begin." At last Chaka unrolled the scroll, slowly, only far enough to reveal a couple of lines. "Part Eight. Hine was grieved. She could not marry Akamu, for her father would not consent to the union. The wretched girl did not know what to do and could only repeat: 'Oh, if only my beloved Akamu could persuade my father!' and Luna heard the plea of the sorrowing one…"

Chaka's monotonous voice did not lull anyone to sleep; rather, it conjured a pale picture before the eyes, like a drawing traced in sand, familiar to almost every woman. Everything in these tales was true, and the questions they settled were utterly real, and at times it was simply astonishing that a person who had lived many, many years ago —of whom nothing remained but symbols on an old sheet of paper— could feel and think exactly the same things as you do now. Sam had always been enchanted by these stories, and she tried to imagine how it would be if someone wrote down her own story one day, to be read aloud before the women in just the same way.

"Part Six. All her friends had forsaken unhappy Dzhera, and a great loneliness weighed upon her, for she could not follow them, for she had given her vow…" Everything in these readings sounded overdone, and Dzhera doubted that in real life people ever spoke to one another like that: "Our love will grow just like this corn!" or "I have given my vow,

and now only the Death of Juju can demand it back!”—and so on. And yet she would not have minded in the least if those beautiful phrases were woven into her own story.

Secretly, she nursed the hope that — who knows — perhaps today, in the tale of Hina, she would hear some piece of counsel for her own predicament. What would that legendary girl have done, forced to live without her beloved — but by her own will? Almost by her own. Dzhera doubted she would simply have sat back and done nothing.

Chaka read a whole chapter aloud at a leisurely pace, and then, with the same unhurried calm, wound the scroll onward a little. Dzhera lowered her eyes in disappointment. The story was engrossing enough, yet bore no relation to what had befallen her.

“Hina will always stand as an example of what a woman can achieve when she truly wants it. For when a desire is born deep within” Chaka placed her palm on her belly and slowly drew it upward, all the way to her neck — everything will work to help us attain it. All the forces, Luna included. That is all from me for today, sisters. But if anyone…

Chaka never got to finish: Slog sprang to her feet, waving a thick arm.

“Me! I have a question! Chaka, can we help the squad? My desire comes from deep within, I swear it” I can feel it right here!..

One of the girls behind Dzhera giggled, but Chaka did not smile. If anything, Slog’s question perplexed her — and only because she was pleading on the men’s behalf.

“You know the ofinda doesn’t work for men…”

“Yes, but can’t we do something for them?” Slog’s voice quavered with sorrow, and she sniffled. — I can’t bear to feel so helpless…

Dzhera’s heart echoed in answer. She understood her friend perfectly, though of course she did not love the boys as fiercely as Slog

loved Lok. But that sense of helplessness—sitting here in safety while they were off somewhere far away, serving as live bait for a hungry monster—was simply killing her. And worst of all, there was nothing whatever she could do about it.

The only way out was to run away and catch up with the party. But they would clearly not like it, Father would like it even less, and the women would frown upon the very idea—besides, it would somehow be silly.

"The only thing we can do," Chaka finally deigned to reply, "is ask Luna to come to the party's aid. But why, when she is already protecting them?"

Her indifferent gaze came abruptly to rest on Dzhera, and the girl felt a stab of unease. But the next moment the woman blinked and once more looked over the girls' heads.

"If it would comfort you, Slog, I would suggest you take up some sort of work. Make a gift for Lok—it will distract you and earn Luna's approval. And when he returns, he will be pleased with what you have made for him"—even Chaka could not utter this with any sincerity; she understood perfectly well that Lok would be only too glad never to set eyes on Slog again as long as he lived. "I would also advise you to drink noni tea. Sisters, I propose we hold a tea ceremony this very moment. That is, if none of you have any further questions."

Her gaze lingered on Dzhera one more instant, but probably only because she was scanning the whole group, making sure there would be no more requests. Slog sat silent, mulling over what she had heard. But just as everyone was already rising and drifting toward the mouth of the cave, Blita suddenly raised her hand in a feeble gesture.

"Yes, baby?" Chaka turned to her at once.

"Mommy, I'd like to try looking in on the detachment," she piped up, thin-voiced and wide-eyed. "I'm sure I can manage it tonight." She

glanced back over her shoulder. “And Slog will rest easier if I see for myself that the men are safe and sound.”

Dzhera let out a strained breath, realizing only now how long she had been sitting there, quietly holding it in. How? What? Why should that thorn, that nasty little upstart, be the one to peer in on the detachment?! What gave her the right? She had no friend there, no brother, no…

“Of course, baby.” Chaka nodded with satisfaction and turned to all the women. “My daughter wants to test her ofinda power. She is going to try to look in on our detachment!”

Naturally, everyone fell at once to cooing and fulsome praise, lauding the younger Ungachaka as though she were Juju himself — some immensely powerful sorceress who had graciously deigned to show off her tricks. Reluctantly, Dzhera rose and trudged after the others, out of the cave into the open air. Had she possessed so much as a scrap of magical power, she would have scorched that girl’s hair to ash, burned the clothes right off her back, torn her tongue out… At the same time, she secretly hoped nothing would come of Blita’s attempt — gazing into the water was difficult, and with Dzhera present no woman had ever managed it. So Blita was hardly likely to succeed. At best she would rattle off every sort of nonsense to hoodwink Slog and everyone else…

The night glowed bright with moonlight, lending the women fresh strength. A fire blazed beside the cave, and in the kettle suspended above it, a tea of noni and chamomile was steeping. One of the girls, En, fetched an nguru and began to play softly. Zaria laughed with Kaona and Lei over some jest. They all behaved as if nothing were amiss, as if they were perfectly safe and hadn’t a care in the world for what would become of the squad! Dzhera had always known her sister was two-faced, and would make an excellent chief precisely because

she could act out whatever people wished to see while securing whatever she herself required. In front of Tak, she had performed the part of the model leader, deeply concerned for her people; but now the mask had been cast aside, and Zaria had forgotten all about the squad. Dzhera hated her for it.

Blita came up to her mother carrying a flat plate, and with Chaka's help she carefully poured water into it from a glass vial she had brought along beforehand. The tea stood ready, yet none of the women moved to serve it — all of them watched Ungachaka as though spell-bound, while she, relishing her position, stepped slowly forward, seeking the right spot to catch Luna's reflection in the water.

Blita had always seemed not quite of this world — though not in the same sense Tak was. The first thing that lent her an air of mystery was her family — a twin brother and a mother who led all the women. The second thing that caught the eye was her everyday attire. Unlike the other girls, Blita wore no dress. Instead she had a loose top falling to her hips, a skirt, and marvelous gaiters — short bands of fine tapa that slipped over the legs and peeked out beneath the hem, climbing all the way up to the knees. No one else in the tribe wore anything of the kind, and Dzhera had long been convinced that Blita was either tainted by some contagion or simply out of her mind.

"Oh, mighty Luna, defender of Pupununu and patroness of women," she began to chant in a thin, reedy voice, "reveal to Blita Ungachaka our brave band: squire Tobar, warrior Lok, and shaman Tak."

"And Kiko," Dzhera hissed from her seat, but no one heard her.

Ungachaka bowed her face low over the plate while everyone else stood apart, watching and taking care not to disturb her. Only En went on playing softly on the nguru, and the music deepened the sense of enchantment further still, as though drawing down upon them all the

light of the stars and all the radiance of Luna. On nights like these it was easy to believe that the Juju came to the women… and that one of them might linger afterward in the village and fall in love with a mortal man.

Dzhera had been on the verge of stalking pointedly off to pour herself some tea, yet she stayed. What unnerved her was the thought that Blita was about to behold the whole band — to learn what had befallen them, how they fared, where they were. She did not want to leave her alone with all of that.

Ngurus and a light wind sang in the night air. The stars had dipped lower, lending their magic to the little sorceress. Goosebumps rippled down Dzhera's arms, and her stomach went cold. She glanced at the Moon and even shuddered, struck by how brightly it burned and how near the earth it hung. This was clearly no ordinary night.

"I see them," Blita whispered.

En stopped playing. Glances flew from face to face; only Chaka stepped closer to her daughter, her sleepy eyes alert and keen for the first time that night.

"Do you see Lok?" came Slog's loud whisper, and everyone hushed her at once.

Blita slipped into a kind of trance. Her breathing turned shallow, and her hands blanched where they gripped the pale plate; her long bangs all but touched the water. For three minutes, perhaps a little more, she said nothing. Then she spoke — her voice deeper than usual, slow, stripped of all feeling.

"I see Lok. He is asleep."

Slog heaved a loud sigh of relief.

"And how is he…"

A swift hand clamped over her mouth, while Blita went on:

"I see Kiko."

“You don’t even remember what he looks like!” Dzhera protested inwardly, and yet something in her eased where her friend was concerned. As if she had genuinely believed the words of that liar.

“I see Tak…”

Dzhera’s heart leapt. Blita bent lower still over the saucer, as if about to drink, then instead blew softly upon its surface.

“And Tobar?” one of the girls asked quietly.

“Is Tobar not there?”

Blita gave no answer, and Dzhera realized she felt no thrill of anticipation whatsoever. Most likely, the squire had gone off hunting, or simply out to forage for something to eat. Or perhaps Blita simply hadn’t seen him — he hardly came up to a teenager’s height. And what could an image in a plate of water even look like? She hadn’t the faintest idea.

If there had been an image at all. Who could say — perhaps Ungachaka had invented the whole thing on the spot.

“May Luna save you,” Blita said distinctly.

She lifted the plate higher toward the silvery light, then murmured something else under her breath — Dzhera couldn’t make it out. One thing, however, she did understand: it was a plea of “May Luna help you.” But why Luna…?

“Well done, dear,” Chaka began, but Blita wasn’t finished yet.

She licked her ring finger, then swirled it through the water, stirring it. The gesture, whose meaning escaped her entirely, made Dzhera feel faintly ill. Only afterward did Blita pour the whole plate of water over the crown of her head, eyes closed and smiling.

The women applauded when the rite was done. Chaka kept silent, watching her daughter, who in turn avoided her gaze. Dzhera understood that the two of them knew something, but of course she didn’t go over to ask.

The main thing was that nearly the whole party had come through alive and well — and Tobar was probably fine too. Though she would far rather have learned it some other way, by any means but Blita's telling.

Nothing better occurred to her than to settle down to tea with Zaria, hoping the move wouldn't look too suspicious to an outside observer.

Before her sister could wrinkle her nose and pull away, Dzhera leaned in close and whispered into her ear:

"What did Blita do in the end? Why?"

Zaria was far better versed in such matters; she was bound to know. The only question was whether she would say…

But Dzhera was "lucky" in one respect: Zaria cared little for her, and hated Blita even more. Two birds with one stone, as the saying goes.

"I can't say for certain, but it had something to do with a love spell."

"W-with what?" An involuntary tremor crept into Dzhera's voice, and she darted a quick glance at Blita, who sat beside her mother and Slog.

"Tak was the last one she named," Zaria smirked with malice, — which means she tried to bind him to herself. Make him think of her, I don't know what else… Oh, you'd better watch yourself, sister — they say Blita can mix the right herbs and speak the right words. Before you know it, she'll have stolen your friend away.

With a soft giggle, Zaria rose and drifted slowly away toward zimdi and her sister Alisia. Dzhera was left alone, clutching her coconut bowl so tightly her nails nearly dug into the shell. Naturally, Zaria had nothing better to do than try to set her against Blita — and yet… and yet… rumors have to come from somewhere, don't they? And besides, Tak was hardly susceptible to that kind of magic; otherwise some…

some… yes, it had to be admitted: by now there was no one but Blita who could have worked it on him.

But she hates Tak! The only thing she wants from him is Juju's power—and the fool doesn't grasp that it could no more be taken than all the blood from a person's veins, or, say, his very skeleton. Or the ability to play the banjo. Or a tattoo. Those aren't beads or feathers you can simply pluck off and hand to someone else. But the dimwits of Ungachaka are fated never to understand that.

"You won't get him—you'll never get him," Dzhera repeated to herself, over and over, like an incantation all her own, all the while watching Blita out of the corner of her eye.

And then, when Dzhera was the very first to leave the gathering and head for home, she saw him.

Tobar!

He was running up toward the village from the direction of the jungle—from the side where a gap still remained in the half-built wall. On watch that day was a fellow everyone called Porcupine, for the way his hair stood straight up. He, too, caught sight of the squire and leapt to his feet.

Even though barely an hour had passed since Blita had declared that everything was fine with the squad (except for Tobar, who was missing), terrifying visions instantly flashed through Dzhera's mind—of Tsarad doing away with the others and leaving only the squire alive. She very nearly took off at a dead run to meet him.

"What happened?" Porcupine shouted, not caring a whit that he might wake half the village. "Why have you come back?"

Dzhera wanted to hear the answer every bit as much as she wanted to stay out of everyone's sight — whether the men suspected anything or not, the women's gatherings were held in secret (save for the one who did end up sniffing them out — may he be torn to shreds). And if

the gathering had to happen at night, then sneaking out of the house had to happen at night as well. Dzhera had already mastered the trick of it, but Zaria once ran into Otacon, and he went straight off to tattle to their father about it — what a laugh that had been…

Creeping along, hugging the brand-new wall, Dzhera made her way to the young men, who had stopped right beside the opening that was still unsealed. Tobar was puffing from his run, yet he was dutifully answering their questions. Dzhera arrived just in time to catch the most important part.

"…said that the monster would kill Dzhibolba… We have to warn him… All in all it went well" we took a shortcut… Is everyone all right?

The porcupine had no chance to reply. A crash thundered from the far side of the village. Dzhera herself all but jumped out of her skin, while the warriors were already rushing that way, spears raised.

"Hey! Who goes there?"

"Halt! Don't move!"

Kaik came hurrying toward them as well, having left his post at the House, and Dzhera slipped quietly in that direction under cover of the commotion. Soon she learned whom they had been called out for.

"Slog?"

"Slog?"

"What are you doing here?"

Apparently the poor girl had begun murmuring something in her own defense, but then she spotted Tobar — for her voice rang out at once, loud and sharp:

"You?! You abandoned Lok? Where is he? What's happened to him? Why are you here, and he…A light winked on in the house next door, and a deep, guttural grunting came drifting over from the barn.

Dzhera nearly laughed at the whole spectacle, then made her way to her room in perfect calm.”

From here, almost nothing could be heard, and the pleasant silvery glow spilling from the window wrapped the room in cozy light. In its corner, the little long-nose stirred but did not wake. For a while Dzhera lingered, listening to the voices, but Tobar offered nothing new. How good that he had made it in time to tell the tribe everything. Certainly, if the monster had not disdained Tleylok, then Dzhibolba’s mana should prove to its taste as well. And yet… he was supposed to go after Tak, wasn’t he?..

Dzhera drifted slowly to the opposite wall and had just reached for a candle when she thought better of it: the guards might notice the flame. Sleep held no appeal anyway, so she clambered onto the bed, feet and all, and gazed out the window.

Had it been Juju who had prophesied that Tsarad would kill Dzhibolba? Well, of course it had — who else could it possibly have been? Still, perhaps Tak would manage to outwit the future; after all, why listen to prophecies if you never mean to change anything? Dzhera’s memory obligingly served up the ending of their last attempt to mend the future — hers, Tak’s, and Zaria’s — but that was the very prophecy from the final season of the earth pits, the better-not-to-think-about-it one.

All right, Tak and Dzhibolba could manage that on their own — certainly without any help from her. She was only an ordinary human, not even a chief with a decent reserve of mana. If anything, it was she who had no business lingering among the Juju in the first place — let alone sinking so low as to join the Vile Juju every now and then in a game of great-ball, to slap palms with the Brawler in greeting, and — worse still — to no longer remember when she had last knelt before the spirits.

She ought to have been turning over in her mind what Blita had done, but Dzhera had no desire to dwell on it. That lunatic was capable of pulling off any manner of trick, and Dzhera was certain not one of them would work. Experience had shown her that half a glass of love potion, drunk on an empty stomach, acted on Tak without fail; yet never once had she seen him lose his head because some fool trailed a slobbering finger through the water.

More by touch than by moonlight, Dzhera found the stick she had readied in advance — short and thick, stripped of its bark, almost perfectly straight — and took out her blade. ‘Knife’ was too strong a word, for it was merely an old, nearly blunt dagger, fit for nothing but sweeping cobwebs off the ceiling and dispatching the centipedes that crept into the house. Dzhera bore down harder with the tip and carved a single line into the peg.

One. Only one day had passed since the squad marched off, and already she felt she might die of boredom.

Chapter 9

What silly questions you ask! What do you mean, where did the dragonfly pattern on the tapestries come from? Why, everyone knows that! What do you mean, you don’t?

Well then, listen. Juju Luna is not the only one who looks kindly upon Pupununu. People remember another magical girl as well, and she could turn herself into a dragonfly.

True, this Juju did not shield the tribe, but she helped us with small matters, watched over the everyday round of life, mingled freely among the people and, of course, took part in our festivals. Oh, how she loved them! Trading her dragonfly body for a human one, she would dance longer than anyone, sing so sweetly that the hibiscus flowers bloomed, and perform her magic tricks. Power she had in plenty. It cost the girl nothing to set the whole night sky ablaze with lights, fill the air with the fragrance of perfumed oils, and double the platters heaped with food.

This Juju would vanish with the first rays of the sun, and so they nicknamed her the Dawn Juju. Her true name she never told a soul.

Dawn gave the tribe mirrors, bringing them straight from her own world, and people no longer had to peer into murky water. The women now had vessels of colored glass, heavy and gleaming like precious stones. And to Dzhibolba she presented magnifying lenses for his telescope, so that the shaman could gaze at the stars. Even now, the chiming of glass beads calls to mind the laughter of that beautiful Juju, and when a girl looks into a mirror, she fancies herself even more beautiful than she truly is.

But the greatest gift the Dawn Juju bestowed upon the tribe was her blessing. She loved mortals in a way no spirit ought to love. Those days shone among the brightest in the memory of the Pupununu. The

harvests came in bountiful, the hunts went well, and the Chief's daughter grew up healthy and more beautiful than any other mortal. Several times each moon the people held festivals, all in honor of the lovely Juju with dragonfly wings.

We all remember how bitter things grew for the tribe once Dawn departed. Sickness, monsters, hostile neighbors, and the caprices of nature assailed us in those days, wresting away and laying waste to everything Dawn had guarded for us. The Pupununu never saw her again, yet the chime of glass, the glimmer of mirrors, and merry music never fail to call her to mind. That is why we hang tapestries wrought with dragonflies for the festival and never harm those delicate creatures. The Pupununu know how to hold kindness in memory and to treasure the gifts they are given.

Now go, and never ask such silly questions again.

Darkness fell. Tak walked ahead, lighting the way with his staff, while Kiko and Lok tramped along behind, bawling loud enough for the whole jungle to hear:

"The dark of night has fallen on the land, dark of night, dark of night,"

Courage in our hearts, our hearts, our hearts!

We've left our dear home, our dear home, our dear home,

And tonight we'll sleep in the jungle, oh yes!

Tak would have been grateful had they sung a little more softly—or, at the very least, spared him the banjo along the way—but he had already quarreled with Lok four times since setting out, and that, he felt, was quite enough. After all, Tsarad was in the World of Dreams now, and could not hear them…

Far away we roam, far away, far away, far away,

"Straight to the Forgotten Temple, the ancient Forgotten Temple!"

We left our native home, our wives and…

“We haven’t got any wives,” Lok cut the song short.

Kiko merely shrugged and wailed out a fresh version:

“We left our native home, our brothers and sisters,”

O Juju! Deliver us from our plight!

Inwardly, Tak breathed a sigh of relief, glad that Pupununu’s farewell song had at last come to an end. But Kiko and Lok were far too caught up in their roles to stop. Before they reached the Forgotten Temple, the two had already worked their way through the “Song of the Brave” and plunged into “The Long Road” though they would certainly never have finished it, for it ran to some forty verses. Legend had it that this song lasted precisely as long as the journey from the village to the Seven Blind Brothers, but Tak had never felt the slightest urge to put it to the test.

“Wonderful,” he muttered under his breath, finally catching sight of the Temple’s peak.

The Forgotten Temple jutted up from the heart of the jungle like a rotten tooth that no one had ever managed to pull. Tall and faintly reminiscent of the Blind Brother cliff, it had been hewn out beside the rock face. Its summit was shaped like an enormous human head, in the manner of the chieftains’ heads upon the Altar of Juju, or the guardian heads near the shamans’ house. Once, a waterfall had gushed from its gaping mouth; now only creeping and climbing plants — fue — trailed down from it. These same vines wove themselves about the whole of the rock as well, undoing it with a gentle power imperceptible at first glance. Below lay a pool built of stone blocks polished long ago. It was far larger and deeper than the basin by the High House, and had once served as an oasis of freshness and coolness on a hot day in the dry season. Now, though, rainwater had collected in it, midges swarmed overhead, and water lilies and lilies floated on its surface. Beside the

temple spread a broad, open glade where, in the old days, a sacrificial altar had been set up.

It was a perfect spot to break the journey.

They quickly rigged a single canopy to shelter them all — a long length of sheep's-wool cloth, one end stretched over a vine at roughly the height of a man above the ground, the other edge propped up with a long stick and spread out upon the ground. Done. They could have added a few pillows as well, but that was a luxury they lacked just then.

Kiko rekindled the fire, then built an earthen oven, an imu. That night, for dinner, they had baked mei fruits and a little wind-dried fish. They could have gathered more fruit, but everyone, it turned out, was too lazy.

"A year has passed, and I still miss nosatik meat," Lok muttered, and Tak winced.

Ever since he and Dzhera had found that small, fragile cub and taken it into their care, the thought of eating nose-beasts had never once crossed his mind. Now the very idea seemed wrong.

I wonder—if the Pupununu tamed all the animals and birds of the jungle, would they give up meat altogether?

"Who's sleeping first tonight?" Lok looked Tak straight in the eye. "You're planning to kill Tsarad in your sleep, aren't you?"

"How did you even pronounce that?... Never mind, though. Yes, it seems that's the only way. But I'm no longer sure I'll try it today."

He didn't say that he was tired, that the Seer's words still wouldn't leave him in peace. That he feared for the people of the village and dreaded letting every one of them down. He didn't say how little he wanted to face Tsarad, even knowing that one day he would kill him.

“Then I’m off to sleep,” Lok declared, already stretching out beneath the lean-to. “Don’t forget to wake me if I get so much as a scratch.”

“I’ll wake you in three hours or so,” Tak replied, glancing at the sky.

Lok answered with nothing but an indistinct mutter, his eyes already closing, one arm tucked beneath his head. He hadn’t taken off his cloak, and Tak decided to follow suit. Nights in the jungle were cold, and the damp rising from the ground could chill a body to the bone despite a layer of cloth and a fire burning close at hand.

Kiko sank deep into thought, never noticing how his fingers drifted quietly across the banjo strings. His was the most musical soul in the entire tribe. A love of song and dance ran in the Pupununu blood, yet Kiko outshone them all. He could spend hours at strings of dried sheep gut, plucking and stretching each one until the sound rang flawless. He would labor for months over a single drum, coaxing the perfect response from its wood. Every hymn and every ballad of the tribe he knew by heart, and had even composed some of his own. The Pupununu might shun him for his solitary ways, for his murky past, but none could deny that when music was needed, Kiko was the first they called.

And yet this time, Tak had to take the instrument from his friend and set it far aside. It unnerved him that they should be making noise in the jungle, so near the ancient shrine. Who knew who—or what—might come to them from this world, or from some other?

“It’s been a long while since we’ve really traveled,” Kiko said at last, breaking the silence with a smile. He drummed his fingers on the log, as though searching for something to stand in for the banjo. “Adventures like this are what songs and legends are written about—the kind that get cliffs and islands named after them, and so on.”

It came to Tak suddenly that he did not share his friend's high spirits. He had always longed to be the hero of a legend, would not have minded an island named in his honor—but now… he wanted none of it. He simply wanted the whole thing over as quickly as possible, so they could go home.

Or maybe he was simply tired, and that was why such thoughts took hold. Perhaps it was that, this time, they were without Dzhera. Never before had he strayed far from her, nor for so long; she was with him in all things, always — just as the stars come with the darkness, and fire is never without its smoke.

He wondered how she was faring. He hadn't managed a proper goodbye — he'd been too angry at being made to leave her, and he hadn't liked it one bit, even though he knew it was the right thing to do. Knowing that, if anything, only deepened his anger with himself. All he could do was hope that, in the week ahead, she wouldn't come to forget him entirely.

"I, for one, intend to immortalize our names in a song," Kiko went on, venturing to speak despite Tak's silence. "It will be called 'The Strangest Squad in the History of Pupununu, Investigating the Strangest Case in the History of Juju.' What do you think?"

Tak didn't hear him. His attention had caught on tiny green dots glowing and swaying gently above the leaves of the bushes, fading away into the depths of the forest. Faint as they were, they might have been fireflies — except that they never went anywhere at all.

"Kiko, do you see that?"

His friend looked where Tak was pointing, squinting, tilting his head from side to side, before admitting at last:

"See what, exactly?"

“Those are yorbls!” Tak cried. Ordinary people couldn’t see them — they lacked the mana for it. “I’ll be back soon,” he promised, springing to his feet and hurrying toward the little lights.

The little lights of the yorbls led the way between the trees, winding about the Forgotten Temple. Touch one and the light would vanish, though it never scorched the skin. Tak quickened his pace, hurrying after them, still unable to guess where they had come from. Perhaps the Temple was still breathing out its magic all around? Perhaps it wasn’t as dead as he had believed?

“Hello, hello! You found me!”

No — this had nothing to do with the Temple. There, perched on a palm leaf with her legs crossed, was Flora, and her bright green eyes glowed exactly like the yorbls she had scattered about.

Tak leaned back against the trunk of a tree, gazing up at her from below.

“Hi. What are you doing here?”

Long ago, when he had set out on his first journey to stop Tleylok, Flora had marched right beside him, shoulder to shoulder. Yet they had scarcely exchanged a word since, even though in the jungle it had seemed to him that her presence lingered close.

“I’ve been watching you ever since you left the village,” she boasted, drifting gently down through the air to the ground. “I worry about you, Tak.”

Of course she did — she had always fussed over him far too much, as though he were nothing more than a foolish, fragile human without a drop of magic in him.

“But we’re all doing just fine…”

“The Seer told me you had come to visit him,” she went on, cutting him off. “You wanted to learn your future. But, Tak, you know it’s often better not to.”

Clever girl — choosing to warn him about that only after he had already gone and done it.

“But I had to know. Now I’ll be able to protect Dzhibolba. His prophecy would have come true if I hadn’t learned of it.”

Flora shook her head stubbornly, and her green hair, curling like the supple stems of the fue plants, whipped against her green-tinged cheeks. She was entirely green, from the tips of her fingernails to the irises of her eyes — just like the foliage that grew at her will, or the grass that strained toward her wherever Juju happened to appear. In beauty Flora took after her mother, and in power she was every bit her equal. Might she one day become a protector of Pupununu, too?...

“Tak, you’re not listening to me,” she said crossly. “I’m telling you…”

She broke off abruptly, staring at Tak with wide eyes. Before he could open his mouth, she made a swift gesture with her hand, as though brushing away a cobweb in front of his nose; then she turned the other way, opened her fist, and blew it off her empty palm.

“Flora, what’s the matter?...”

“Tak, you must be extremely careful,” she began again, turning to him. “Tsarad is after you — you are the one he needs, because your mana is just like Juju’s, and he is very hungry.”

“I’ve heard that a hundred times in the last two days!”

Only when the words were already out did Tak realize he would have done better to keep quiet; out of habit he flinched, bracing himself for a blow to the arm. But nothing came.

Oh, right — she isn’t Dzhera…

“And that’s very important — and very dangerous! I want you not only to look after the tribe — the people — but to think of yourself as well. What will they do without you? If you want to help them that badly, then you must take care of yourself — yourself above all. Do

you know why mothers eat first and only then feed their children? Why is the chief's house built first, and only then the homes of everyone else?"

"And what would you suggest?" Tak asked as gently as he could, for the Juju truly was angry. With Flora, this happened far less often than with her sister. "Go back to the village and ask the Chief to lend me a couple of guards? I have power, Flora, and I've already learned to use it. Everything will be fine."

"Oh, Tak," she said, a smile breaking suddenly across her face, which she hid behind her little hand. "But you're not a Juju! You could die—and so easily, at that! You have a human body and human weaknesses. Forgive me—that's Fauna's nature speaking—but you… you're not as strong as you think. That's why you must be more careful. Please."

Tak made no reply, stung by her words. To humans he was too strange; to the Juju, too weak. A thing incomprehensible and needless—a thing that should never have existed in nature at all. Thanks a lot—Flora could hardly have put it more plainly.

"Is that all?" he asked dryly, when he realized the silence had stretched on too long.

The Juju smiled faintly and reached out a hand to touch him, but Tak stepped quickly back, frowning. Flora froze for a moment, then coughed and looked away. Just like a human.

"I'll keep an eye on you," she said in parting, folding her arms across her chest with formal precision. "If you ever need help, you can always count on me."

"But Sa…rad eats Juju first, doesn't he? How could you possibly help me? And in your sleep, at that?"

Flora smiled again, revealing her small, perfectly white teeth.

“Tak, the Juju are capable of a great deal. Don’t worry about me. Think of yourself instead.”

And then, with a sudden flare, she dissolved into thin air. Only a handful of small, fragrant leaves appeared from nowhere and drifted softly down to the ground.

Tak lingered where he stood for a while, turning the strange encounter over in his mind. Juju spirits are immortal, and time means nothing to them. Naive Flora still thinks of him as a lost ten-year-old boy with no notion of how to master his power, no idea how he had been swept into a war with the dark shaman, and no understanding whatsoever of Juju, whom he had scarcely seen before that moment. A great deal has changed since then, and Flora ought to know it. He no longer needs her protection, and his Juju power is in no way inferior to her own.

When he finds Tsarad and kills him, she will understand.

The night was hushed and strewn with stars. Tak gazed up at the sky until his neck began to ache. Girls make a habit of staring at the stars for as long as they can, so that their eyes will sparkle afterward like those of the Juju Moon. For sailors, the night sky serves as map and sundial alike. And shamans read stories of spirits in the stars—at times, even prophecies.

In another hour or so, it would be time to wake Luke. Kiko kept nodding off beside the campfire, though each time he snapped quickly back—either his chin caught the spikes of his necklace, or he managed to rouse himself just before toppling over.

“Get some sleep,” Tak suggested after his next abrupt awakening. “I’ll keep watch over the two of you. When Luke wakes up, he’ll take over keeping an eye on you.”

“You don’t understand.” Kiko flashed him a sudden wide smile, rubbing one eye. “It’s genius! I’m sleeping and yet not fully asleep at

the same time" not really. The beast will never have time to crawl into my head, and I still get to sleep properly. There's the answer to all our problems! Sleep, snatched in scraps and slivers!

Oh, if only 'all their' problems could be settled so easily, with words alone…

Tak himself couldn't shake Luna and Flora from his mind, and wondered why he was paying them so much heed in the first place. The Juju had never truly cared about people — Luna was their protector, but for the most part Pupununu had always had to rely on itself, and everyone knew it. It would be no different now. The spirits were supposedly keeping watch over them, but only the way children watch a spider spinning its web before devouring a fly.

"It's a strange thing, to think that one of us will soon die," Kiko said abruptly, and Tak flinched.

It wasn't right to say things like that, least of all beneath a full moon — but trifles of that sort had never troubled Kiko, as ever.

"Don't say that. I'll kill Tsarad — the Seer said so. Dzhibolba will be more careful from now on, and we'll keep an eye on each other. Everything will be fine — none of us is going to die."

Tak edged closer to the fire, feeling himself on the verge of a shiver. Was it the cold?

"It's not all that simple," Kiko said with a brief chuckle.

For some reason, these musings amused him—though he had never taken death quite as seriously as a person ought to. Having lost his parents in infancy, he had met death too early and too closely to go on fearing it. Then he and Tak had chosen to let the tribe believe them dead—and once you have attended your own funeral, nothing can truly frighten you anymore.

When the time comes for Kiko to cross into the Spirit World, he will go lightly and cheerfully, skipping and singing all the way.

“You never know what the next moment holds,” he went on. “And that is the most wonderful thing about it, isn’t it? We’re not Juju, brother—that is exactly why life stays interesting when you can’t tell what it will bring you.”

“I’d still rather have at least a rough idea,” Tak muttered, hugging his arms tight around himself. “I don’t want this life to spring any unpleasant surprises on me.”

“He tried not to recall all the predictions he had heard from the Seer. Of course, every one of them had come true—except for the one best left unthought of, and today’s. The thought that these, too, would one day be fulfilled twisted his stomach into a painful knot—from fear, from anxiety, from anticipation. But fear above all.”

Kiko whistled softly, and a kakapo parrot answered him with a hoarse croak. He lifted a mei fruit from the still-hot stones and tossed it from palm to palm several times to cool it.

“And can this Juju of yours foresee the future as well?”

“She is not my Juju,” Tak replied crisply, shooting his companion a stern look. His friend pretended not to notice. “And it seems to me that all Juju can see a little of what is to come. Flora frets over me as always, though I can’t imagine why — after all, the Seer said that I would kill Sarad, and surely he knows better than she does. In short,” he sighed, dropping his gaze to the imu oven and wondering whether he ought to have a snack himself, “the spirits, as usual, bring more confusion than good.”

Neither of them spoke again. The jungle sank into slumber around them; the Forgotten Temple was dead. A round, bright moon drifted slowly, slowly across the sky.

Then the moon was gone, and the stars with it. Tak made his way blindly through the jungle, trying in vain to summon his staff. Where

had it gone? Nor could he conjure light with his hands, as if all his mana had been drained from him. Yet he wasn't afraid. Not at all.

The darkness was so complete that it felt as though he were walking with his eyes closed.

When the ground suddenly ended in a cliff, he slipped on the slick mud and went tumbling down — he wasn't even surprised. He landed flat on his back and lay there for a while, letting the pain subside, then picked himself up and walked on.

He had the feeling that someone was calling to him from deep in the jungle, but it was no human voice — no words reached him. But Tak knew it was waiting for him, felt it with all his soul, and so he hurried onward. The call burrowed under his skin and into his skull, ringing from within — subduing, hypnotizing, drawing him in. Yet Tak saw no harm in any of it for himself. He was curious to know who it might be, and which Juju had need of him. And on he went.

A colossal sal tree barred his way. The call did not fall silent for a single instant, and Tak resolved to climb it — perhaps from on high he would see everything better and make out which way to go.

Even in absolute darkness, his hands and feet unerringly found their holds — every ledge, hollow, and scar on the tree's body. Besides, the trunk was twisted, so the climb cost him no effort at all. Somewhere, quite recently, he had clambered up something too… Oh, of course — at the festival held in honor of their departure. He and Dzhera had scaled a kwila together, and from there…

One foot slipped off a damp ledge of bark, and Tak pressed his fingers in harder, as though letting his claws out. His heart quickly steadied; he caught his breath and climbed on.

The tree never seemed to end, its crown stretching clear to the heavens. Tak pressed ever upward, a dull ache beginning to gnaw at his arms and legs.

Should he turn back, after all?

Clinging to the trunk, he glanced back down, and nausea rose within him. He could see nothing, yet he sensed how high he had come. If you fell, not even Dzhibolba could gather you back together…

No — there was no going back.

At last Tak felt out a thick, sturdy branch overhead and hauled himself onto it. He looked around, but still he saw nothing, though no other branches hung above him. Even with clouds hiding the moon and stars, he should have had a splendid view of the surroundings. So why was there nothing but blackness on every side? Had he gone blind? Tak raised a hand and waved his fingers before his eyes, but it was as if his body had ceased to exist.

Suddenly he gave a slight start and could not at first tell why. The call had stopped.

And then Tak truly opened his eyes.

Tak's strength gave out, and he dropped to his knees. His hands trembled faintly, and nausea roiled in his stomach. He didn't look around, but a fresh, cold wind swept over him, and not a single tree stirred overhead.

And yet he was in no tree himself.

But he was very, very high up all the same.

Once the queasiness had passed, Tak crawled to the edge of the platform on which he found himself. It was square, a good two human heights across—solid to the touch, though muffled beneath layer upon layer of moss, fue, and dirt. He had a guess as to what it was, and the guess set his head spinning harder still.

Gripping the stone fast with both hands, Tak leaned over as far as he could. Yes, that was it. He was standing on a colossal stone head, not much like the chief's head on the altar. This one was more elongated, with a straight nose, a heavy overhanging brow, and thin

lips. Though it was hard to say for certain now, in darkness such as this. Tak simply knew—he had seen it many times before.

He was on top of the Forgotten Temple.

And that was not good at all.

"Okay… okay…" Tak muttered under his breath, still on all fours, not daring to rise to his full height. "You were sleepwalking again. And you… climbed up here. It's all right. For someone like you. The main thing is you're alive. Yes. That's the main thing. And now you need to get out of here."

Calmer now, he rose to his feet. Two of the Blind Brothers loomed above the fanakenga sun, and beyond them the sky was brightening. A strip of orange-red glowed faintly along the horizon, melting into cold blue before sinking back into darkness. Thank Juju — the wild night was over at last.

Tak circled the site, searching for their camp. There it was. Not a glimmer of firelight — had they all fallen asleep? With no one keeping watch? Nerbils…

Tak hurried back. He drew his staff, rapped its knob against a stone, and the next instant he stood beside the dead campfire. The teleport left his whole body numb, but the sensation wore off a moment later.

Some, like Blot and Blita, believed you could teleport yourself anywhere you pleased, even to the far end of the valley. People like that generally assumed Juju's staff could do anything in the world: make Moana overflow her banks, do away with the Seven Brothers, turn the whole countryside upside down. That was nonsense — magic granted no such freedom, and it claimed mana mercilessly for every single thing it did. Tak could teleport himself only to a place he could see at that very moment — never any great distance, especially if he wasn't standing on some high ground.

Fortunately, Lok and Kiko were safe and sound. They lay snoring peacefully, and there was no sign that anyone had tried to kill them in their sleep. But where, then, was Tsarad? Had he gone looking for them? Or was he off hunting animals in their dreams — or rather, in their nightmares?

He really ought to have gone looking for him that night after all, but the day's travel had left him utterly drained, and he doubted he could endure another nocturnal struggle with a predator. As it turned out, though, he'd had strength to spare — enough, evidently, to climb to the very top of the Temple, all while fast asleep, no less!

The only consolation was that no one had noticed his leaving. They had troubles aplenty as it was; the last thing they needed was for Lok to find out that he wandered about in his sleep. He probably should have asked Flora about it, but it was too late for that now.

Tak waved his wand, and the campfire leapt up hot once more, blazing with violet flame for a moment or two. Then, on reflection, he swept the wand again, and a translucent pink wall, twice the height of a man, rose up around their campsite. It was a sheer miracle he hadn't tumbled off the temple, and he doubted his luck would hold a second time. The wall of magic would keep him from sleepwalking — and might even delay Tsarad, should he come to see them here in the real world.

He would simply have to remember to warn Lok and Kiko about the barrier, or an unpleasant surprise would be waiting for them.

Chapter 10

With her own hands Flora gathers every withered flower, lifting fallen leaves and broken branches. A dead tree, bound fast in vines and lichen, she gently draws from its cocoon. She will not pass by a single crushed blade of grass, nor a single trampled sprout; she will mark every slender sapling that never lived to see even its first year.

Flora squeezes the dead plants in her fists, and they scatter into seeds and spores, drifting down to the earth to grow anew.

Fauna knows when the heart of the tiniest parrot in the jungle stops beating, when an ant freezes forever, when a fish's tail stirs no more. She senses the death of each of her creations and comes for them. The white souls of beasts and birds are harmless; even the fiercest predators grow meek and walk side by side with the souls of sheep and antelopes. Only the souls of nerbils are dangerous, for even in death they can do a person harm. You know that if you kill one of these creatures, you must run a good distance away and wait, then come back and douse the monster's body with water — though covering it with stones will serve just as well. Whatever you do, don't touch it!

The souls of animals do not return after death, but remain in the World of Spirits. There they can graze forever on ghostly grass, free from fear, lie upon the ground, climb onto rocks, and watch the other souls. They no longer gather in packs or hunt one another — they have no need of such things. Nor do they need to eat, yet out of habit they still seek out grass and water.

But no one comes for people. That is why we hold a lavish feast in honor of the deceased, why we speak of him the whole night through, recalling his jokes, his exploits, and his other merits. For a person's soul is still close to us — on the first day, at least. He hovers near the people, clattering the empty pots now and then, frightening the

chickens, stirring the tapestries. The ghost hears our every word, marks our every step. He is watching.

If the feast is not to the deceased's liking, he will not leave his home village for a long while yet, and then we might as well forget about peace. An enraged spirit is worse than a maddened rhinoceros. A beast you can kill; a ghost will not be so easily appeased. No mortal hand can harm him. The spirit will wreak his vengeance upon his former tribesmen: he will wail through the nights and rob the children of sleep, carry off the sheep and drain the blood from the chickens in the darkness. Terrible is the wrath of a man displeased with his own funeral.

But if the feast goes well, the soul will slip away, quiet and unnoticed, to find eternal peace in the mists of the World of Spirits.

Yesterday, Father said that the people could now sleep in peace. He hastened to bring them the good tidings, confidently declaring that the monster had followed hard on the tail of their mighty shaman and quit the village. For this announcement he gathered everyone before the platform, as though some sort of celebration were underway. And the people rejoiced as though it truly were one.

But then, behind the closed doors of the House, he revealed that Dzhera and Zaria would have to keep watch over one another for at least a couple of nights more, and that he would post a guard for himself as well. For they are the supreme family, and they hold more mana than all the other people put together.

And of course, Father dispatched two people to Dzhibolba the moment he learned the news Tobar had brought. For this was Juju, and Juju does not make mistakes.

And so it came about that those strongest in mana — and therefore most vulnerable to Tsarad — once again spent the night sleeping in snatches, watched over even as they stood watch over the others, while

everyone else, the ordinary folk, could lie back and enjoy an unbroken night's sleep.

Dzhera believed none of it — least of all that she had any mana to begin with. In all likelihood she did not possess so much as an ofinda, but such trifles never concerned her. She had no intention of becoming either chief or shaman, and even without a scrap of mana, her life held magic enough already.

Still, she obeyed her father and sat dutifully at Zaria's side for half the night. Her sister was unusually quiet, barely spoke a word, and was asleep almost at once. Dzhera jotted a short entry in her scroll, then tipped out over herself nearly all the tamanu oil from Zaria's stores — and boredom soon crept in. She wanted to sleep; she tried to hold herself at the very edge of it — refusing to drift off, refusing to think too much about the squad. Thoughts of them kept her alert, yet at the same time they bred too many questions, too many feelings she could not bear.

It was wrong, all of it. She ought to be out there with them right now, not stuck here. It had always been that way — she, Kiko, and Tak weathered everything together, no matter how hard it got, no matter what magic stood behind it. Why should now be any different? And the wrongness of it left her with an uneasy premonition that they would fail. Did Tak think he was acting for the best, leaving her behind in the village? He was sorely mistaken. She would sooner die of worry than beneath the claws of a beast.

That night, Tsarad gave the Supreme Family and mighty Dzhibolba a wide berth; he did not so much as touch the half-dead Tleylok.

But he had been to their village.

Early, early in the morning, Dzhera was woken by voices outside. She buried her head beneath the pillow, hoping the clamour would simply fade away of its own accord, but the voices only grew louder,

more and more agitated, until it became impossible to pretend they weren't there. She would have to get up and open her eyes.

There was no sign of Zaria in the room — Dzhera would not have been the least bit surprised to learn that her sister hadn't stayed with her at all, but had slipped off to her own bed the moment Dzhera drifted off. Comfort, for Zaria, came above all else.

Nevis the nosatik was spinning in nervous circles on his bedding, twitching his big, soft nose. Dzhera scooped him up, pressed his bald, hot little body to her chest, and carried him out of the room.

The cool, damp air wrapped about her at once like a thick cobweb, freshening her face and leaving a bitter taste somewhere at the root of her tongue. The delicate whistling of birds in the forest finally drove the last of the daze from her head.

A wonderful morning. It could have been.

Down below, a dozen or so people had crowded together in the clearing. The shepherd stood out among them at once, his huge, brightly painted mask looming above every other head. His indistinct muttering carried even up here, and he gestured in agitation; the painted eyes and snarl looked especially mad just then. Dzhera noticed him before anyone else, for the Guy in the Mask usually preferred to hole up somewhere near the sheepfold and keep his mouth shut. The last time she had seen him so worked up was on the day when, under strange and eerie circumstances, half of his mask had been torn away.

"What's going on?"

The crowd fell silent and turned toward her, as though they had only just realized they were standing directly beneath the windows of the House.

Her father stepped forward, gazing up at her from below. He was in a fury — Dzhera saw it at once.

"Are you all right, dear?"

But even so, his first thoughts were always for her — for her and for Zaria. Dzhera often wearied of this solicitude, yet at times it was the only thing that kept her anchored to this world. As it had this morning.

“Yes, everything’s fine.”

“Is Zaria with you?”

“I’m here, Father.”

Zaria peered out from the window of her room and gave a solemn little wave of her hand.

“Good,” her father nodded curtly, stiff as a wooden statue. — Very good.

“So what happened?”

Dzhera pressed Nevis closer to her chest, and his tiny heart pounded as fast as her own.

“That monster slaughtered every last sheep in a single night.”

Dzhera nearly cried out, “Is that all?” she had been certain that one of the villagers had died. The shepherd took up his babbling again, throwing up his hands and clutching at his mask. Dzhera half-feared that, overcome with emotion, he would tear it off at any moment. She had never seen his face, and Tak, who had had the good fortune to see it, never breathed a word about it — he would only widen his eyes expressively whenever she asked.

“Tak said he would lead it away from the village,” her father began angrily, clenching his fists, — but the beast is still here! Why didn’t it follow him? Why does it keep hunting here?!

The people behind him had begun to grumble anew, their anger at the shaman outweighing their grief for the sheep. Only the Masked One kept droning the same words over and over, though at that distance Dzhera could not make out what he was saying.

“Or perhaps the monster has already done away with the party—and that’s why it has returned to us?” Zaria ventured suddenly.

She had come out of her room to join Dzhera on the balcony, laying a graceful hand on the rope railing, and now stood gazing down at the crowd below.

“It wasn’t here last night because it was with them, but now it has come back here,” she went on, and her plump lips pressed into a thin line.

A chill ran down Dzhera’s spine at this, yet she strove not to let her fear show. She did not succeed.

“Blita said she’d seen the party,” she murmured, low enough that no one below would overhear.

“The monster has had ample time since then,” Zaria replied in the same hushed tone, and made her way down to the clearing.

Dzhera watched her go and begin speaking with her father as the people pressed in close around them, arguing over what had happened and what ought to be done now. She did not want to hear them. Nor did she want to hear what Zaria had said. It could hardly be true. He couldn’t have just up and died on the very first night—even granting that he had spent the whole day on the road with the party and must have been exhausted. He was not a man to be caught off guard so easily, let alone killed. At the very least, Juju’s Luna and her daughters should have shielded him, if only a little.

No, most likely Tsarad hadn’t yet realized that Tak had left, or perhaps he had gone after them, met with defeat, and so returned to easier prey. Who could possibly know what went on in that demon’s head.

Having let Nevis go, Dzhera climbed down from the balcony as well. She threaded her way around the crowd and made for the sheep-fold. She didn’t know why she had decided to go and look upon the

predator’s handiwork, but it was better than standing about listening to the people’s dire predictions and the curses they heaped upon her friend. The man in the mask, noticing this, went along with her. Now, at last, she could make out what he was saying, though the shepherd’s speech could hardly be called the most beautiful in the world. The wooden mask made his voice come through muffled, with an almost hollow echo, and all the time he had spent among sheep had given his manner of speaking something close to a bleat.

“He didn’t leave a single one alive!” she managed to catch. — He killed them all, every last one! What for? Why my sheep? He didn’t spare one, not a single one! They couldn’t keep watch over one another, and there was no one to shield them. I was the one who should have protected them, but I betrayed them!

Dzhera had nothing to say to that, and the shepherd’s plaintive wails accompanied her the whole way to the pen. Before they even reached it, a downpour broke without warning. That same cold, dreary rain that comes on early mornings, when you have only just opened your eyes and hear it drumming on the roof and murmuring over the ground. Dzhera could never abide days that began with rain like that.

And now, watching the heavy drops soak into the sheep’s white wool while thin rivulets of blood crept across the ground, Dzhera thought that this was the most wretched yet of all the days that had begun with a downpour.

Nearly two dozen sheep lay with their bellies slit open, just like those rhinos. Not one of them stirred.

“Oh…”

Dzhera swallowed hard, aware of the salty tang of blood mingling with the damp smell of rain and soil. The wool had grown heavy with the water, and down below, near the ground, it had drunk up blood as

well. It could never be used for weaving now. Dzhera doubted anyone would have the heart to shear dead sheep.

“Why is he doing this?” She could scarcely make out the shepherd’s voice.

The rain beat loudly against his mask as though trying to punch its way through, then trickled down like tears. Dzhera had little doubt that the Boy in the Mask was indeed weeping. Strange as it might sound, the flock had been like family to him — perhaps closer to him than all of Pupununu put together.

“I’m so sorry,” Dzhera said softly, gently taking his hand and feeling the leaf bracelet beneath her palm. “But at least none of the people were hurt. You weren’t hurt.”

The shepherd made no reply. The feathers on his mask were drenched and hung limp, and the painted mouth no longer seemed to smile — it merely bared its teeth in grief.

Dzhera had no idea how long they actually stood in silence by the sheep pen in the pouring rain. It felt like a whole lifetime.

“Why didn’t Sarad leave?” Dzhera asked, fighting to keep her teeth from chattering.

She sat in the main hall of Dzhibolba’s house, yet it was even colder indoors than out. The shaman draped an old blanket about her shoulders and pressed a cup of hot herbal infusion into her hands, but still she shivered — most likely more from dread than from the cold.

“Nothing bad could have happened to them, could it?” she pressed on, before the old man could even begin to answer her first question. “Tsarad couldn’t have… just up and… killed him, right?”

She sighed, her grip tightening around the cup even as its heat stung her palms. All she wanted was the right answer — just to know that everything was fine. That was all.

“Of course he couldn’t,” Dzhibolba said with conviction, though his gray brows drew together. “I think Tsarad simply never went after them. For some reason. Perhaps Juju are right, and it’s me he’s after.”

Dzhera flinched. The clairvoyant never spoke anything but the truth, and the thought that Tsarad would not rest until he had killed the shaman terrified her more than anything else. This was a very, very bad turn of events. Juju couldn’t be so cruel to them. Where on earth was Luna looking?

“Dad sent Porcupine and Bul to you. They’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe,” she murmured helplessly.

Dzhibolba merely waved a hand.

“A magical barrier — that is what real protection means. But I haven’t the strength left to raise one sturdy and dependable enough, and if I put up some half-made thing, I’ll only squander my mana for nothing — and Tsarad will come and take my soul in no time.”

Thunder rumbled, as though it had saved itself for that very moment.

“Perhaps Tak shouldn’t have left at all?” Dzhera asked plaintively. “Perhaps he could have driven the monster from the village?”

Dzhibolba spread his hands and, with a low grunt, lowered himself onto the stone step beside her. He gently smoothed the wet hair that had tumbled across her shoulders in thick, unruly strands. Dzhera knew the water was streaming off her, that her clothes were soaked through, and that she ought to go home—yet she longed to stay beside someone who understood her. And after Tak and Kiko, that someone was Dzhibolba.

“My nephew will do everything in his power to protect us,” the old shaman said at last. “I know he’s already hard at work—laying a trap for the monster, or conferring with Juju, or offering himself up as living bait. He didn’t go because he wished to leave the tribe, or to

leave you. He went because he knew it would be better that way—for everyone. And I know how much he wanted to take you with him."

At these words a sweet shiver stirred deep within Dzhera, and warmth spread through her chest. She had known it herself, of course —but somehow, hearing it spoken aloud made all the difference.

"Yes, you're right, Dzhibolba." She hugged him tightly. "Thank you."

Behind him she caught sight of a folding screen shutting off the sickroom.

"How is Tleylok?" she remembered suddenly, dropping her voice to a whisper.

Dzhibolba cast a brief glance over his shoulder and frowned.

"No change. Neither better nor worse. He's regaining his strength. I hope... once Tsarad moves farther away, Tleylok will be able to leave as well."

"And go where?"

Dzhibolba rose slowly to his feet, his face darkening.

"To the place where he had been hiding all this time. The Dark Temple. That shrine was consecrated to the Dark Juju."

"Did people truly erect an entire temple in that freak's honor?"

"He was worshipped, just like the other Jujus. The Dark One was not the unmitigated evil we're used to imagining. He is a spirit. He cannot be terrible, any more than thunder or a flood can be. He simply was what he was."

Yes, the rules of mortals did not apply to Juju, however much one might wish otherwise. And if he cut people down by the dozen because a single man had stolen his bride, that did not make him wicked — oh no. He was Juju, after all.

“I’m going, said Dzhera, rising to her feet and reluctantly slipping the blanket from her shoulders.” That fellow in the mask claimed not even the birds would alight on the sheep’s carcasses.

“Just as they left those rhinos untouched. Animals can tell at once when they’re dealing with an unholy power” and they give it a wide berth.

“Then what are we to do with the sheep?”

“I told your father the most sensible thing would be simply to burn them.”

Dzhera winced at the thought of the stench that would hang over the entire village. But how else were they to be rid of the bodies, when the flesh was dangerous to eat and even the scavengers would not touch it?

“Keep the blanket,” put in Dzhibolba. — And I won’t let you leave until you’ve finished that tincture. That way, if you catch cold, you won’t come running to me about it.

Wrapped in the blanket once more, Dzhera started across the clearing — though not toward her house. A nasty little thought had wormed its way into her head, and she could think of nothing else.

“Blita!” she called, halting at Ungachak’s door. — Blita, open up!

The downpour was nearly spent, leaving behind only the occasional icy drops that kept breaking loose from the sky like someone’s tears. People stayed indoors, letting their work wait, and the whole village had fallen strangely quiet and empty.

“Blita!...”

Another knock, and the door swung open—Dzhera nearly staggered back. Blot stood on the threshold.

He always looked as though he were preparing for some grand celebration: temples carefully shaved to show off the elegant tattoo beside his right eye, a stiff high collar at his throat, jewelry in lavish

abundance. All the Ungachaka were a little mad, and Dzhera usually made a point of keeping as far from them as possible.

“Oh,” was all she said, disheartened to see it was Blot. “Is your little sister home this time? I need to speak with her.”

“She isn’t well,” the young man grumbled.

He looked past Dzhera, rocking back and forth on his heels. His thick cheeks glowed red, as though he were the feverish one. His bulging, glossy eyes gazed at nothing. Some said Blot was as handsome as a ripe taro, but to Dzhera he looked like a dead fish.

“Since when?”

He shrugged impatiently, still careful not to look Dzhera in the eye. His lips twitched nervously, baring two upper front teeth.

“But can I talk to her? It won’t take long.”

Blot sank into thought, half-closing his eyes and puffing out his cheeks. Dzhera braced herself to summon the boundless patience she had never possessed. But then, from deep inside the house, came Blita’s own quiet voice:

“Let her in.”

Blot looked distinctly put out at being shoved into the background yet again, but he meekly stepped aside to let Dzhera pass. She flashed him a brief, insincere smile before sweeping by and heading for Blita’s bedroom.

The twins’ parents were out, and the spacious house seemed vaster and emptier than ever. Portraits of the Ungachaka family crowded the walls — hardly surprising for people who, aping the High House, had planted statues of themselves beside the entrance. All this pomposity turned Dzhera’s stomach. If she ever became chief, she certainly wouldn’t be putting up wooden idols carved with her own face. It was simply creepy.

She entered Blita's room, which bore a striking resemblance to her sister's but felt somewhat gloomier. Lamps glowed in the wall niches, and bottles of dubious elixirs stood in plain sight. Herbs hung drying from the ceiling, while on the floor vases bristled with fragrant orange and vanilla incense sticks. Several animal skulls adorned one wall, and above the closed window stretched a garland of bird feathers.

Blita lay on the bed, nestled among pillows, one hand hovering near a bowl of sweets. The moment Dzhera set foot inside, eyes hidden beneath long bangs began tracking her every movement. Light, soft blankets of sheep's wool, dyed in different colors, covered her up to the chest. A little bell even dangled within reach, so she could summon a family member whenever she needed anything.

"What a darling little blanket," Blita drawled.

Dzhera wore the shamans' blanket over her shoulders like a cloak, but she had forgotten about it until reminded. The wool had gotten damp and smelled faintly of sheep, but Dzhera was doing her best not to think about the morning's scene.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked politely, though she couldn't care less that Ungachaka had come down with a cold. "Blot said you were feeling unwell."

Blita curled her lips in displeasure, baring the tips of her fangs. Just like Kiko, Blot and Blita had had several teeth knocked out at their initiation, mangling them even further. But the twins were terribly proud of having gone through the ceremony, and they looked at Tak and Dzhera with a touch of superiority.

"Nonsense," Blita muttered at last. "What do you want, princess?"

The hardest part.

"I need your help," Dzhera forced out with difficulty, slowly pressing her cold palms together. "I have to find out what's happened to the detachment."

Her fingers clenched into fists of their own accord, but she made herself unclench them. She knew there was no other way left, which meant she had to ask. Even if it meant sacrificing her pride. It wasn't worth much anyway.

"I'd like to know that myself," Blita drawled slowly, "but as you can see, there's nothing I can do right now."

"Then," Dzhera said eagerly, "tell me how it's done, and I'll find out everything myself."

Blita gave a thin laugh. Like a little bell being shaken right inside her ear.

"You don't have an ofinda, princess. You aren't capable of anything."

Dzhera frowned, realizing that she was both right and wrong at the same time.

"But I must have mana. All chiefs have mana," she continued with an effort, almost hating herself for naming the family she belonged to.

"You are no chief," Blita cut her off, her voice suddenly loud. Her green eyes darkened until they seemed utterly black. "And you never will be. You have no ofinda, no mana, and no brains. You're good for nothing at all, you fool. If you want to know what's become of your precious shaman, then go to him and find out for yourself." She leaned back against the pillows, staring at the ceiling. Her breathing quickened. "Can't you see it?" she went on more quietly. "He simply walked out and abandoned us. He knows that the mana of a shaman and a chief, together with Mama's and my ofinda, is far greater and stronger than that stupid magic of his. Everyone knows it. And he just ran off like a coward."

Dzhera scraped together what remained of her patience to keep from being drawn into an argument. How she would have loved to

yank the hair out of that girl's head and knock out her remaining teeth...

"Can't you just tell me what needs doing, and be done with it? Please," she forced out, her jaw clenched.

She already knew the answer, but...

"No, I don't see the point. You wouldn't understand anything anyway," Blita replied haughtily, as though she were the elder of the two. "Sit there and torment yourself with guessing—it's all you have left now."

For the third time, Dzhera fought down the urge to lunge forward and throttle the nasty Ungachaka. She should have expected nothing else from this house. She knew that perfectly well. But her only hope of learning the truth had just died in her hands.

"I hope you catch some nasty illness, something that keeps you chained to this house for a long, long time," she spat in parting.

On her way out, she drove her shoulder hard into Blot — deliberately, as though Blita might actually feel it.

Ah, well. Pain, blood, and grievances — all of them must be swallowed.

Chapter 11

Oh, all right, all right — you win. The stars are spirits too, not merely little sparkly things created by Juju. And nobody's hiding it — what, haven't you seen how they float across the sky, how they plunge down, how they wink at you? Don't give me that reproachful look. The story last time simply wasn't quite complete, that's all.

Fine, then — listen. Though the stars gather to form constellations, each one bears a name of its own. They are radiant spirits who live in the sky just as we live on earth — and just as Juju lives in his own realm.

The Little Eyes that Merchant Juju left in the sky shine so brightly you'll have no trouble finding them even on foggy nights. They watch us more closely than the other stars do — and no wonder, for these are the seeing eyes of the Seven Brothers, who keep the peace of our district. I can't tell you why, but the sight of them has always made me uneasy.

In the constellation of the Boat, three bright stars catch the eye at once: Pipiri, his sister Rekhua, and the beetle they journey upon. Greedy, envious stars though they are, people adore them — for they are easy to find and fall into so lovely a row.

And there are two more bright stars: one appears before all the others, while the other lingers in the sky after all the rest have gone. These are the sisters Fetia and Taurua, the first beauties of the night. The other stars don't much care for them, for the sisters outshine everyone else with their radiance — even the Blazing Star. And you already know what envy can lead to.

Once upon a time, all the stars banded together and fell to pondering how they might drive away the beautiful sisters. Many a

scheme was voiced, but only one caught everyone's fancy — the one devised by the spiteful Rehua.

And so, no later than the very next evening, the stars informed Fetia that henceforth they would gather much later than usual — such was the decree of Juju the Moon. They counselled the poor beauty to dress in her finest, most radiant attire for the occasion, and Fetia obeyed her brothers and sisters of the sky.

And the stars told Taurua that from the following night onward they would arrive much earlier than usual, advising her likewise to don her brightest and loveliest raiment for that meeting. And Taurua obeyed them.

And now we shall never see the sisters again, neither among the other stars nor side by side. Taurua, in her dazzling attire, arrives before all the others once the sun has set. And Fetia appears shortly before sunrise, when the other stars have already slipped away, and she too blazes like a spark.

So if you should chance to glimpse Taurua, and then, later that same night, Fetia as well, carry to her greetings from her sister.

The first day near the Forgotten Temple passed far too peacefully and lazily for a dangerous expedition-in-which-they-would-all-perish. Tak, Lok, and Kiko picked fruit, dug up yams, then made snares and caught a couple of wild hens. They scoured the whole area around the Forgotten Temple, swam in the pool, and stumbled upon an abandoned cave strewn with human bones. It all felt like nothing more than a simple outing in the jungle.

But as evening drew near, Tak began preparing for what they had truly come here to do.

Until now, he had known no way of entering the World of Dreams by his own will—unless one of the Juju hauled him there in person. However carefully he prepared, however firmly he fixed his intention

—you need the world itself, not dreams—nothing usually came of it: he would sleep soundly the whole night through and dream like anyone else.

Now, though, he had learned that overripe noni berries, a tincture of manuka flowers, and a pinch of nutmeg could carry him straight into the World of Dreams, as though it were simply one more corner of the Waking World. And, of course, the proper spell was required as well: without magic, no one takes a single step in that realm.

“Don’t wake me the instant wounds or anything of the sort appear,” he told Kiko, blending all the ingredients into a thick, sticky paste. “I’ll try to lure the monster out here, but there’s no telling how it will turn out. He may simply materialize in midair out of a rift, so be ready for that.”

Lok frowned, his hand already resting on his spear. Tak felt a twinge of unease at the thought that, in the commotion, the warrior might put that spear through him, skewering him like a chicken carcass.

“If you see something... well, I don’t know... if the wounds run too deep, or there are simply too many of them, then wake me. Though I hope it won’t come to that.”

Tak could almost foresee what would happen: the moment he faced Tsarad and began to gain the upper hand, his friends would rouse him at the worst possible instant, and everything would have to begin all over again.

“And how will you manage to carry a weapon in there?” Lok asked suddenly.

For travelers to That World, this was yet another unpleasant surprise. With a measure of skill — and, of course, a prepared elixir and the proper incantation — one could bring a few belongings along. But in the World of Dreams everything worked differently from the

way it did here, so it might suddenly turn out that a spear refused to fly at all, a sling stone weighed as much as a couple of rhinos, while a knife, on the contrary, grew light as a leaf. Such things were useless; besides, in the World of Dreams one usually met nothing but spirits, and no weapon of this world could impress them.

Once again, then, there was nothing for it but to rely on magic alone.

“I won’t be taking any weapons,” he replied to Lok, “but my staff comes with me. That’s even better.”

Lok spat and stepped aside.

“I’m off for a walk for now. Yell if anything happens.” He hesitated but did not turn around. “Good luck, little brother.”

Still, a single wish of good luck would not be enough. Tak finished mixing the potion and rubbed it onto his eyelids, his temples, his palms, his heels, and, at last, the left side of his chest. With one finger he scraped out the remainder and marked his hair where the feathers were fastened. It wasn’t truly necessary, but he did it anyway, just in case — after all, he would at least have the hope that the feathers might help him find his way back. Then he whispered the spell, and the marks glowed with a faint, pale blue light. Kiko’s eyes widened.

“And what’s that for?”

“My soul is gathered whole and can cross over into the World of Dreams,” Tak replied as he settled onto the blanket, “but that, too, comes at a price in mana, as always.”

“Oh... Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Only a tiny bit of it gets used up. What’s far more dangerous is what awaits me there.”

Tak tried not to worry, tried not to dwell on it, but every muscle was taut, his jaw clenched tight. The potion lay cold and unpleasant against his skin, and he willed himself into a position that would not smear it.

“I could sing you a hunting lullaby,” Kiko offered.

It was hard to refuse: Kiko so rarely whistled it. The lullaby was the only memory he had of his parents, and surely it was weighted with sorrow for him. Yet the song itself was so dreary, so desolate, that it seemed fit only for the dead.

“Go ahead, then,” Tak finally agreed, and closed his eyes.

Kiko’s whistling sounded like the voice of a ghost from the World of Spirits. At times the melody was almost tender, as if calling one to follow, mournful and desperate, before it broke off without warning.

“Sorry, that’s all I remember.”

He managed the tune twice more before Tak felt the potion and the spell begin to take hold. His body grew heavy, as though his muscles had turned to stone; bitterness flooded his throat, and his ears stopped up. He wanted to move, to swallow, at the very least to open his eyes, but nothing obeyed him anymore.

For several long minutes that stretched like weeks, he struggled to turn over and ease the pain, all the while knowing that this too was part of the passage, something he simply had to endure. Yet Tak was terrified that this time everything was going wrong, that the pain was too fierce and his body had already died. That his soul was tearing free of his flesh, and he would end up not in the World of Dreams, but among the Spirits. He might have muddled it all, as usual. Most likely, that was exactly what he had done.

He hoped Kiko would realize something was wrong and come to his aid — at the very least, give his shoulder a shake. But his body lay motionless, breathing deep and calm like a sleeper’s, and his friend suspected nothing.

Then the rustlings of the jungle, Kiko’s stirring, and the crackle of the campfire all vanished, as though the darkness had swallowed them whole.

"This is the World of Dreams. You have visited it many times in your dreams, but now you have been summoned here on an errand of great importance…"

Yes, that was true — right now, he had a purpose in coming here.

"All right… all right… all right…" Tak muttered, looking about and trying to make out where he was meant to go.

The World of Dreams was a strange place indeed — stranger even than Juju's realm. One of its chief oddities was that the spirits of Juju almost never appeared here at all. They had no time to come calling on people's dreams; they loved their own world too dearly to leave it without good reason. In the World of Dreams one could meet only the creatures native to this place, though at times monsters from the World of Nightmares wandered in as well. Their presence, however, was easy to detect.

The whole World of Dreams seemed unreal, like a reflection in water. Stone bridges and slopes stretched away in every direction, along with staircases and grottoes — and yet none of it looked real, as though it were all merely a skillful painting on fabric. There was neither earth nor sky here, only a luminous nothingness that seemed now blue, now pinkish, now golden. It was rather like the sky — except that round islands and stone spirals do not usually hang in the sky.

Everything around glowed bright, though almost unreal — welcoming in appearance, yet faintly deceptive. Yet the moment a monster appeared here, the terrain about it changed with startling speed. The ground where the creature dwelt would darken to a deep shade flecked with blood. Ugly offshoots would suddenly begin stretching out from the air bridges and pathways, and a dark mass would swell over them. It was like the inner organs of a sick animal — one whose flesh had grown riddled with tumors, begun to rot while still alive, and burst

open with internal bleeding. Such was the look of an infected corner of the World of Dreams.

If Tsarad happened to be anywhere nearby, Tak would surely sense it.

He pressed onward, choosing to roam at random and trust that the beast would catch his scent and come find him of its own accord. Then all that would remain was to lure it into the crevice, and the job would be half done. To make sure he drew the monster's notice, Tak resolved to call upon his magic — fortunately, the World of Dreams permitted that. Though even here, magic sometimes obeyed only its own rules.

"Hey, Tsarad!" Tak shouted, brandishing his staff and scattering vivid purple sparks all about him. "Where are you hiding? Come on then — come at me!"

Not a soul was in sight anywhere around, so he could yell his fill without embarrassment — and without fear of accidentally finishing someone off with a stray spell. That was why Tak liked this place: the World of Dreams offered a freedom his own world couldn't even dream of.

"I'm here! Do you hear me? Come on — over here, come on now!"

Between shouts like these, Tak sent magical flares streaking upward, wrapped himself in light, rapped the stone with the pommel of his staff, and set sparkling cracks crawling far ahead of him.

He loved magic and would have chosen no other fate for himself. His power had brought him no end of trouble, but he couldn't imagine living without it. What would it be like to be an ordinary person with no mana at all? How weak you would feel then! How defenseless, how utterly helpless!

"Where are you?" Tak barked, weary of shouting himself hoarse and seeing no sign of the monster. — Are you afraid of me? Afraid that

I know who you are and can strike back, is that it? Is that why you prefer to prey on ordinary people? How pathetic you are!

Waving his staff in invitation, he lifted himself above the rocky island. The sphere of energy bore his weight effortlessly, carrying him wherever he needed to go. A pleasant warmth spread through his chest as he embraced his power.

“So now you’re hiding from me, is that it?” he shouted, scanning his surroundings from high above, anger rising as Tsarad still refused to show himself. Had he been wrong yet again? — You know what? You’re a coward! A pitiful creature of the Nightmares, good for nothing but scaring and killing animals! You’re no better than your vile master!

Gripping his staff tighter, Tak ran forward, and each time the magical energy caught him, a radiant footing sprang up beneath his feet. It had been a long time since he’d had a chance to shine in all his glory, and he was savoring every moment of it now, even though the beast had yet to appear. The World of Dreams offered no resistance to his magic; it was only too glad to amplify it.

“Where are you, then?” Tak swung his weapon, and the stone bridge before him shattered as though it were made of sand. — Why don’t you come out? Or can’t you see how strong my mana is? There isn’t as much of it in the whole tribe as I have alone! Just look!

Coming to a halt, he raised his wand high overhead, and the stone arch before him—three times the height of a man—trembled and began to creep slowly upward. With a sweep of his hand, Tak sent it somersaulting in midair. Smiling, he gave his wand a sharp flick, and the arch came crashing down onto the island, shattering into hundreds of pieces.

Where else but in the World of Dreams could you let your magic loose at full power? Here you never felt your mana ebbing away, and so your strength seemed boundless. That is precisely how dreams work

—they pass off wishful thinking as reality, conceal whatever you would rather not see, and convince you that nothing is impossible.

You'll never find that in the Waking World.

Tak found no trace of Tsarad, and Tsarad found none of him.

All was calm and quiet in the World of Dreams; not a single creature of the Nightmares disturbed him that night. Yet when Tak woke near morning, he could have sworn he had barely escaped with his life from a battle against every last one of Juju's monsters. His bones ached as though with fever, his head throbbed, and his whole body was seized by such an unsettling inner sensation that it could be called nothing but "the heavy return of the soul."

Kiko and Lok had fallen asleep, but Tak could hardly blame them; all of them had been running short on rest of late.

He himself no longer felt like sleeping, so he resolved to take a walk down to the pool. The cool water ought to set him right again.

He knew exactly why he was not himself, and he was angry. Not at himself—at Tsarad. He had been trying to catch the beast's attention in every way possible and impossible. What more could that creature possibly want? Flora had said it fed on mana, which meant it should have been circling Tak endlessly, not hiding from him.

But maybe he really was hiding from him? Maybe Tsarad was actually afraid of him? The thought would even have delighted Tak — but he remembered all too well what the beast had done to Tleylok. Perhaps it was the part of Juju in Tak that had scared Tsarad off?

Tak almost hoped so, for the very last thing he wanted was to believe that Tsarad had failed to come because he was occupied with far more important business.

Hunting Dzhibolba, for instance.

All that remained was to hope that Tobar had understood everything correctly, forgotten nothing along the way, come to no harm, and

delivered Tak's request to the Chief. He found it hard to believe that his wise uncle could be caught off guard at all — but of late he had grown so weary, worn down by Tleylok and everything else besides. Tsarad would have no trouble exploiting his weakness.

Tak trudged to the pool and tried to shake every notion from his head. He was out of luck, as usual — but next time he would find the monster. Tsarad couldn't avoid him forever. Besides, he hardly wanted that himself.

Flinging off his cloak, Tak dove straight in and nearly leapt right back out. The water was icy — chilled by the fresh night, kept among the stones far below, in the shadow of the Temple. Never, it seemed, had he felt such cold. Probably only water from the mountaintops of the matu-fanakenga could rival what filled this pool.

But just now, that was all to the good.

The cold refreshed him, washed every needless thought away, and took his mind off the pain. Tak had never been able to hold his breath for long, yet this time he stayed beneath the surface as long as he could, until his chest felt as if it would tear apart from the burning and the tightness. Only then did he surface, frantically gulping down mouthfuls of air.

Above him loomed the Forgotten Temple — a tall, black hulk against the purple sky and the fading stars. And upon its summit stood a white beast.

Tak's breath caught in his throat. Only the animal's head, neck, and a hint of his forelegs showed; his coat was so pure a white against the sky that it seemed to glow. The thin horns he was supposed to have could not be made out at that distance, nor could the burning golden eyes. But Tak knew perfectly well that those sharp horns were jutting into the sky at this very moment, and that the yellow, pupilless eyes were fixed upon him.

As carefully as he could in the cold water, where his feet found no bottom, Tak began swimming toward the shore, never once taking his eyes from Tsarad. If he so much as blinked, the monster would come leaping down to drown him; he would not even have to cut him open to devour his soul.

At last his hands touched the smooth stones at the pool's edge, and Tak climbed out onto the platform. His eyes stung from the water and the strain, but he never looked away from the monster, and the beast went on watching him. Overhead, the sky was slowly turning pink.

"Stay right where you are," Tak whispered, barely loud enough to hear, summoning his staff to him.

The beast stirred, sensing the glow of magic. Tak held his breath, bracing for it to come charging at him any second. Perhaps he could fly as well — who could say for certain.

But Tsarad did not rush at him. Quite the contrary — he stepped back from the edge of the Temple.

"Stop!" Tak cried out before he could help it.

Without stopping to think, he waved his staff, and a heartbeat later found himself on the stone platform. Tsarad was no longer there.

"Where are you?" Tak shouted—though not with the confidence or volume he permitted himself in the World of Dreams.

Below, the jungle lay sunk in darkness; a white pelt like the beast's would have stood out at once. How had he come to be so far away? Where to? As if through…

A blue flash blazed before his eyes, blinding him. He never saw the monster spring from the crevice.

A searing, brilliant pain lanced through Tak, and he recoiled. Blinking away the tears, he just managed to catch Tsarad raising his arm a second time; he leapt back, flinging out his arms to keep his balance. His stomach plummeted, and gooseflesh crawled up his spine.

He barely kept his footing at the platform's edge, nearly toppling backward into the pool.

The beast before him stood taller than he remembered—so snow-white it hurt to look at. Its legs were thin and straight, yet they did not end in the slender hooves of an antelope. It stood on thick, powerful toes tipped with strong claws—exactly like the paws of the Monster Juju. The small head was tilted slightly, and from its crown jutted horns like two thin branches sprouting tiny twigs. The creature's eyes glowed faintly, like two little moons. Its soft nose twitched, sniffing at him.

In appearance, the beast seemed deceptively fragile and harmless. The Pupununu might well have hunted creatures like these, to serve their tender meat at the great holidays.

Tak tried not to move, but that was no easy feat while clinging to the edge of the cliff. One step forward was all he needed—yet it would carry him straight into Tsarad. And he had dropped his staff; it lay beside the beast's hind legs, though fortunately the creature paid it no heed.

Tsarad sniffed the air. One more swipe of his paw, and Tak would be sent flying deep into the jungle.

"Stay back!"

He cried out — loud, sudden — and Tsarad flinched. Tak himself did not stir, lest the beast attack.

"Where were you all night?"

If only he could reach the rod. But the monster showed no sign of backing off, and Tak dared not move. Already his toes had begun to ache — he could not stand here much longer.

Slowly, so slowly, eyes fixed on Tsarad and balance precarious, Tak raised his right hand. Perhaps he could wring out at least a tiny flash, a single clap — anything that might make the creature give back a step.

"Behold, and tremble!"

Tak spread his fingers wide, every muscle taut, straining to summon the merest scrap of magic. Useless. All that answered his summons was a surge of weakness rising to his head. He had poured out too much mana that night, and his body was now as feeble and helpless as that of any ordinary human.

Tsarad growled low, pressing his little ears flat against his head. At the moment he looked least of all like an antelope — far more like an enraged cat, or even a crocodile. A predator.

“Yeah, well, I’m not exactly in top shape right now…”

Tsarad lunged, paw swinging, and Tak flung himself backward. The terrible claws raked past right before his eyes, yet his stomach still clenched as he went down. He managed to twist in midair, and the next instant he plunged into the pool.

He did not resurface at once. The blow had left his ears stopped up, he had swallowed water, and it took him a long moment to work out which way was up and which way was down. When at last he broke free of the water and lifted his head, the top of the Temple stood empty. The beast had vanished once more.

Tak dragged himself onto dry land, barely moving his arms and legs, and managed a closer look at his wounds. Tsarad had not struck with his full strength, yet even so the gashes ran deep. He had raked his claws clear across Tak’s chest: three long furrows, just like Tleylok’s. It was pure luck he hadn’t torn his belly open, the way he had with those rhinos.

Then a violent wave of nausea swept over Tak, and he sank straight down onto the ground. His head was spinning and still throbbing, and his teeth chattered as though a fever had taken hold of him. He looked again at the top of the Temple, which the sun’s rays were already bathing in soft light.

Now he truly had no idea how to deal with the monster. And now, for the first time, he was genuinely afraid.

“Flora?”

Tak frowned. It wasn’t that her arrival surprised him — but he had, in fact, been trying to summon Fauna. Yet Flora alone had answered.

“Hello, Tak.”

Fortunately, the Juju would now and then deign to appear somewhere other than the altar, though as a rule they showed up in person like this only when they needed something themselves — which happened roughly once a century. But Flora had always been fond of Tak, and she came to him readily enough, even out here in the jungle. He never dared use magic near the Forgotten Temple; there was no telling what disasters it might call down upon him.

“And where’s Fauna?”

“She’s off wandering somewhere. Were you hoping to see her?”

Well, yes, actually—but Tak was afraid to admit it, afraid of hurting his friend’s feelings. Just as Dzhera bristled at any mention of Zaria, Flora took offense whenever her sister was favored over her. Sometimes ordinary girls and spirits have a surprising amount in common.

Flora sat on a tree branch, gazing down at him. In the darkness only her eyes stood out clearly, and a greenish aura shimmered faintly around her. Tak couldn’t say for sure what it was, but he guessed that mana was shrouding Juju. Right now her magic was probably glowing across the whole of the Seven-Cliff District, and Tsarad could sniff her out from any world. But she had come anyway.

“I have a few questions about… Sarad.”

“Tsarad.”

“Fauna said he can open rifts on his own. I’ve seen it. He appears whenever and wherever he pleases, then vanishes just as easily. So how

am I meant to catch him if he's always hiding? How am I supposed to save people from him if he keeps slipping into their dreams?" Tak drew his cloak tighter around himself, not wanting Flora to see his wounds. "I don't understand how anyone can fight him when he's so elusive. Is there truly nothing that can be done?"

Yes, perhaps he had expected too much—or had simply been naive—to think he could deal with him without much trouble. But to lose to the Dark One's pet? To condemn his own kind to destruction? Tak didn't care what Flora said—he would do anything to destroy Tsarad.

And if the Seer is to be believed, he will succeed. Unless, by warning Dzhibolba, he has changed his own future.

Flora watched him from the tree for several minutes; then she rose to her feet, though she stayed standing on the branch. Tak thought she would come down, but she remained high above. The sun had already risen over the valley, yet deep in the jungle a cold half-darkness lingered, and the hush here was astonishing. At the side of the fanakenga sun, the star Fetia shone brilliantly. It was, in all likelihood, the most fitting place and time for a talk with the Juju girl.

"You can raise the barrier," she said at last, "unless Tsarad knows how to break through it."

"What barrier?"

"A protection that will enclose part of the Awakened World like a fence. The beast will remain inside, unable to pass into any of the other worlds. I know you can do it."

Of that Tak had no doubt — and suddenly everything seemed far simpler than he had imagined.

"Will you teach me to create that protection?"

"Of course."

Yet Flora was in no hurry to descend. Just as Tak was hiding his wounds, she, too, seemed to be hiding something from him — something she had no wish for him to guess.

“Flora? Is everything all right?”

She glided softly down through the air to meet him and hovered very, very low above the ground, so as to be at Tak’s height. She smoothed her hair and finally lifted her head, looking him in the eye.

“No, nothing is all right at all, Tak. The Juju are alarmed; none of us is allowed to visit the world of humans. Luna still doesn’t know what to do. Nobody knows what to do!”

“The Seer said that I would kill Tsarad.”

Flora shook her head stubbornly and looked up at the sky. Was she afraid of the monster’s coming? Or of her mother?

“But he didn’t say whether you would survive it.”

True. He hadn’t said it.

“Teach me to raise a shield. We don’t have much time.”

Flora came up to him without a sound, so close they were almost touching. Her skin smelled of orchids, her hair of hibiscus — and, quite unexpectedly, the scent reminded him of Dzhera. But there was no time for her now. Taking him by the shoulder, the Juju whispered the incantation into his ear; it was much like an ordinary warding charm. When she finished, Tak ran through it once more in his head. It seemed simple enough.

“You’ll manage to hold him back for four days at most,” Flora warned him. “After that, your mana will run dangerously low. I’ll help you replenish it as best I can, but you alone can judge your own strength. Please,” she ran her palm along his arm, “don’t forget that you…”

“…weaker than I think,” he finished gloomily. “I understand.”

Flora offered a tentative smile and slowly, gently, slipped her arms around him. Tak had no time to step back; he simply froze, holding his breath. He never knew what to do with himself when a girl hugged him — far simpler to avoid such embraces altogether.

“Strong as a Juju and stupid as a human,” she murmured, her eyelashes tickling his shoulder.

When she let him go, Flora raised her eyes slowly. Something in her gaze sent an unexpected pang through Tak’s chest. Perhaps he had been too harsh with her. She wanted to help him — perhaps the only Juju who truly did. He tried to say something, but found he couldn’t.

“Hibiscus grows along the matu-fanakenga that leads from the Temple,” the Juju said hurriedly. “Be careful, dear.”

She slipped away in silence, unnoticed, leaving behind the delicate scent of flowers and the lingering touch of soft hands on his body — along with a great many troubled feelings and thoughts churning in his head.

“Either this works, or it’s the end of us all.”

Lok laughed nervously, rubbing the back of his neck as he studied the trap they had rigged up. A snare was fine for catching people and antelopes — surely it would do just as well for a clawed beast from the World of Nightmares? The rope was strong, and the trap sprang almost —almost—every time. Right. If the creature was as nimble as an ordinary antelope, he’d be caught in no time…

Granted, it was far from the perfect trap, but Tak’s snares had turned out better than anything else. He had already set two that morning — a strangling snare and a spring-pole — and hoped Tsarad wouldn’t spot one of them before blundering straight into it, right after Tak lured him out of the World of Dreams into the Waking One.

“Most likely, he’s hidden himself away again since our encounter.” Tak felt the eyes of Kiko and Lok upon him. He still hadn’t gone to

fetch the hibiscus leaves — there had been no time for that — and his wounds ached, steadily sapping his strength. “So I’m heading off to the World of Dreams now, and I’ll try to find him there.”

Tsarad would hardly be expecting to come across a human in the World of Dreams in the middle of the day. It was an excellent plan. Except for one thing…

“Brother, you can barely stay on your feet!” Kiko exclaimed. “You simply won’t survive a meeting with him — you get me?”

“I feel perfectly fine,” he snapped. “We can’t afford to waste any time; Tsarad is already very close.”

“Exactly,” his friend insisted mulishly. “He’s already here, not over by the village. What’s the hurry? The tribe is perfectly safe — it’s you the beast needs.”

“He’s right,” Lok chimed in. “I’d say he’ll be waiting for you this evening.”

Tak didn’t want to admit that they were right. That he was far from his best at the moment. That he was only human, same as the rest of them, and needed rest as much as anyone. Everyone with nothing better to do had already told him as much.

“We’ve already wasted heaps of time.” He dug in his heels yet again. Purely out of stubbornness. “And the beast won’t sit around waiting for me to attack him in broad daylight.”

Kiko and Lok traded glances. In ordinary times the two of them hardly ever spoke — their interests and their roles in the tribe were simply too different. But now, in less than two days, they had become friends for one purpose alone: to gang up on Tak. Wonderful.

“You’re worth more to us alive,” Kiko pointed out, sensibly enough. “How can you not see that? Tsarad isn’t getting away from us now.”

Kiko was always right. Still, Tak held his tongue a while longer, searching for something that would turn the argument his way — but in the end he gave in.

“Fine,” he breathed, wincing as if it hurt. “I’ll hold off until evening. Maybe we’ll all get unbelievably lucky — which, of course, I very much doubt — and the monster happens to be prowling somewhere out there in the wide world, and he’s fool enough to stroll straight into our trap, and we’ll grab him like a chicken. Maybe. Now let’s get back to camp.”

The old sacrificial altar put him at ease in a way the jungle never had—especially once he had ringed the clearing with a simple barrier. Whether it could hold Tsarad back, he couldn’t say, but it offered some measure of protection at least, and that alone was enough to steady his nerves.

Tak settled onto a fallen log, and only then remembered that he still needed to gather leaves to treat his wounds. Really, he ought to have stocked up on healing remedies beforehand, in case anyone else came to harm. Dzhibolba would fly into a rage if he saw how little Tak had done. Tak had always been far better with magic and spells than with leaves and roots—and since he didn’t always see eye to eye with the magic either, the herbs might as well be forgotten altogether.

“What’s he like?” came Kiko’s voice from behind him. — Did he try to kill you?

Tak drew his cloak more tightly about himself, though there was little point in hiding the scratches any longer.

“I don’t think so. Perhaps he only intended to frighten me.” He had no wish to admit that if Tsarad had truly wanted him dead, he would surely have managed it; the monster had caught him in a sorry state. — He can cross the chasms with ease. The moment he appears in this

world, I'll raise a ward to keep him from hiding in dreams again. Flora said we'd have no more than four days to see it done.

"And then what?"

Tak swallowed. How could he ever make Kiko understand the way magic worked? Could you explain to an ordinary person how mana is drawn from the body?

"Then… I won't be able to keep the ward up any longer. But we'll have him before then, I'm sure of it. And right now I'm going to get some rest anyway; it's been a wild night."

Chapter 12

One day, the clever fool Atiki set off into the forest to gather firewood. He climbed up a tree and, perched on one of its branches, began chopping away at it right beside the trunk. Juju the Killer of Joy happened to be passing by; seeing what he was about, she cried out:

“Whatever are you doing, blockhead? That branch will come crashing down this very minute — and you with it!”

But the clever fool Atiki only laughed in reply.

“Silly spirit! You understand nothing at all! This is a brand-new way of felling trees.”

The Killer of Joy made no answer and went on her way.

Meanwhile, Atiki chopped clean through the branch. Down it flew, and Atiki tumbled to the ground right along with it. When he came to his senses, he was utterly amazed — and dashed off to catch up with Juju.

“Tell me the day of my death as well!” demanded Atiki, popping up in front of the Killer of Joy.

“How should I know that?” she said indignantly. “I am the Killer of Joy, not the Killer of Fools.”

“But you said I would fall, and it came true!”

The clever fool Atiki decided that all Jujus can foretell the future — but you and I know that only the Seer is capable of that.

“Oh, so that’s it!” exclaimed the Killer of Joy. “I saw you sitting on the very branch you were chopping, and that is why I knew you might fall. But the day of your death I cannot foretell. For that you must ask my husband, Juju the Killer of Death.”

But Atiki insisted that she be the one to name the day of his death, and the exasperated Killer of Joy, just to be rid of him, told him:

“Very well! Then listen, foolish mortal. The day you set off into the jungle and stumble three times on your way back — that day will be the day of your death.”

Atiki did his utmost to impress these words upon his memory.

And so one day the clever fool Atiki set off into the jungle to fetch coconuts. He trudged back with a heavy basket brimming with nuts, paying no heed to the path beneath his feet, and soon tripped over a stone. Angry at his own clumsiness, Atiki quickened his pace — and promptly stumbled again. Wary now, he thought: “Oh, my death is already near!” And no sooner had the words formed in his mind than he stumbled a third time.

Atiki crashed to the ground, flinging the basket aside and scattering nuts the whole length of the road. He shut his eyes and lay perfectly still, believing himself already dead.

So if you ever go for coconuts along the old trail, watch your feet all the more carefully. The clever fool Atiki still lies somewhere out there, waiting for his death.

“Couldn’t you make the mask some other time?” grumbled Dzhera, opening one eye a crack and squinting against the glow of the candles. “Or in some other place?”

It was Zariya’s turn to sit with her now, but her sister was determined not to let the precious time go to waste and had brought along oils and berries to mix a mask for her hair and face. By then Dzhera’s whole room was fragrant with coconut, orange, and mango — and, as if that were not enough, Zariya had lit at least five bright candles.

“Silly girl,” she replied without turning toward her, carefully separating the strands of her thick hair. Like many in the tribe, they were walnut-colored; only one strand, on the left side, had Zaria dyed

white. “Papa said I have to be here, so I can’t go anywhere. You might at least be a little grateful that I didn’t abandon you.”

Dzhera ached to say exactly what she really felt toward her sister just then, but she knew it would get her nowhere. Always and everywhere, Zaria found a way to get under her skin. Even now, in the midst of Tsarad’s hunt, she had contrived to gain the upper hand over her.

The day had gone wrong from first thing in the morning, and now the night offered no peace either. Outside, the acrid reek of smoke from the burning sheep carcasses still hung in the air, and it seemed to Dzhera that she could sense it here as well, that it was mingling with the sweet aromas of Zaria’s oils, poisoning them. How could she not smell it herself?

But as if all that were not enough, Dzhera had also managed to disgrace herself before the entire Ungachaka family — and her sister into the bargain. When Blita refused to help her, Dzhera set off in search of her mother. But in answer to her request, Chaka merely gave her a stern once-over from head to toe and said that she wasn’t sure she had the strength for so intricate a ritual, and that it was no trifle for just any girl to handle. In short, it was plain at once that mother and daughter deserved each other — and yet it stung all the same. Nor did Chaka stop there. She went straight to Zaria and told her everything, and for the rest of the day Dzhera had to endure her sister’s barbs and mockery. By evening she had all but flung everything aside and run off toward the Forgotten Temple. The only thing that stopped her was that ending up in the jungle in the middle of the night wasn’t, just yet, part of her plans.

“You would do better to spend your own time on something more useful,” Zaria went on, and Dzhera simply shut her eyes, regretting having started the conversation at all, — than fretting over the boys. Believe me, they never worry about us. We girls simply slip their

minds, then pop right back in just as easily the moment some girl or other shows up on the horizon. And even if you did have mana or an ofinda, it still wouldn't be worth your while to perform this ritual. You saw what became of Blita.

Zaria delivered those last words with gloating relish, making no attempt to conceal her hatred of the Ungachakas.

"Is it because of the ritual?"

Until this very moment, it had never occurred to Dzhera that Blita might be ailing because of the loss of the ofind's powers. She knew how shamans grew weak after expending their mana, but she had never heard of such a thing happening to ordinary women. Though perhaps the headaches and the bouts of low spirits that visited them now and then were precisely those signs?

"Of course. Your Tak isn't such a fool after all. He's bound to have some kind of protection against love spells and the like. Blita got exactly what she deserved. You should be glad her scheme came to nothing."

At this news, Dzhera's eyes flew wide open. That she had never once considered. It was unlikely the thought had ever even crossed Tak's mind that anyone wanted him badly enough to try bewitching him. But maybe Juju's magic had been protecting him all on its own, without his ever suspecting it?

"Do you really think so? Oh. Then that is truly wonderful."

Zaria gave a brief giggle as she smoothed the sweet-smelling paste into her hair. She had brought the mirror along on purpose, so as to do everything properly without her sister's help. Dzhera watched her movements, her eyes half-closed, musing that their mother might have been sitting in her place right now — she would have teased her too, though never unkindly, would have offered her advice, but in everything else she would surely have been more like Zaria, and

perhaps that would have irritated her. Still, better a mother who sometimes got on your nerves and didn't always understand you than no mother at all.

The sweet scent, the flickering candlelight, and thoughts of her mother had all but lulled Dzhera to sleep. She had no need to worry on her own account — after the incident with the flock, even Zaria would be keeping a closer eye on her. And the squad gave her still less cause for alarm: Tak was far stronger than she had ever imagined, and he would surely have magic and wit enough to shield himself and the others. All that was needed was a little more time, a little more patience in waiting for him — that was all…

"It's a good thing that—" Zaria began, but a shout from the street swallowed her words.""

The sisters sprang to their feet, straining to listen, but no words could be made out — only one of the women, screaming in anguish and terror.

While Zaria stood rooted to the spot in fear, Dzhera was already dashing out the door, without a thought for what she might find there.

"Help! Help me! Help!"

The scream was rising from one of the far-off huts, and Dzhera saw that people, startled from their sleep, were already hurrying toward it. Paul, who had the watch that day, set off at a run for the shamans' house.

Zaria ventured timidly out onto the balcony to join her.

"What's happened?"

Dzhera could not answer. Her chest felt tight, constricted, and she could not draw a proper breath. A terrible suspicion pounded in her head, but she was afraid to let it become a thought.

It was the dead of night, and even the torch flames burned dim and unsteady. People had crowded together at the edge of the village, and

their anxious murmur barely carried as far as the High House. Someone, it seemed, was weeping or wailing, but Dzhera wanted to believe it was only her imagination.

At last Father came out of the house — without his suru, without the necklace of fangs at his throat. Beside him walked Otakon, craning his neck to see what was going on.

“In the name of Juju’s magic!” the father shouted, his voice loud with irritation. “What’s happened? Who has died this time?”

He hurried toward the crowd, a guard at his heels. Dzhera clutched the rope strung along the balcony until her palms ached.

“Someone is dead,” Zaria whispered, though she, too, dared not go down.

Dzhera tried not to imagine who lived in those houses. She could never make her peace with any loss. None whatsoever.

“I can’t bear this any longer,” she muttered, forcing herself to release the railing and climb down. “I’m going there.”

Behind her, Zaria drew a frightened breath, then followed in silence. Dzhera knew she would go mad if she went on tormenting herself with guesses and dread. She would find out everything right now — very painfully, but very quickly. Like yanking a porcupine quill out of your backside. One pull, and it’s done.

At the far edge of the village, nearly the whole tribe had crowded together, many with torches in hand, massed in a semicircle. No one dared speak above a murmur or weep openly. No one, that is, except Leya, who had raised this whole outcry.

At the sight of her, Dzhera understood what had happened.

In the center of the circle lay her husband. Tau. But unless you knew who it was, you would never have recognized him. Tsarad had slit the warrior open like a moa or a sheep.

Dzhera turned away too late, pressing her hand hard against her mouth. Her eyes welled up, her nose began to sting — not from tears, from nausea.

He had simply gone and gutted him. Like livestock before a feast.

She blinked, swallowed, and the dizziness slowly ebbed away. She ought to have run to her father and flung her arms around him, but he was speaking with Dzhibolba, whose help was no longer needed. Whispers rippled through the crowd on every side. Few were weeping; right now terror outweighed grief in every breast. Husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, parents and children stood pressed close together and, without even realizing it, felt a secret surge of relief that none of them had stood in Leia's place — or in that of Itu, Tau's brother. Today the most terrible of nightmares had brushed past every one of their homes, sparing all but one.

"It all happened so quickly." Dzhera could scarcely make out Leia's voice. Zimdi, Itu, Alicia, and Vallu stood beside her now. "I didn't… I didn't manage to do anything. It was over so fast."

Her voice dissolved into sobs again, and a wave of horrified sighs rolled through the people gathered around. No one could fault Leia for failing to save her husband. How could anyone be blamed for a thing like that? Tsarad had simply swept his terrible claws, and Tau was gone. What could anyone possibly have done in time?

Dzhera began to tremble with horror at the thought that it might so easily have been her father in Tau's place. Or Zaria. Or herself. Anyone at all. And what good were their guard shifts if no one could manage to act? If the beast had only to lash out with its claws, and that would be the end of it?

Yesterday the sheep, today Tau — who would it be tomorrow?

Dzhera couldn't make out a single word of what the people around her were saying. Her teeth chattered so hard and so fast that the clatter

alone seemed to be keeping her alive. All she wanted was to hold someone close, to hear a heartbeat, to know they had both lived through the night. But her father stood among Dzhibolba and the others; Zariya had finally mustered the courage to seek out Leia; and everyone else could scarcely spare her a thought. Sure enough, not one of them thought, just then, of how desperately the untamed younger princess needed someone to hold her.

“Pupununu!” Her father’s thunderous voice split the darkness of the night, and heads turned toward him. “A terrible grief has befallen us, but we must be strong! Do not let fear break you! We are no strangers to hardship, are we? How many times have they tried to destroy us, wipe us from the face of the earth, and erase every last memory of our existence? We have endured, and endure we shall this time as well. Pull yourselves together! We will avenge our brother! We will not let fear drive us into the shadows like a flock of chickens! We will not let the beast kill us!”

The chief’s words, as ever, poured strength back into the people. Gazing at him, hanging on his every syllable, they grew calmer and began to turn their minds to shoring up the village’s defenses. Dzhera could never have managed anything of the kind; more often than not, she could scarcely calm even herself.

But right now her tribe had no use for her anyway. What they needed was Tak and his magic. The villagers needn’t have troubled themselves to raise that tall wall — Tsarad cared nothing for it. What they required now was a barrier of magic, not logs and stones. In the meantime, it was easier to tell them that they could still aid themselves and their kin, that the outcome rested in their hands, that they were perfectly capable of fending off the beast alone.

Dzhera looked at Dzhibolba. He said nothing, his head bowed. Of course he would never tell the truth either, though he knew perfectly

well — better than any of them — that no simple fence could save the people.

Only Tak could deliver the tribe.

Cautiously, Dzhera backed away, her eyes never leaving the throng. The village had no need of her; right now she couldn't even help Leya…

"Luna Juju will not let us perish," the father kept repeating as the people pressed ever closer around him. "Ours is the chosen tribe; the very blessing of the spirits hangs above us. We have nothing to fear, Pupununu! And that we must never forget."

...Yet she would bring to them the one who would surely rescue them all.

At last Dzhera turned her back and trotted off toward home. The whole village lay empty and dark now, except for the far-off houses where everyone had gathered.

"Forgive me for not coming to your feast, Tau!" she begged forgiveness in her thoughts, knowing that he was somewhere nearby and could hear every word. "You were my brother, and I shall never forget you. But I must help the tribe — help Leya, Itu, and the others. You understand, don't you? Please, don't turn into an evil spirit because of me."

She dashed into her room, then hesitated on the threshold. Her head swam in a haze, as though from the scent of oils and smoke, and her hands felt as if they belonged to someone else. She gathered up a cloak of thin tapa cloth, a couple of candles, a tinderbox… Nevis watched her with his big eyes and snuffled quietly.

"I can't take you with me," Dzhera whispered, glancing helplessly about the room and wondering what else she might need. A weapon, that's what. "But I would take you, of course I would. Be a good girl."

She found her old, dull knife. It was hardly a weapon, of course, but it was all she had. Perhaps she could put an edge on it along the way, should the need grow truly dire. Besides, she had fire with her.

“I’ll be back soon.”

She kissed the little snoutling goodbye and dashed from the room.

Luna had already covered more than half of her journey; a couple of hours yet remained until dawn.

Dzhera even managed to stop by the reception hall. It was pitch-dark in there, but she found the throne by touch and laid upon it a hibiscus flower plucked from her hair. There was no time to hunt for paper and write a note; her father would understand without one. The main thing was that he shouldn’t worry about her. Well—and that he shouldn’t be too angry.

Leaving the house, Dzhera looked one last time toward the far end of the village. All the people were still there. Today they would be busy with the funeral preparations, and in the evening they would throw a lavish feast in Tau’s honor, so that he wouldn’t hold it against his tribesmen. She could almost see it all unfolding before her, as though it were real.

She herself had attended only two funerals. One real, and one staged.

One day a pair of fools, Tak and Kiko, decided to sneak away from their chores and spend the whole day lazing about and getting up to all sorts of nonsense. They staged everything so that the tribe would believe them dead. And who knows what the Pupununu would truly have thought had Dzhera not discovered their scheme and carried it straight to her father. It was decided to teach the boys a lesson, and when they returned, they found themselves attending their own funeral. They had vanished from the sight of their tribesmen; no one saw or heard so much as a whisper of them, and only the next day, when Tak

and Kiko had abandoned all hope, were they taken back in. It was a lesson they carried with them for the rest of their lives.

If only every funeral could be as fake as this one.

Torches will be planted in the ground upon the burial mound, and the men will beat their drums. A new headstone will rise, bearing Tau's painted face and his name written beneath it. His body will most likely be wrapped in a carpet, for it looks far too dreadful to behold.

Beside the grave will stand the father, Dzhibolba, and the warrior's kin. The father will sprinkle ash over the rolled-up carpet — ash the color of crushed moonstones, meant to help Tau find his way to the Spirit World. They will speak of what a mighty warrior he was, and of how his memory will live on in their hearts forever. And all the while, the spirit will drift among the mourners, peering into people's eyes to discover who is telling lies.

When it is all over, friends and relatives will be free to stay behind and weep over the grave in solitude. When they staged it all, Dzhera herself sat down by Tak's and Kiko's gravestones and bawled almost in earnest, knowing full well that they were watching her. For a long time afterward, the mere memory could still give her goosebumps.

And after the funeral, there will be a feast. Tau will have to watch his tribesmen making merry — remembering him, telling his jokes, trading stories about him. After all, the passage into the World of Spirits is no bad thing. It is part of existence, and as such it should be celebrated just like a birthday or a wedding.

It's just that death beneath the claws of a hideous monster from the World of Nightmares could hardly be called a customary part of existence. No matter how hard Pupununu tries, they will not escape Tau's wrath.

Only at the edge of the jungle did Dzhera allow herself to look back. The house loomed dark and empty, a black mass. Soon she would

return here — and not alone — and in doing so save the whole tribe. As for Father and Zaria, they would not be allowed to die — not for anything in the world.

I never said…

The people won't allow it, Dzhibolba, and neither will the spirits themselves.

…that Zaria would become…

They'll be just fine.

…chief…

It couldn't have been any other way.

Drawing a deep breath, letting the fresh night air cool her chest, the princess turned away and at once dissolved into the darkness of the forest — like a lonely soul drowned in the world beyond.

Chapter 13

Luna Juju had not always been the most revered and beloved of the people's spirits. In the old days she was trusted no more than any other woman, and far greater praise was lavished upon Sun Juju. It was Sun who sent warmth and light streaming through the Seven-Cliff District, lifting the orb of day high above the jungles. The people rejoiced as they watched the corn shoots break the soil and the yam harvest come in, and their hearts were glad, too, when his rays fell pleasantly warm upon their bare shoulders and backs. But for kind-hearted Sun even this proved not enough.

He took to holding the heavenly luminary back, sinking it into the waters of Moana later and later each day. Luna Juju bore no resentment that her time was growing shorter, yet still she went to Sun.

"My brother," she began, "do you remember how all the spirits agreed to keep to their appointed roles? Each does his own work and nothing more, neither hindering the others nor standing out among them. Remember this."

"Never fear," he answered carelessly. "I mean only to bring a little joy to the poor folk. Their lives are hard enough as it is."

But the great spirit did not stop to consider that the longer the day grew, the less the people slept. Scarcely would darkness and coolness settle over the valley, scarcely would the people reach their beds and hammocks, when—lo and behold—the sun would climb again into a bright and burning sky, and once more they had to rise and set to work. And this was only the beginning of their troubles.

It was not long before the corn shoots started to vanish and the taro withered. The milk in the coconuts turned bitter, the oranges tasted sharper than ever, and the mei bore no fruit at all. Then the sheep fell

ill. The fish fled down into the depths. In a very little while, the people were suffering worse than ever before.

Dreadful burns covered their bodies, and their eyes had withered and shriveled in their heads. Sleep eluded them and labor was beyond them; their food soon dried out and perished.

The tribe of humankind would have died out to the very last soul, had it not been for great Luna. Seeing what had befallen the Seven-Cliff District, she went to the Sun once more — but this time she spoke with him differently.

“Restore the day to what it once was, and all will be well again.”

“You are simply jealous of me, sister!” Juju retorted hotly. — People adore me; they adore warmth and light. That is all they need. And I shall make my countenance blaze in the sky from morning till night, bringing joy to wretched mortals.

Luna lowered her head. She knew she could not sway the Sun, and so she was left with no choice but cunning — she was, after all, a woman.

“You are right, great brother. People need time to grow accustomed to your generous gifts. But do you know, brother, what place on earth you have overlooked? A place where it is still damp, and cold, and dark as at the beginning of time. That is why people cannot acknowledge you as their chief spirit” because you have forgotten that place.

“What place, what place? cried the Sun, Juju, in amazement.” My rays touch every rootlet of the jungles, every grain at the bottom of Moana, every pebble on the mountains of raki-fanakenga. What place could I possibly have missed, wise sister?

“The Crater of the Heavenly Stone, replied Luna.”

Deep was that crater, plunging to the very heart of the earth. Within, all was dark as on the blackest of nights, for neither stars nor moon

ever shone there, and the cold in its depths numbed the tongue and blanched the hair. It was to this place that Luna led Juju the Sun.

The Sun of Juju rejoiced, for soon he would bring light and warmth to the last cold and dark corner of the Seven-Cliff District. Without a moment's hesitation, he leaped down into the crater of the Heavenly Stone. And wise Luna lost no time sealing the entrance with a great stone, so that the self-absorbed spirit could never escape again.

From then on, the days were short again, as they had been before. The crops bore fruit once more, the animals fattened, and people could sleep soundly at night and work by day without fear of burning alive.

But you know that deep inside the volcano — which is what the Crater of the Heavenly Stone has become — the Sun of Juju still sits to this very day. Day by day, moment by moment, he grows angrier and angrier. In his rage he burns himself to ashes and is reborn, dreaming of nothing but how he will take his revenge on all the Jujus — and on people as well.

And when he does manage to break free — that, my dear, is when the end of all times will come.

When Tak awoke, it was still light. Lok and Kiko had left him a note scratched onto a banana leaf, saying that they had gone hunting and would check the traps while they were at it.

Tak felt even worse than he had before drifting off. His muscles ached, his head was heavy, and his thoughts trickled through it ever so slowly. Had Tsarad appeared before him right then, it would have taken Tak a good half hour to work out what was going on. He should never have gone to sleep at all.

He made his way to the pool and, having satisfied himself that the monster was nowhere in sight, washed himself thoroughly, though he did not dare venture all the way into the water. Then he found the hibiscus Flora had spoken of and hastily prepared a healing salve from

its leaves and one of its flowers. It stung his wounds a little, but it would do no harm. After that, Tak decided to freshen up a bit and set off into the jungle near their camp.

He should have summoned Luna herself, not her daughter, and demanded of her an answer to what was happening in all the worlds at once. Luna had promised to protect their people, yet at this very moment she seemed more concerned with the safety of the other Jujus and had simply forgotten all about the tribe. No surprise there. Immortal spirits fly into a panic at the mere thought that their existence might come to an end, and human lives count for nothing in comparison. Tak knew it was unfair, but he wanted to believe his mother was different.

He stopped short, his body tensing before he even realized he was not alone. Someone was a few dozen paces off and wasn't even bothering to hide: they came on at a steady tread, brushing against the leaves of bushes and calmly pushing vines aside with one hand. Kiko and Lok? Unlikely — he would have heard their stomping and their voices from hundreds of paces away. Tsarad? A Juju? A hunter from another tribe?

Tak pulled the staff from across his back and ducked behind a tree. He had no wish to strike first, whoever this might be, but he meant to stand his ground no matter what. If only his magic would not fail him the way it had earlier that night.

The footsteps drew nearer — unhurried and quiet, but hardly because their owner was sneaking or hunting. More likely, they were simply out for a stroll. Tak squeezed the staff tighter, but this time the solid shaft beneath his palms brought neither comfort nor confidence. His power had failed him today, and he had nearly died for it. And all because he had decided to amuse himself in the World of Dreams.

A dark figure stepped out from behind a banana trunk, and Tak very nearly hurled a magic orb at it. Then his heart skipped a beat as he saw who it was.

Dzhera.

Light and supple, every inch a daughter of the Babuzonki tribe, she drifted into this corner of the jungle with untroubled calm, as though it were nothing at all—as though she had always been near. Tak sighed—in the space of a few heartbeats he had contrived to be angry with his friend and glad of her arrival all at once—and stepped out from behind his flimsy cover. The princess stopped short, and their eyes met.

The birds had time to trill six times before he found his voice.

“What are you doing here?”

Perhaps Tak had never truly believed his friend would manage to stay in the village through that whole endless week. Perhaps that was why he could not summon any real anger.

Dzhera had not changed; she merely looked weary and strained. All the same, Tak studied her face closely, searching for any difference from the Dzhera he had left behind in the village. What if she were not real at all—only a phantom conjured by Flora or Fauna? What if this were mere illusion, another trick like the one they had played on Tsarad? The instant he reached out his hand, his friend would dissolve into smoke, and he would be alone once more.

“I...”

“We agreed on five days, remember? You gave me your word. Why have you come? It’s terribly dangerous! And your father? He hardly suspects a thing yet, but afterward he will hold me to account for everything…”

“They’ve killed Tau!”

Dzhera was breathing in gasps—whether from the long road or from agitation, there was no telling. She wore a light cape of tapa, part

of it rolled into a bundle holding her belongings, and an old knife hung at her belt. Dark rings shadowed her eyes, but her gaze was piercing and alert. Tak noticed how it lingered on his scratches, yet there was no time for that now. No time at all.

Tau is dead.

In helpless fury, he clenched his hands into fists, then forced himself to relax. How did this creature manage to keep darting back and forth? Had the whole journey truly been for nothing? Had it even been worth leaving at all, if a man had died?

“When?”

“Last night. Tak, are you hurt? Tsarad?”

He didn’t even notice, just then, that she had pronounced the cursed name correctly. He tried to ease the tension from his muscles, but his fingers had curled so tightly they ached, and his palms burned with heat — as though a moment more and a fireball would burst from them, staff or no staff.

“Last night he was here as well. How does he even do it?.. And Flora never said a word to me!” Tak flung up his hand, barely keeping himself from setting something ablaze. — Why do they say nothing? Why do the spirits keep silent?!

“Tak!”

Dzhera gave him a look that truly hurt. And he couldn’t bear it when she stirred up such feelings in him.

“What? Are you going to tell me this isn’t my fault? That Juju is always on my side? All they ever do is throw up their hands and say how sorry they feel for us! the words came out strangled, and now he seriously feared that something might catch fire” or simply explode — from his voice alone. — I tried to lure him out that night, but he never showed himself in the Edge of Dreams at all — he came into this world

just before dawn instead! He's simply mocking us — can't you see! And I…

"You're doing everything you can!" Dzhera stepped closer, but he didn't back away. — No one could have done more. And I know you will kill him. Soon.

He gave a brief nod, steadying his breathing. It was probably foolish, yet those seemed to be the very words he had needed to hear. Sillier still was the fact that he had needed to hear them from Dzhera of all people.

"Why have you come?" he asked quietly.

He was glad to see her — glad beyond measure, in fact. But he had no intention of admitting it. Dzhera knew him far too well; she had surely guessed as much herself. And he refused to let her see that she had made the right choice in coming.

"To bring you back," she said. She had already composed herself, and no longer gazed at him as though he were a toy she had lost many years ago. Her eyes had turned impenetrable once more, her voice calm. "You see? The Monster cares nothing for whether you left the village or not. Last night he slaughtered every last sheep, and now he has moved on to people. You must come back — that is the only way you can protect the tribe."

Despite himself, Tak folded his arms across his chest, careful not to disturb his wounds. Dzhera's words were steeped in common sense, and that was precisely why it pained him to admit that everything about this expedition had been a mistake from the very start. A mistake that had cost them their brother.

"Wait," he said, remembering his last conversation with Flora. "But what good would I be in the village? I need Tsarad here. Once Flora and Fauna help lure him out of the World of Nightmares, I will raise a barrier so that he cannot return. And then we will kill him — here, in

this world. How, tell me, am I supposed to weave such protection back home? Around the village? So that Tsarad would feel like a snake in a henhouse?"

He hadn't meant to raise his voice at his friend, hadn't meant to make Dzhera feel guilty, even after everything she had done. Yet the words came out angry, almost accusing. He saw something splinter in her eyes, though she swiftly masked it with coldness — and then the green of them darkened like the jungle in a downpour.

"But Pupununu needs you! Dzhibolba spends all his time with Tleylok, and he said so himself: he won't be able to hold Tsarad back. Can't you go back and slay the monster in your own world? It won't take much time if you lure it into this one" assuming your friends agree to help after all.

Just great. They hadn't seen each other for two days, and the very moment they finally met, they had to quarrel. Tak kept silent, wondering how to steer the conversation back onto peaceful ground, given that he and Dzhera were each certain they were right.

But the princess no longer wished to listen to him. She pulled her makeshift cloak tighter about herself and tilted her chin high. Her pink-tinged eyelids drooped, and never had she looked more like Zaria.

"I only want you to remember one thing: you are the shaman of humans, not a brother of spirits."

And she strode past him, all but shouldering him aside as she went. Tak squeezed his eyes shut for a few seconds, long enough to blame himself for everything in the world, before an angry voice rang out behind him:

"Where did you make camp? I'm dead tired."

After that conversation, Tak allowed both himself and Dzhera a little time to cool off and collect themselves. He spent it circling the Forgotten Temple, his mind less on how to defeat the monster than on

what he ought to say to her by way of reply, and in the process gathered all the fruit his arms could hold. Only then did he head back. There was no telling how Kiko and Lok would take the sudden appearance of the princess — assuming they hadn't laid eyes on her yet.

The two of them were nowhere in sight. Most likely they had made camp right in the heart of the forest, to feast on some fresh kill. Well, all the better; the last thing he wanted just then was Lok's little jokes and Kiko's needless commentary.

Dzhera sat by the rekindled fire, warming fish-and-berry flatcakes on a stone, her tapa cloak flung down beside the tent. At the sound of footsteps she quickly raised her head, but the moment she saw it was Tak, she lowered it again and, with an air of great diligence, prodded at one of them with a stick. Tak crouched down beside her and laid his burden right on the ground; he couldn't be bothered to look for leaves to spread the fruit on. He took up the small orange once more, still greenish along one side, and set about prying at its peel with a fingernail. Dzhera's nearness alone was enough to calm him — he had all but forgotten what that felt like.

She was one of the few who had never feared his magical power, and the magic itself did her no harm. Even in the grip of his fury, she would come to him without a moment's hesitation, either tossing off a couple of biting but apt remarks or simply staying close by. And it worked, every single time. Whether that sprang from the much-vaunted feminine magic of the ofinda, or whether she knew him better than anyone else, he couldn't say. But right now he needed it badly.

"I'm glad you came," he conceded at last, without looking up. "Even if your father kills me for it afterward."

Dzhera snorted—not quite in anger, not quite in mockery.

"He won't, if I ask him to."

"But he never listens to you."

“Well, then you’re done for, no question.”

Tak raised his eyes to her after all. He was certain she had changed over these past days, though he knew it was a silly thought. Still, when he tried to recall whether he had ever left her alone for so long before, he couldn’t. She had always been with him. Probably ever since the very first day he appeared in the village.

And that was why she couldn’t have stayed away. He had always known it.

“So. There’s a funeral tonight.”

Dzhera lifted her head as well, her brows knitting at the bitter memory. She sighed and picked up one of the flatbreads.

“I figured that, with everything going on, it would be a while before anyone missed me.”

“Did you at least leave a note?”

“You could say that. Dad will understand everything.”

She reached around to scratch a scrape on her back, and only now did he notice the fresh cuts on her legs and the thorns tangled in her hair. She had made her way through the night jungle entirely on her own, while Tsarad could have been lurking somewhere close by. Tak’s heart clenched at the very thought. But if he tried to bring it up in any way—let alone pity her—Dzhera would flare up and demand to know since when she had turned into some fragile little princess allowed to do no more than wander the small meadow by her house. Yes. That was exactly how it would go. He let out a breath and said nothing.

“Where are Kiko and Lok?” Dzhera asked, suddenly remembering.

“They’ve gone hunting. They ought to be back before long.”

She nodded, chewing a flatbread thoughtfully.

“You need to get some sleep,” Tak said, as gently as he could manage. “And I’ll stay with you—in case that monster is still lurking in your dreams.”

Dzhera said nothing, didn't even glance his way; she kept chewing, her gaze wandering over their tent.

"Father sent Bul and Porcupine to Dzhibolba when Tobar returned," she said quietly, as though he had asked her a question. "And Blita spent all of yesterday lying in bed. She's come down with some sort of bug."

Only now did it strike Tak that for two days he had seen neither Dzhera nor the rest of the tribe, and so had no idea what had been going on in the village. He hadn't asked his friend to tell him any of this—she had taken it upon herself. And as it turned out, he had needed to hear it.

Ofinda. Without a doubt.

"Zaria has finally realized that all this is far more serious than a broken nail." Dzhera stretched out unhurriedly, arms folded behind her head. "And I had to leave Nevis there, too. Though I wanted to take him with me, you know."

"He'll be all right," Tak replied without thinking—he had long since grown used to saying those words at every turn.

Dzhera shifted onto the tent spread out on the ground, curled herself into a ball, and drew her cloak over her. Her weary eyes drifted shut, but just before sleep claimed her, she murmured:

"To think I can sleep in peace again. And Zaria won't even be there beside me."

Tak smiled, but Dzhera no longer saw it. Moments later she was already snoring softly.

Kiko and Lok heralded their arrival long before either of them came into view. Their bellowing must have frightened off every animal, bird, and insect for hundreds of paces in every direction. Tak glowered toward the quarter from which they were bound to appear. Poor Dzhera wouldn't get a moment's rest even out here, far from the noisy village.

The instant Kiko's and Lok's heads bobbed up from behind the thickets, he waved a warning hand. They halted, but that didn't put an end to the racket.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Is there a monster here or something?" Lok backed up a couple of steps, his eyes bulging. — Where?

Tak answered with an expressive gesture, pointing at Dzhera. Now Kiko's eyes went round as well.

"What's she doing here?" he asked in a loud whisper.

"Is she alone?" Lok echoed him.

Tak would have liked to move farther off, where they could talk everything over calmly, but he dared not leave his friend. After all, Dzhera was the second person Tsarad had attacked. Who was to say he didn't make a habit of returning to his victims? Besides, he had promised to keep an eye on her. So the explaining would have to be done here. In whispers.

"She came because she was going to take us back to the village. Tsarad had returned there."

Kiko's face darkened. Lok swallowed hard.

"And then?"

With great effort, Tak forced himself to speak again:

"Last night he slaughtered every last sheep. And this one... he killed Tau."

Pain seared through his chest once more, and for a moment he squeezed his eyes shut. Lok gasped as though he'd taken a blow to the stomach, and Kiko's frown deepened, as if that could somehow help.

"It can't be," Lok hissed through his teeth, then swore and looked away.

“I told her we wouldn’t be coming back until we had slain the beast. Flora and Fauna will help us with that.” Tak’s hands clenched into fists of their own accord. “Luna won’t dare allow another death.”

Kiko settled onto a log by the campfire, studying Dzhera. Was he thinking the same thing Tak had thought the first time he saw her? Did he miss his friend? With Kiko, it was always hard to tell what he was feeling, especially where other people were concerned. Tak knew he loved Dzhera like his own sister, and yet he had no doubt that Kiko could get along perfectly well without her.

“So we’re not sending her back?”

It took Tak a moment to grasp what he meant. Tau — and the question of who might be next — had taken over his thoughts once more.

“Do you want to try? The chief will flay me alive, of course, but I’m not sending her off on her own. And we can’t go back ourselves just yet.”

He said this even more quietly, suddenly afraid that Dzhera might hear every word. She really was remarkably cunning. She had eavesdropped on the conversation between the chiefs of the Zverian and River Warriors tribes, Tina-Tina and Zogsnob, when they arrived at their village. She had caught wind of his and Kiko’s plan to escape and stage their own deaths, and thanks to that they had been taught a cruel but well-earned lesson. It would cost her nothing to lie there right now, taking in all they said about her.

But then Lok changed the subject on his own.

“How could he have killed Tau? People were watching one another, after all.” His hands trembled slightly as they balled into tight fists, and his voice hissed with hatred. “Why did he come back at all? We were supposed to be the ones distracting him — that’s what you said. Something here doesn’t add up.”

“So much of this doesn’t add up,” Tak grumbled in reply, “because it’s an evil spirit! Evil spirits follow no plan whatsoever—they’re utterly unpredictable. I thought we were all supposed to be used to that by now.”

He could have bitten his tongue off in frustration. After all, he was the very one who had told everyone he would lead the monster out of the village! He had been so certain of it, too—and Luna and her daughters, naturally, had assured him it would all turn out exactly that way: that he was doing splendidly and everything would work out…

All they were doing was driving themselves deeper and deeper into a cage. Perhaps this time the Pupununu really were doomed, and no Jujus would come to save them anymore?

He wasn’t leading them to their deaths. Death itself was hot on their heels.

Chapter 14

We keep many holidays in honor of the spirits — nearly every one of them has a day of its own set aside by humans, when we exalt that particular Juju, lay lavish offerings before him, and celebrate his heroic exploits. And for a long, long while, people gave the Love Juju a wide berth.

After all, the tribe of humans was never famed for its wisdom — and watching you, I grow ever more convinced of it. Far greater welcome, if you can believe it, was given to the Dark Juju. People craved the protection of mighty, warlike spirits — beings who could grant them weapons or strength. The Sun, the Brawler, the Strongman were held in the highest esteem… Even Draykof, that hideous monster, pet of the Judge Juju, was loved by mortals more dearly than some of the spirits themselves. But the Love Juju they dismissed as a mere female spirit, good for nothing beyond bewitching whatever lad caught her fancy.

And, as you may well guess, this state of affairs did not please her in the least. And as you know, the Love Juju is terrible in her wrath. Stung by the people’s neglect, she visited upon them the most dreadful punishment imaginable. She took away their love.

This proved more terrible than any plague or drought.

People grew indifferent to one another. No longer did they care for the health or happiness of a neighbor or a brother. Parents turned from their children, and children forsook their parents. Husbands abandoned their wives, and women quarreled among themselves. Chaos descended upon the tribe, and at last the people resolved to part ways and live apart from one another.

The wise Luna observed all of this, and what she saw displeased her. She understood that humanity would soon perish entirely, and Juju

would lose their amusing neighbors. No one would ever again raise altars and statues in their honor. No one would ever again compose songs and tales about them. And how could anyone bring themselves to destroy another's creations? After all, it was not Juju who pulled the people from the depths of Moana — no, that alone is the one deed for which they deserve no credit before us.

"Sister of Juju," pleaded Luna, — come to your senses! Restore love to the people while they still live! It is wrong to take their lives — and by such treacherous means, no less.

"I won't even hear of it!" retorted the touchy Love. — People never valued me, so now let them pay the price!

To other spirits they offer lavish gifts, tirelessly erecting statues in their honor and holding noisy festivities in their name. And me? If only a single soul would remember me, if only once a human shaman would bring a tiki doll to visit me. No, sister, such vile creatures have no right to live in this world. You'll see — someday someone else will come in their place, more grateful and more generous.

Then Luna hurried off in search of the chief of those days. Life was hard for people struggling alone in the jungles of the dark times, yet the chief had seized the most fertile patch of land and had already slain ten of his former subjects while defending his home.

"Chief among men," Luna addressed him, — does it not grieve you that the tribe is no more? That your wife has gone, and your children have perished? Do you not long to bring everything back to the way it was before?

The Chief sank deep into thought. He cast a glance over his empty house and the barren ground, and at last he nodded.

"Yes, Luna of Juju, something is missing in me. We have lost something, though I cannot say what. I possess everything, and yet nothing brings me joy. If only I knew what has befallen us."

“The Love of Juju has grown angry with you and withdrawn her gift,” Luna explained. “She will restore it only if people henceforth respect her and honor her alongside the other spirits.”

The Chief bowed his head and said:

“So be it.”

Overjoyed, Luna returned to her realm and told Love of the conversation.

“But how will people make amends to me?” she asked incredulously.

“Every year they will hold a splendid feast in your honor. Sparing neither flowers nor feathers, they will adorn their homes, exchange gifts, help one another, and love one another. They will raise a temple in your name and compose beautiful songs, so that no one may ever again forget how wondrous your gift is.”

Only with Luna’s aid did love return to the people. The tribe came together once more, and families and friends were reunited. The people hastened to build a new temple — on a hillock set apart from the satut-fanakenga, bathed in sunlight; they wreathed it with fragrant garlands of flowers, laid out incense, and hung merry little bells. And from then on, every year, they celebrated the feast of the great Love of Juju on a grand scale, striving to please her in every way, so that the tragedy of long ago might never befall them again.

Yet you know perfectly well what calamity befell that festival last year—how love, from a blessing, became a genuine curse that destroys everything around it, sows chaos and discord, and finally drives its own slave to hurl themselves chest-first upon the arrows.

Remember, my dear: never speak ill of anyone at the Feast of Juju’s Love. Especially if that “anyone” happens to be the most hapless shaman in the entire history of the Pupununu people.

Waking was strange. Dzhera lay still for several minutes, trying to piece together where she was and what surrounded her. Curiously, the oddest thing was neither that she found herself in the heart of the jungle, nor that two fellows were snoring loudly on either side of her. The oddest thing was that she had slept her fill—for the first time in days, she had truly slept her fill. Zaria hadn't woken her because it was her turn to keep watch, and she herself hadn't bolted upright from a nightmare or someone else's scream. No one was raising a clamor outside her room because a sheep had been slaughtered, or one of her kinsmen. She had simply slept well and woken quietly, all on her own.

Who could ever have imagined that one day this would become an unaffordable luxury, even for the ruling family?

Dawn had not yet broken. Directly above Dzhera's head, an enormous white cloud swayed in the open black sky. It stood out so clearly that it seemed to glow in the darkness all on its own, like Luna. No smaller than the High House, it drifted slowly toward the mountains of raki-fanakenga. Most likely, rain was falling there again right now. All the storm clouds and rainclouds gathered over the cold side of the island, where they snagged their bellies on the sharp, lofty crags and burst into downpours. Dzhera would have gone out of her mind if they had lived in that part of the district.

Propping herself up on her arms, she kept watching the sky. A star glittered beside the cloud, but Dzhera couldn't tell which constellation it belonged to. That was back in the days when people traveled far and wide, discovered new lands, waged war on one another, or could simply hunt for weeks on end. Those people could name every star and say precisely at what season or hour any given constellation would rise.

All of that had faded into the past. Dzhera, like all the Pupununu, rarely ventured far from the village, and more rarely still spent a night away from home. She didn't know all the constellations, and in the

dense jungle she could easily lose her way. True, there had been a few occasions when she, Tak, and Kiko took a tent, walked a dozen paces from the village, and set up a “camp” there. They roasted snacks over the campfire, chattered away, and, of course, slept beneath the open sky. It’s easy to play at being carefree and brave when a single shout brings every guard running at once.

These days — you could scream yourself hoarse, and the only ones to answer would be scavengers.

“How did you sleep?”

Dzhera finally tore her gaze from the sky and glanced aside. Tak sat by the smoldering campfire, chin propped on his fist, watching her. The orange embers barely illuminated his figure and glimmered in his eyes, though the pale clouds and the brilliance of the stars made him easier to discern. He wore a cloak, dark and seemingly heavy, yet it failed to conceal the long scratches across his chest, which stood out dark like a clumsy, strange tattoo.

Dzhera rose gracefully and strolled slowly over to him. The day before, upon finally reaching the Temple, she had nearly burst into tears at the sight of Tak. After everything she had endured in the village and the wild trek through the night jungle, her emotions had overflowed the instant she found her friend. Fortunately, sheer exhaustion had kept her from giving free rein to her feelings; she had merely grown quickly cross, grumbled a little, and that had drained her strength.

“Better than these last few days,” she answered honestly as she reached him.

Tak rose to his feet as well, stretched, then pointed with one hand at something behind him and extended the other toward her.

“And yet... How did you get through the forest? Alone. At night.”

Dzhera might have taken offense at such words, but there was no escaping the truth. She did not know the jungle well, and on her own she would never have found the Temple — let alone reached Juju's altar. But she had not been alone.

"Your friend Juju is the one who helped me," Dzhera admitted reluctantly. "Fauna, of course — but her sister is nowhere near so well disposed toward me. When I lost my way, she appeared as a little orange ball and guided me to you."

And the whole time she giggled and teased, carrying on as though she were doing me some unheard-of favor. Dzhera tried neither to remain in the spirit's debt nor to overstep her bounds, lest Fauna take offense after all and abandon her. She had no idea why Fauna had chosen to take pity on her, though she suspected Tak had something to do with it — which was precisely why she was so astonished to see how astonished he was now.

"Fauna? Fauna, Juju's Fauna?" he exclaimed. "Perhaps you had one of those — what do you call them — visions? I've never once heard of Fauna helping a human being! Could you have mistaken her for Flora?"

Dzhera certainly could never have endured Flora's help. Flora irritated her far more than her sister did, for her manners so closely resembled those of Zarya.

That was why it struck her as so strange that Tak liked her.

"I am, in fact, capable of telling orange from green, thank you very much."

Tak regarded her in silence for a few moments longer, as though she really had come here with Flora's aid but, despite everything, had resolved to keep it hidden — then shrugged carelessly.

"Fine, I won't argue. In any case, we are talking about Juju, and with them you can expect anything."

Dzhera liked it when he spoke of the spirits that way — as if he had no part in them and, like any ordinary person, could not fathom them at all.

“Hungry?” He nodded at the baked fish and taro spread out on the ti leaves. “Kiko and Lok are, without question, the two unluckiest hunters in history—though one of them insists otherwise.”

Dzhera turned to glance at the sleeping children, barely visible in the darkness. They were missed back in the village. Lok, with his tall tales, would have lifted the other men’s spirits in these hard times, would have kept her father company so his worries might ease for a while; and Kiko, perhaps, would have been strumming something cheerful on the banjo in the evenings.

The way it had always been. Something was surely amiss with the tribe torn apart like this—but she was here now, she would bring the children back to the village, and together they would manage everything. And then, at last, things really would be all right.

She sat down by the fire and reached for the fish, while Tak stirred the embers, which flared up hot. Dzhera turned from the smoke and suddenly noticed something strange. Very close by.

“What’s that over there?” She sprang to her feet, all thought of food forgotten. “There—do you see it?”

A couple dozen paces away, behind the trees, a pale lilac glow shimmered faintly. Hundreds upon hundreds of tiny lights seemed to tremble in the air, together weaving a veil. Whatever it was, it had no business in the jungle. She had seen nothing like it the night before.

“A protective wall,” Tak replied, scarcely glancing in the direction she pointed. He was staring into the fire, diligently prodding it with a stick. “I raised it around our camp because... because...”

Dzhera sat down again across from him, watching his face. The end of the stick trembled slightly in his hand.

“Because Luna released Sarad into this world through Juju,” he finally concluded, tossing the stick into the fire.

Dzhera let out a breath, only then realizing she had been holding it.

“But that’s a good thing, isn’t it? He won’t be able to wound us through our dreams anymore. And it’ll be all the easier to catch him,” she said, her delight mounting by the moment. Her palms fairly itched to drop everything and set off on the hunt. — Did you cast a protective barrier around our camp?

Tak kept delaying his answer, as though it were not the best piece of news they’d had in ages. Dzhera had ample time to grow anxious as she watched him. What was it he couldn’t bring himself to admit?

“I wove that barrier,” he began quietly, almost in a whisper, — so that Sarad couldn’t get out of it. While he’s inside, he can’t open rifts. He’ll never reach the village. He’s within the circle, Dzhera — together with us.

Whoever claims that fear doesn’t hurt has never known true terror. Dzhera would have sworn that hundreds of tiny needles had plunged into her chest, and that her head had been plunged into icy water. She looked back at the magical wall once more, but now it was no protection she saw there — quite the opposite: a prison fortress. She had spent time in a dungeon, so she knew precisely what she was comparing it to.

“That’s why I want you to go home,” Tak finished flatly.

Of course he could have done nothing else. He, Kiko, and Lok had left the village to serve as bait for the beast — she had known that from the very beginning. And Tak’s plans had never included her joining them — she knew that too. Yet it didn’t make things any easier. Right now, they were all trapped together.

“I’ll take you across,” Tak said quickly, lifting his head to her. “Let me send you home with Kiko or Lok. The monster will be easier to

deal with now, and I'll be back in the village myself before long. I can handle him alone."

Dzhera hastily licked her dry lips.

"No. No-no-no, I'm not leaving you, and you won't drive me away. You're right—see for yourself. Tsarad is nothing now but an animal, like a rhinoceros or a monkey. He can't fly, can't cast magic, can't do anything," she went on, drawing courage from her own words. "There are four of us and only one of him, and he has nowhere to run. Of course we'll win!"

Tak never took his eyes off her, but his brows knitted sadly, shifting the edge of the tattoo's pattern.

"I can't risk you like that. What if he senses your mana, and... and the ofinda too, and comes after you? No, I'll send you home with Kiko..."

Blita's words rose unbidden in Dzhera's mind, but there was no time for them now.

"I didn't come all this way just to sleep and then go home without you!" she declared firmly, meeting Tak's gaze without flinching. "I'm not afraid of Tsarad. And I know how to use a spear. I'm not some helpless princess who needs guards. I can defend myself—and you know that perfectly well."

A flicker of fear still stirred in Dzhera at the thought that they were locked in the same cage as the monster, but she would never admit it. Everything would be all right now, because she and Tak were together again, and together they always won. Always!

She could tell from Tak's face that he genuinely hated admitting she was right. That he was struggling to conceal the spark in his eyes at the prospect of embarking on this adventure together again. She knew him: his pride would never allow him to confess it outright. So she changed the subject, sparing him the trouble of finding an answer.

“Where could Sarad be now? What do you think? We can’t just sit here waiting for him to come to us.”

Tak sat in silence a while longer, frowning, and shot her a look of reproach for leaving him no way out. Dzhera almost felt sorry for him. He truly wanted what was best for her—never realizing that her place was here, at his side, and that nothing in the world could be better than that.

“There is one place where he’s most likely hiding,” he muttered at last, reluctantly, without meeting her gaze.

He turned and lifted his head. Behind them, rising above the treetops, the spire of the Forgotten Temple pressed up into a white cloud. An involuntary shiver ran through Dzhera.

“Why do you think so?”

“Luna of Juju helped me drive him out of the World of Dreams. He has grown weak, and he’s hardly likely to come hunting for me himself now. He’s like a wounded beast at the moment, nursing his strength—and there are still traces of magic lingering in the Forgotten Temple.”

Dzhera sprang to her feet. Fear gave way swiftly to excitement, to anticipation. How she had missed this.

“And so we can...”

“...catch him off guard, yes.”

They smiled at each other in the half-dark, and Dzhera went back to the tent. Here they had stacked all the weapons they had brought with them, and now she was scrutinizing fussily what there was to choose from. Two spears, a knife, a sling, and a cudgel. She chose the spear, even though she handled it a little worse than the knife. But she would have the advantage at a distance.

“But we can’t leave them here,” she remarked quietly, pointing at the sleeping Kiko and Lok.

They were sleeping soundly like children, utterly defenseless and, probably, terribly appetizing from a predator's point of view. And not only Tsarad's.

Without much thought, Tak walked over to Kiko and shook him awake. He quickly raised his head but kept his eyes closed.

"Kiko!" Tak called to him, holding his shoulder. "Dzhera and I are going to the Temple to see where Sarad is. Be on your guard, he may come here."

"Not even a mosquito will get past me!" he answered cheerfully, still without opening his eyes and swaying slightly from side to side. "Don't worry…"

Tak sighed, picked up the spear, and forcefully thrust it into Kiko's hands. He pried his eyes open with difficulty and blinked sleepily.

"Fine — if anything happens, scream with all your might." Tak walked over to the campfire and stirred it with a stick to make it burn brighter. "We won't be long. We'll see if there are any traces of the beast there. If he shows up here, then… then try to keep yourselves from getting killed."

At these words, Kiko's gaze gained focus for the first time. He sat up and looked at their weapons "storeroom." Then he looked at Dzhera, and a smile spread across his face.

"We missed you, sister. And I always knew you would come."

Dzhera chuckled good-naturedly in response.

"Leaving you two alone together is a hazard, kids. You're worse than monkeys armed with torches."

"You will... be able to fight off the beast, won't you?" Tak asked his friend uncertainly. "Lok will surely help you—once he opens his eyes, that is..."

Kiko remembered what they had been discussing and drew his spear closer, as though Tsarad might materialize at any moment.

“The hunting instinct runs in the blood,” he answered gravely. “My parents used to take those down from a half-crouch, hardly bothering to aim.”

Tak didn’t dispute it. He straightened, turned to Dzhera, and drew a staff from beneath his cloak. Dzhera all but smiled, as if greeting another friend. The magic staff was part of Tak, and she had long grown accustomed to seeing them as a single whole.

And yes—she had almost missed magic.

Tak stood very close to her, his shoulder nearly brushing hers, and lightly tapped the pink crystal against the ground at their feet. The next instant, goosebumps raced across Dzhera’s body, her chest grew heavy, and she found herself somewhere in the midst of darkness and cold.

For the first moments she could see nothing and could barely breathe. The numbness, sheer in its unfamiliarity, took a long while to wear off, and she nearly feared she might lose her balance. The air seemed too sharp, too dense, and the darkness devoured her sight. Dzhera was about to step forward when Tak gripped her shoulder firmly, holding her back. He waved the staff until it burned brighter, illuminating everything around them.

“Whoa,” Dzhera breathed, realizing where they had landed.

In an instant, Juju’s magic swept them from the cozy campsite to the very summit of the Forgotten Temple.

Dzhera looked around, but nothing met her eye. The sun had not yet stirred, and the stars overhead were strange to her.

“Could we see the Blind Brothers from here?” she asked, peering into the darkness. “I’ve never been up to the top.”

“Well, I have — just recently. Climbed all the way up here. While I was asleep.”

Dzhera turned and searched her friend’s eyes, trying to decide whether he was mocking her or speaking in earnest. His strange

nighttime wanderings had slipped her mind entirely. Yet Tak was perfectly serious, which was unlike him; he had scarcely smiled once in all the time she'd known him.

"How is that even possible?" she murmured, hardly expecting an answer. "You might have fallen…"

She caught herself. Now was not the moment to dig into the past. Nor did she ask whether Tak had told Luna and Juju about it — of course he hadn't. You could hardly wring a confession out of him to save your life.

"Do you think Sarad is somewhere close by?" she said, deliberately not looking at him as she scanned the view from the Temple's crown, hoping to catch a glimpse of the beast's white hide somewhere below.

The heavy spear in her hand lent her a measure of courage. This time she would face him neither unarmed nor taken by surprise. When they met again, it would be for the last time.

"Yes," said Tak, sweeping his staff through the air and tracing an arc of lilac light. "He's probably come to feed on the magic of this place. Luna struck him a hard blow when she hurled him out here. Sarad is weak."

"She could have struck him harder and finished him off," Dzhera muttered under her breath, but Tak heard her anyway and turned.

"Luna is no murderer," he said dryly. — She did everything she could; you should have seen her. She has more than enough work as it is, and she truly is helping us.

Dzhera closed her eyes.

"I never said otherwise."

They fell silent, listening to the whistle of the wind and the faint stirrings of the jungle. The night birds and beasts, the insects, even the spirits — all of them were absorbed in their own affairs, never

suspecting that the most dangerous predator in the world was prowling nearby.

“We had better go down,” Tak said slowly. — I would teleport us straight to the pool, but it’s invisible from the campsite.

Dzhera nodded and stepped closer to him. Standing at such a height was far from pleasant, even if she couldn’t see just how far up they were. She had fallen more than once — from the top of a dungeon built into a giant kvila, and from an ordinary ladder no taller than a man. But this time, no one would be waiting below to catch her.

Tak sighed beside her, and she felt his warm breath brush her shoulder.

“I can’t believe you and I have tangled ourselves up in another mess. And here I was thinking none of this would touch you.”

There it was at last — his pleased smirk. Dzhera broke into a smile herself, like a silly girl. Everything, everything suddenly ceased to matter; nothing seemed dangerous or frightening anymore. How many times had they escaped the World of Spirits, barely slipping from death’s grasp, believing tomorrow would never come for them? Only reunited could they face it all once more.

“I told you,” Dzhera muttered, struggling to keep her emotions in check, — we’ll get through this together. You. And I.

Tak merely wrinkled his nose in a smile and glanced away. His hand found hers with quiet confidence and gave it a firm, warm squeeze.

“Yes, we’ll survive Sarad and anyone else from Juju’s world. But the moment we set foot back home, your father will wring both our necks” mine first, no doubt.

Dzhera had no chance to protest. Tak quickly traced a circle around them with his staff; pink lights flashed before her eyes, and the next instant she found herself on the ground in the shadow of the Temple.

She exhaled and shook her free hand to banish the numbness. Her ears felt plugged, but that soon passed as well. Her legs were still unsteady at first, so she stayed where she was, afraid of toppling over. Then she tilted her head back toward the top of the stone structure, half expecting — without quite meaning to — to see herself still up there. It was always a strange sensation after teleportation, as though some part of you were meant to linger behind in the place you'd left.

"Kiko and Lok were checking the traps I set," Tak began, his staff casting light across the dark pool. — The monster got around them. But right now he's weak and hungry — maybe he'll stumble into one? Though it would be foolish to count on that.

Dzhera walked to the edge of the basin and dipped her toes into the water. The cold burned her skin, yet brought none of the customary refreshment and vigor that cool water had always given her; it only raised goosebumps along her flesh.

"Do you feel the mana of this place?" she asked her companion. — Even I can sense that the Temple isn't dead yet.

"Yes, he's angry at being forgotten. And now he's looking for someone to take it out on."

Dzhera looked at Tak, but there was no smile on his face. This was no joke.

"This place is steeped in dark magic," he admitted. — That's why no one ever comes here. And that's why we thought Sarad would feel right at home. He must be somewhere close by.

He uttered those last words with a trace of wounded pride. Dzhera's eyes drifted to his scratches.

"When did you encounter him? In a dream?"

Tak let out an angry breath, and his hand strayed instinctively to his chest.

“I expected to find him in the World of Dreams,” he began. — I had prepared myself for it. But the beast never showed. I burned through a great deal of mana for nothing, and when I returned here, I stumbled straight into him — here, in the Waking World. And there was nothing I could do. He clawed me, then escaped through the crevice. But he won’t get that chance again!

They skirted the edge of the pool, peering into the dense thickets by the light of the staff. All the while, the temple loomed above them, watching, waiting. The Pupununu tribe knew of, and made use of, one ancient bathing pool left behind by the proto-tribe of Nast. In its day, that pool had been magnificent — tall columns rising on either side of the deep basin, and the enormous stone head of an ancient chief jutting up out of the water like a kwila. Though the place had since been smothered in shrubs and fue trees, common folk still occasionally came to swim there. Tak and Kiko sometimes amused themselves by leaping from the crown of the stone head, twisting into a somersault midair before plunging into the water below.

The Pool of the Forgotten Temple inspired no such longing to splash about.

“Did Juju prophesy to you that Sarad would strike at Dzhibolba?” Dzhera asked as they settled onto a stone block at the foot of the Temple.

Night birds called softly among the trees, and a pair of nimble lizards darted between the stones. The foolish creatures were startled by the light of the staff, yet at the same time kept creeping toward it. Fireflies and night moths, too, drifted toward the magical glow.

“Yes,” Tak admitted reluctantly, watching the insects swirl above his head. “You know, the Seer has spun all manner of tales again, and whether any of it proves true is anyone’s guess.”

Dzhera would have staked her hand on knowing exactly what Tak was thinking at that moment. Like her, he was recalling the Seer's most extraordinary promise—the one they had all caught only in passing, barely making out the words, so it could hardly be taken as truth. And yet driving those words from their minds—no, that was simply impossible.

"But he also said," the shaman went on abruptly, "that I will kill Sarad. I will do it, though it will bring me no joy. But if I've warned Dzhibolba and he is kept safe, then perhaps that part of the prophecy won't come true either?"

In this, Tak was exactly like all humans. He needed prophecies to glimpse the future, however roughly. And since he had taken it upon himself to reshape it in his own image, he needed fresh word of what lay ahead.

And perhaps Blita could have helped him with that, had she stood in Dzhera's place. But the cursed Ungachaka was at the far end of the district just now, watching her brother drink himself into the ground. The Pupununu had no idea that on this night they no longer needed to watch over one another.

Once the tribe came to mind, Dzhera could not help but recall its latest sorrow as well.

"Tsarad won't kill anyone else," she said, mustering all the confidence she could. — We've had our fill with the sheep and Tau. The Juju simply will not permit another death. — She laid the spear down on the stone, realizing only then that nervousness had made her clutch the shaft far too tightly. — Pupununu has suffered enough today as it is. No one can pass in peace into the World of Spirits when a monster like that is the one who takes them.

Tak's warm palm settled over her hand, and Dzhera flinched at the unexpected touch. She assumed her friend meant to comfort her — but on his face she read genuine anguish.

"Tau is no more," he said, lowering his voice.

Dzhera dropped her gaze.

"I know. I mean his spirit is probably…"

"Dzhera. Tau is no more. At all. The beast devours souls. Completely."

It took a moment for his words to sink in — and when they did, pain and terror tore through her chest as sharply as a knife's blade.

Only now did she grasp what the Juju sisters had truly meant. Why the monster left flesh untouched. That he really did feast on souls.

"How is that even possible?" she whispered, feeling as though she had just learned of the death of one of her own tribe. A lump rose in her throat, squeezing tears from her eyes. Trembling swept over her. — How can he… simply cease to exist altogether?

Tak hesitated, then gently drew her close with one arm. Dzhera gratefully pressed her forehead to his shoulder, struggling to steady herself.

It was fear more than sorrow that gripped her. Had it truly been necessary, she might even have made her peace with her own death. But simply to vanish? Never to be reunited with her loved ones in the World of Spirits? To fade away and cease to exist altogether? That was too dreadful to contemplate; it seemed almost impossible that such a thing could happen at all.

But this was Juju's world, and there anything was possible.

"Sarad will never harm anyone again," Tak whispered soothingly, pressing his temple against hers. — We'll kill him, and it will all be over. Just stay close to me, since you're here.

Dzhera didn’t argue. She closed her eyes and felt the fear at last receding, and in its place came calm, confidence, and a sense of safety. She knew this feeling well. Her father would hold her tightly in his strong arms and say that no force in the world would ever dare harm his tender, wild little flower. She had grown used to leaning on his support, his protection. Always. Now he was not at her side—but Tak was, though Dzhera understood she mustn’t lean on him too heavily. Of course, he would try to shield her at any cost, but she had no intention of giving him a reason to put himself at risk. In this, they had always been equals.

They simply needed to stay together and keep their wits about them. And then they would surely defeat the monster.

She had been about to say as much to Tak, but thought better of it. It was cozy simply to sit like this, beside a friend, feeling his touch—not so firm as to make her uneasy, yet not fleeting either, as though he didn’t care at all. Right now, everything was perfect.

Then Tak tightened his grip on her shoulder, pressing her fully against him. Dzhera’s eyes flew open, and she was on the verge of pulling away when she caught the faint whisper of her friend:

“Don’t... move...”

In an instant, she understood everything.

Tsarad. Tsarad was standing right behind her.

Yes?

Chapter 15

The wise spirits of Juju soon discovered that after their departure, the human tribe had sunk into utter misery. Barely would people fell a predatory nubu plant at the risk of their wretched lives; barely would they gather enough leaves from the orange tree or the manuka to obtain oil for the tiki doll, when a new calamity would descend upon them, and once again they would have to set out and do everything needful for their meeting with Juju. How many perished in the claws of the nubu, how many plunged from cliffs and vanished without a trace on the way to the orange and manuka trees! How many died without ever receiving help from the spirits — easier it would be to count the stars in the sky.

Reasoning that at this rate the human tribe would die out entirely within a year or two, the spirits resolved to ease its lot in some way. After all, the foolish creatures were not to blame that Moana had made them so weak and helpless, so dependent on their mighty neighbors.

And so Luna of Juju proposed holding contests between the tribes of humans (for by then they had already split apart — no great intellect is required to bring that about). Whoever passed all the trials, whoever proved himself the wisest, would win protection and support for his tribe for sixty years — a trifle for the immortal spirits, and a whole lifetime for a mortal. Thus the people would not perish quite so soon, and the Jujus could rest easy, knowing their duty had been honorably discharged.

Luna of Juju herself resolved to become the protector of whichever tribe won her contest. She devised fifteen trials, each to be completed by two members of every tribe — a wise shaman and his strong assistant. The pair that endured to the very end, that carried out every task with dignity, unriddled every riddle, and never stooped to cheating

their rivals — that pair would win their tribe the blessing of the spirits for the next sixty years.

And so it shall remain for as long as the Moon shines in the sky.

Thanks to Dzhibolba and Tleylok, and afterward to Tak and Loku, Luna of Juju has watched over the sleep of Pupununu for more than six decades, and our fates rest in her hands alone. Never forget this. Never.

They froze, and to Dzhera it seemed that years slipped past that way — several of them, at the very least. Or perhaps time itself stopped in that instant. She was certain an entire eternity had gone by before Tak leapt up and rushed forward.

She spun around and managed to cry out just as her friend hurled himself headlong into the pool, having completely forgotten about it. He plunged beneath the water, and the blue glow of the crystal died as the staff slipped from Tak's hands.

And beyond the pool, among the trees, stood a clawed antelope, its white pelt faintly luminous in the darkness.

Dzhera did not wait for Tak to climb out of the water. She tightened her grip on her spear and ran toward Tsarad. He shuddered slightly, but held his ground to the last. His golden eyes stared blankly at her, and his thin ears trembled faintly. Only when Dzhera hurled the spear did Tsarad bolt and vanish into the darkness. The tip scraped across one of the stone slabs laid around the pool.

"Dzhera!" Tak shouted from behind her, but she paid him no heed, plunging headlong into the pursuit.

The darkness of the forest all but blinded her, yet Dzhera pressed on, heedless of the stones and roots she kept stumbling over. Leaves raked her bare arms and lashed her knees with icy whips. The long spear snagged on everything around her, slowing her stride; but soon her stubbornness was rewarded.

Ahead, the beast's hide glowed once more—like a small, lost soul. Dzhera quickened her pace, shrugging off weariness and pain, her eyes never leaving the white patch before her.

There was no fear left. She had forgotten that this was the very animal that had attacked her, that had killed Tau, a sheep, and many others besides. Now she herself had become the hunter—the one who must run down the wild creature and cut its throat.

Tsarad neither fell behind nor drew closer. He moved in utter silence, stirring neither grass nor bushes, and the thin black markings on his body looked like translucent knife wounds from long ago. Dzhera waited for the right moment to hurl her spear, but each time she realized she was still too far from the beast.

The chase consumed her so utterly that everything else vanished from the world, leaving only Tsarad ahead and the weapon in her hand. It seemed it could go on like this forever, until the end of time—just as the Sun in the sky chases the Moon, seeking revenge for her locking him inside a volcano, yet will never catch her.

And so, when Tsarad stopped and turned to face her, Dzhera was at once at a complete loss.

She didn't hurl the spear at him, didn't flee. She simply came to a halt ten paces from the animal.

Yet even now he seemed no more real, as though he were some apparition conjured by Fauna's Juju. He had appeared far more vivid, far more dangerous, in her dream those many long days ago.

Tsarad loomed before her, forelegs planted close together, chiseled head held high. His eyes shone with a dim light, no longer resembling shards of a yellow moon. His delicate nose twitched faintly as he drank in her scent.

How could so exquisite and beautiful a creature have sprung from the crude handiwork of the Dark Juju?

“I have to kill you,” Dzhera whispered, the spear suddenly heavy in her memory.

Tsarad took no notice of her words; he merely flicked his slender ears. But the instant Dzhera stirred the hand that held the weapon, the beast understood everything.

He surged toward her, rearing up his fearsome paw to strike, and Dzhera’s body recoiled of its own accord, hurling her as far backward as it could. She thrust the spear up before her and barely managed to parry the second blow. The force of the impact nearly tore the weapon from her grasp, yet her hands refused to tighten around it—they were shaking uncontrollably. From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the claw marks gouged into the shaft.

“You’ll lose anyway,” Dzhera hissed, retreating in small steps, steeling herself with her own words.

Tsarad snorted and charged, dropping his head to aim his thin, sharp horns straight at her. At the last instant Dzhera turned her spear, gasping as the horns raked across her arm. The beast himself shied away when the spearhead bit into his shoulder, and that alone saved her from being run clean through. Yet before she could catch her breath, Tsarad gathered himself like a cat and sprang, knocking her to the ground.

Dzhera bit her tongue, the back of her head thudding into the soft earth. Something else hurt as well — her arm, or perhaps her side. She shielded her chest and belly, holding the spear out before her, and just as Tsarad was about to tear her face open, she wrenched the shaft sharply aside, driving the point into the monster’s neck.

Tsarad bellowed, his icy breath washing over her face, and she cringed, expecting at any moment to be gutted like a chicken. Then came a brief whistle, and the beast roared a second time.

Two figures burst from behind the trees, bows in hand. One loosed another arrow in the blink of an eye, and it too struck home. Tsarad swayed, his splay-fingered paw pressing hard into the ground mere inches from Dzhera's cheek.

But before the unknown hunter could send a third arrow flying, and before Dzhera could drive her spear deeper into his neck, the monster leapt away. The weapon was torn from her hands and clattered to the ground, and the beast had vanished without a trace. One of the figures immediately gave chase.

Struggling to catch her breath, Dzhera rose, retrieved her spear — and at that moment the first hunter reached her side.

"Are you hunting this beast?"

The voice was a woman's, low and faintly husky. Dzhera narrowed her eyes, straining to make out her unexpected rescuer in the darkness. She couldn't discern the stranger's face, but she could see she was tall and slender, her figure even bearing a passing resemblance to Zaria's.

"We've been tracking the creature since the Vog Valley," she went on. — That's where we noticed the magical veil as well. Did you raise it, child? It was never there before, not in all my days.

From her manner of speaking, Dzhera at last understood who stood before her.

A Babuzonki.

Well, it could have been worse. It could have been the Zverian hunters, who would sooner worship Tsarad than lift a hand against him. Or the burly warriors of the Black Haze, brutal and merciless. But this was merely a Babuzonki who had survived out of her mind.

"A friend of mine, a shaman, made it," she answered. — It doesn't let the creature out, and he can't...

"Creature? the woman cut in." Creature? It's just an ordinary animal, a stupid thing with an odd coloring. Vetrishche will run it down

soon enough, and I'll have a blanket made from its white hide, and ornaments from its horns.

Dzhera saw no point in arguing, or in saying how little she believed this Vetrishche would ever manage to catch and kill Tsarad. The Seer's prophecy said nothing of her.

Close by, Tak's voice rang out, calling her by name. The huntress beside her tensed, but Dzhera turned and shouted back at the top of her lungs:

"I'm here!"

"Who's that with you?" The woman raised her bow and drew a fresh arrow from her quiver.

Dzhera lifted a warning hand toward her when the shimmer of the staff's glow flickered between leaves and undergrowth. Tak came hurtling at full speed but halted upon seeing that Dzhera was not alone.

In the soft radiance of the staff, she at last got a full view of the huntress: a lithe girl with sun-bronzed skin and short hair bleached white. She wore outmoded garments stitched from animal hides, and her tattoo bore no discernible pattern—rather, the entire left half of her face was inked, from a shaved temple down to the cheekbone. Her almond-shaped eyes gleamed, watchful and almost menacing.

"Oh, nerbils," Tak drawled without enthusiasm.

"Pupununu," the girl hissed, baring teeth of strange, snowy whiteness. "What brings you so far from your village?"

But Tak had already forgotten her: he stood gaping at Dzhera, and she felt distinctly uneasy watching his face fall slack.

"Are you all right?" he finally managed. "Did he scratch you badly?"

Dzhera had no time for that—something ached somewhere, but she strove to ignore it. There was no time.

“Did you raise the magic veil over the Vog valley?” the huntress demanded.

Tak had reached Dzhera’s side, but at the girl’s question he turned toward her.

“Over Vog? No, that can’t be. My shield was meant to cover only the lands around the Forgotten Temple.”

Instantly the huntress lifted her quiver.

“Are you saying I’m lying?”

Just to be safe, Dzhera took a step back from her. The Babuzonki were notorious for their fiery temper. They believed themselves infallible, having lived for goodness knew how many years—even Juju couldn’t say. But the truth was that every last one of them had lost her mind, and it was dangerous to get tangled up with them.

“What I mean is, this simply couldn’t have happened,” Tak muttered. “I couldn’t have conjured a ring that wide—I’d never have had the mana for it.” He turned quickly to Dzhera and asked, still sharp with anger: “Where does it hurt most?”

“Forget it.” She felt along her scraped side. True, if he’d wanted to, Tsarad could easily have spilled all her guts, but the Babuzonki had arrived in time, and for that they deserved thanks. “I’m fine”—though she appreciated her friend’s concern—“we need to catch him while he’s wounded.”

“Of course.” Tak was no longer looking at her; he had turned to the huntress. “Which way did the beast run?”

She indicated the direction with her bow and added proudly:

“Vetrishcha went after him. She should be back any moment with his skull and his hide.”

Tak exchanged a brief glance with Dzhera, thinking the same thing she was. What if Vetrishcha never returned to her village at all after her encounter with Tsarad?

“We have to go,” Tak announced, and his staff flared brighter. “Tsarad is wounded—we must run him down. Dzhera, can you walk?”

She bit her lip when he wasn’t looking.

“Quite well.”

“If you meet Vetrishcha,” the huntress told them as they parted, “tell her that Krovokhlebka has been waiting for her and wants her new white cloak. I’ll wait for her right here.”

Tak turned to her, and Dzhera could see how little he wanted to say what he was going to have to say anyway.

“Perhaps your sister will never come home again,” he managed at last, unable to find gentler words. “The beast is hungry — and terribly strong.”

Blooddrinker stood frozen for a moment, absorbing what she had heard.

“What are you saying, boy? That the Vetrische lacks the strength or the speed to bring down the white deer?”

“The what?..”

“She spent centuries perfecting the hunt!” Blooddrinker suddenly shrieked, her eyes kindling with a mad fire. “No one in the Seven-Cliff District tracks and kills like she does! No creature of Fauna can escape her. How dare you say she will perish?!”

Tak raised his staff, pointing it toward her. Dzhera saw how tense he had grown.

“Calm yourself! I never said she would die — I only meant to warn that if…”

Though their minds had withered, the Babuzonki had lost none of their agility — their swiftness remained that of twenty-year-old girls. Before Tak could finish, Blooddrinker lifted her bow and, with a single sweep of her arm, loosed an arrow.

Dzhera screamed; Tak, a heartbeat too late, leapt back and crashed into her. A blue wall flared brilliantly before him. The huntress's long, stout arrow snapped in half — a mere finger's width short of the shaman's chest.

While Blooddrinker was still grasping what had happened, Tak seized Dzhera firmly by the hand and dragged her along with him.

"Run!"

They bolted into the jungle, leaving the bewildered huntress behind.

"What was that?"

"Some kind of magical ward, though I never cast it," Tak answered on the run. — Remember when we first entered Juju's realm, and something like this saved us? But why now? The protection has never stirred on its own in this world before…

Dzhera glanced back over her shoulder.

"Will it follow us?"

"I hope not. Who knows—maybe the trick won't work a second time."

They raced through the jungle, trusting their instincts more than the flickering glow of the staff, which offered no guidance—quite the opposite, it only deepened their confusion, flaring suddenly upon broad leaves or garlands of vines dangling from above. There was no trace of Vetrishche or Tsarad anywhere, and Dzhera could not decide whom she feared more: a weakened, wounded beast, or a maddened huntress with a bow in her hands.

"Why did the protection stretch all the way to the valley?" Tak puffed as he ran. — I don't understand any of it.

Dzhera wanted to tell him how often he underestimated his own power, but she had no intention of flattering him now.

"I knew the Forgotten Temple could amplify magic," he went on, even slowing his pace to make speaking easier. Dzhera nearly snapped

at him for picking the worst possible moment, yet she too almost dropped to a walk, gasping for breath. — But I never imagined… that it would widen the ward rather than strengthen it.

Dzhera nodded, and then a most unpleasant detail struck her.

“Tak, Sarad cannot cross your wall of magic, but can he move about inside it?”

“Yes. You saw him yourself.”

“And what if your protection has spread so far that it now swallowed the Moon Path in the valley?”

Tak nearly stopped in his tracks at the thought. Yes—better not to dwell on it now; they had trouble enough already.

“Then Tsarad will end up in Juju’s realm,” Tak breathed out. — That would be a catastrophe.

Dzhera was not particularly troubled by the spirits. If the devourer surfaced in their world, it would give them a bit of a fright, perhaps set them scurrying—but they would finish Tsarad off themselves in no time, whatever Luna might say. And afterward, of course, they would storm at the humans as though it were all their fault.

But Tak looked genuinely frightened, and Dzhera could not hold it against him, however much she wished she could. Part of him would always dwell in a place she could not follow.

“We need to find the Moon Path and see whether it’s inside the ring,” he suggested at last. — And maybe we’ll come across Tsarad on the way and kill him. That would be a pleasant bonus.

Yes—only decidedly unlikely.

They had not yet reached the forgotten Valley of Vog when they stumbled upon a body. A huntress of the Babuzonki, Vetrischche, lay in the middle of the path on her back, stretched out perfectly straight, elbows braced against the ground. Her fingers were still locked around

a broken bow, one leg bent beneath her. Tsarad had torn her throat open with his claws.

But Vetrischche had not gone down without a fight. Tufts of white fur, stained with a black, viscous fluid, lay scattered about her.

“So it bleeds too?” Dzhera asked, somehow in a whisper, doing her best not to look at the dead woman.

Tak began murmuring a ward against the evil spirit, so that Vetrischche could not reach out and touch them—then quickly remembered that the poor Babuzonki’s soul had already departed. Nothing left but the body now.

“Yes, but not the way an ordinary beast bleeds,” he was studying the drops of black blood on the ground in the light of the staff. — Nerbilses don’t have real blood either, but something very much like this. — He straightened and squared his shoulders, ready to give chase again. — We must hurry if we’re to catch it. Especially if it’s headed for the valley. The ancient soul of the Babuzonki must have fed it well indeed.

Dzhera gave a curt nod, prepared to follow Tak anywhere. But he abruptly began to dawdle: he circled Vetrishche’s body once more, examining the drops of blood with the staff’s crystal lowered almost to the ground. Dzhera watched him patiently, though her patience was wearing dangerously thin.

“Perhaps you should stay behind?” Tak asked at last. — Go back to Kiko and…

“Why on earth would I?”

“It has already wounded you once,” he answered frankly, looking her straight in the eyes. — I don’t want it happening again. Have you seen what became of the Babuzonki?

Hot blood surged to Dzhera’s cheeks. Out of anger.

“And you think you can manage alone? That I would only be in your way?”

“I never said that.” Tak raised his eyebrows pleadingly, apparently genuinely reluctant to quarrel with her. — I’m merely asking whether it might be for the best…

“It would not. I’ve wasted enough time in that village as it is” I’ve had my fill! We agreed we would stay together from now on. You said so yourself!

Tak licked his lips quickly, and Dzhera tensed, bracing for another round of argument. Stubbornness she possessed in abundance, and he knew it. He would never send her back — not for anything.

“We can’t afford to waste time…”

“We’re wasting it already, you blockhead! Let’s go after Tsarad!”

“How did you…”

True to form, Juju had once again stuck his nose into other people’s quarrels, pulling all the attention back to his cherished self.

In the darkness, tiny green orbs flared to life, threading between the trees like beads in flight, luring them onward. Dzhera didn’t notice them at first, but the moment she did — just as she opened her mouth to ask what they were and where they had come from — Tak cried out with satisfaction:

“There are yorbls here! You can’t see it, but Flora is showing me the way. I have to go.” He gazed into her eyes one last time. — Dzhera, please stay here. Listen to me, just this once.

And without so much as a farewell, he tore off into the jungle at full tilt. Only the glow of his staff flickered briefly among the branches.

“Traitor!” Dzhera shouted after him, watching the leaves tremble and the green lights dissolve one by one into the whitish haze.

She had meant to chase after him while the yorbls were still visible, but then thought better of it. Why on earth should she trail along after

that idiot? If he was so desperate to work alone — or with his darling Juju — then fine, let him choke on it.

But the instant Dzhera turned back toward camp, a familiar orange glow bloomed in front of her.

“Hey, princess! Lost again?”

“As if,” she snapped, brushing past the firefly. — I’m headed to camp, and I know exactly where it is…

She stopped short, only now grasping what had happened. A fog had settled over the jungle — or rather, one should say it had risen. The treetops jutted above the murky haze, while everything at eye level lay swallowed beneath an impenetrable gray-white shroud. The mist was so dense that it devoured the fingers of an outstretched arm.

“Why is this happening? asked Dzhera, feeling terror crawl cold along her spine and her palms grow clammy.” Why?..

“Because your boyfriend has tangled two worlds together,” came Fauna’s mocking voice, clear as if at her very ear. — He raised that protective ring of his, and around the Forgotten Temple, no less. And then Luna tore open a powerful rift to bring Tsarad here. That’s far too much magic for one corner of the ordinary world. The World of Dreams has laid its spells upon this place, and all we can do is pray the World of Spirits doesn’t join in!

“So what do we do now? asked Dzhera, straining to keep her voice from sounding helpless and lost” though, by Juju, that was precisely what she was at that moment.

“What to do? Let me think…” Fauna drawled, feigning deep deliberation. — We could take down the protective barrier. But then you’d lose Tsarad. We could demolish the Forgotten Temple. But you’d hardly manage that. Oh — we could also make a sacrifice. That alone wouldn’t help, but I’d enjoy it...

“I never expected anything useful from you,” Dzhera couldn’t help retorting, and began carefully feeling her way forward, sweeping her hands before her and testing the ground with each step. At this pace she would reach camp only by the following evening — assuming time still held any sway over this place.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” Fauna called out crossly, still drifting through the air as a small ball of flame. — I thought we were heading for Tsarad — unless you want Tak and Flora hogging all the glory for themselves.

Dzhera glanced back over her shoulder. The spirit’s radiance shone through even the densest veil of fog. Why was she helping her? Because she was weary of living in her sister’s and mother’s shadow? Because Tak preferred to spend his time with sweet Flora, and had heard quite enough of Dzhera’s snide remarks anyway? She looked ahead again, gazing helplessly into the mist. Somewhere out there, immeasurably far away, Kiko and Lok were resting, and in another direction the Blooddrinker awaited her sister. If she went to them, she was doomed — one way or another.

“Very well,” Dzhera decided, turning back around. — Let’s go find them.

Fauna darted swiftly ahead, showing the way. Dzhera hurried after her, squeezing her eyes shut whenever leaves and branches loomed suddenly out of the fog and lashed at her. Her toes were bloodied, her skirt already torn, and the scratches from Tsarad’s claws still seeped. But all of that was nothing — trifles, hardly worth sitting quietly and comfortably at camp beside Lok and Kiko. No, she would show both Tak and that Flora, forever meddling in other people’s affairs, that she was far stronger than they believed. She might not possess Juju’s magic, but she was capable of something too.

Only now did Dzhera notice how quiet the jungle had grown — quiet as it should never have been. As though the fog had not merely blotted everything from sight, but swallowed every sound as well. And then she cried out, without breaking stride:

“Why have you come?”

For all her familiarity with the spirits of Juju, she still could not bring herself to believe they might simply swoop to the rescue like that.

Fauna’s little flame leapt up in indignation.

“To save your miserable hides, silly girl. The moment Luna realized what was brewing in this place, she sent us straight here to help Tak. Besides, if Tsarad reaches the Moon Path” which lies within the ring of protection as well — Juju will find itself in real trouble, and they won’t take kindly to that.

“How very generous of you, riding to our rescue,” Dzhera drawled with all the sarcasm she could muster, ducking beneath the sprawling leaves of a monstera.

Now everything made sense. Luna had dispatched her daughters the instant she realized Tsarad might turn up in their world. That was all. Before that, she hadn’t lifted a finger on their behalf — unless, of course, you counted kicking a monster into this world.

“Ha! I would never have come of my own free will,” Fauna retorted. — But if Flora starts babbling that she hurried here to save the lot of you, you’ll know better than to believe her. Whoa — mind yourself!

The little flame darted back and forth before her, as though trying to hold her back. Dzhera barely managed to halt on the damp ground and, to be safe, clutched a tree trunk.

“What is it?”

“We’ve arrived, princess.”

The flame flared brighter, and Dzhera saw that she stood a mere two fingers' breadth from a gentle slope. Below, the fog had vanished, as if it could not fathom descending into the valley. The forest there loomed dark as an abyss, and somewhere beyond it a violet-pink wall glowed faintly, outlining the black treetops.

The Forgotten Valley of Vog.

Chapter 16

That summer, a fearsome hurricane raged for three days and three nights. All that time, Moana flung itself against the shore, striving to reach the jungle. The people took refuge in caves, and there they waited out the storm through three days and three nights.

On the fourth day, the chief's eldest daughter began to complain:

"All my beautiful dresses are back in the village! We must return!"

But the hurricane raged on, and not one of the people dared to leave the safety of the caves.

On the fifth day, the chief's middle daughter began to wail:

"The yams, the taro, and the sweet potatoes will soon be ripe! We must return!"

But Moana kept surging over the land, and not one of the people dared to leave the safety of the caves.

On the sixth day, the chief's youngest daughter suddenly remembered:

"By all of Juju's magic, I left a candle burning in my room! What if a fire breaks out!"

Still the hurricane raged, still Moana surged, and not one of the people dared to leave the safety of the caves. But the youngest daughter was so frightened for her room that she stepped out of the cave.

A dreadful sight met her eyes. The hurricane was toppling ancient trees, sweeping away hillsides, and rolling enormous boulders as though they were pebbles. Moana rose higher than the mountains, and its icy waters swept away the animals, plucked birds from the sky, and flushed snakes out from beneath the ground.

But the youngest daughter, remembering the unextinguished candle in her room, stamped her foot in anger. She shed her skin and became a

blazing, flying ball. Soaring into the sky, she flew straight into the very face of the furious hurricane.

“Hey, you there! Stop this outrage at once” I have to get back home!

The hurricane was astonished, staring at the strange burning sphere before him.

“No one in this world is angrier than I am!” he thundered. — I could sweep every last thing from this island and leave it bare as stone! How dare you order me about?

“I carelessly left a candle burning in my room, and I don’t want the whole village to burn to the ground because of it. I must get back home, and all your howling and roaring makes that impossible. So stop it this instant!”

The hurricane was astonished; he fell silent and hid his gray face among the clouds.

“Very well, very well” only don’t be so angry yourself.

Then the youngest daughter flew up to the frenzied Moana.

“Hey, sister, stop this outrage at once! I have to get back home!”

Moana was astonished and fell quiet.

“No one in this world is stronger than I am!” she cried. — I could swallow the whole island and drag it down to the depths! How dare you order me about?

“I carelessly left a candle burning in my room, and I don’t want the whole village to burn to the ground because of it. I must get back home, and all your shoving and weeping makes that impossible. So stop it this instant!”

Moana was astonished and let fall her terrible waves.

“Very well, very well” only don’t be so angry yourself.

The youngest daughter rejoiced, returned to shore, wrapped the skin about herself, and became a girl once more.

She ran to the village, slipped into her room, and swiftly put out the candle, whose flame had already all but reached the table.

“Phew! There we go” otherwise it’s too scary to think what a disaster might have happened!

The heavens are hidden by clouds,

Hidden by clouds.

The words of an old battle song pounded in Tak’s temples with every step. He couldn’t figure out himself why he’d remembered it, but now it sounded in his head against his will, urging him onward.

Still, better to hear the words of the song than what Dzhera had shouted at him in farewell.

And down here you can hear it,

As the thunder rolls.

He could barely keep up with Flora, who flew ahead of him as a green spark, lightning-fast around the trees, darting between the leaves of bushes and weaving among the trunks. She never once slowed down to wait for him, and Tak did his best not to fall behind. After an almost sleepless night, the fast run made his heart pound fast and very loud, somewhere up in his throat. Only the words of the song could drown out its beats.

Down here it can be heard,

The echo now deafening.

It seemed to him that it was all a dream, or that he had been carried five years back into the past, when he had set off with Flora on his first adventure. They were rushing toward a danger from the world of magic that no ordinary person could face. And yet he was already too tired to believe that it would all soon be over, that the terror of all the recent days would end, and that the Seer’s prophecy, as usual, would come true.

The spear released, like a flying gift,

Like a serpent with two heads…

The staff in his hand blazed with extraordinary brilliance, burning through the darkness like the fiercest of bonfires. It even outshone Flora's pure light, as though she were merely a creature of this world. Tak felt no weight in the staff; its haft seemed an extension of his arm, a piece of his own flesh. His inner magic had vanished entirely, poured into the crystal and saturating it the way honey fills a honeycomb.

Would he have enough mana for the explosion the Clairvoyant had foretold? How could he not?

Quick footsteps,

Loud footsteps,

"Over here, Tak!" Flora cried, and shot sharply upward.

As Tak lifted his head toward her—no doubt bracing for a monster to come hurtling down from the sky—Tsarad burst from the nearest bushes, flattening them beneath his bulk. He looked more terrifying than ever.

Two broken arrow shafts jutted from his neck, and a third from his left flank. The thick black fluid that serves dark spirits in place of blood had stained his snow-white fur. His claws, meanwhile, had drunk their fill of a man's crimson blood, and even around his nose and lips red streaks lingered, as if he had tried to rend his victims apart with his teeth. Yet the beast's eyes still glowed brightly, matching the crystal.

Tsarad was in no hurry. He stood before Tak, no longer proudly holding his head high, but crouched low, legs splayed wide and jaws slightly parted. Without seeing his pupils or bared fangs, Tak could nonetheless feel how furious the beast was with him.

But neither of them rushed to attack. They studied one another, standing mere steps apart, eyes and crystal gleaming gold and violet against the darkness. The beast's flanks heaved with its breathing, its ear-tips twitched, and its long tail kept jerking. The hem of Tak's

ragged cloak stirred faintly; his chest rose and fell in heavy bursts, and every wound he had taken of late ached, dulling his senses.

And there's blood in every trail, even so…

"What are you waiting for?" Flora's breaking cry rang out like an arrow loosed. "Kill him!"

Tsarad's eyes widened. With a roar he hurled himself at Tak. The staff flared to life of its own accord, raising a protective barrier around its master, and Tsarad recoiled. Whether it was the forgotten Temple aiding him now, or the Vog Valley, or something else entirely, the help came just in time. Tak charged boldly at the beast, staff aloft.

Feet flying headlong…

"Take that!" The crystal flashed blue, searing Tsarad's hide, and he let out a short roar.

He circled away from Tak, unwilling to flee yet fearful of him. Flora's small light darted about behind him; she was confident she could hold the monster at bay if need be. Tak wanted to shout at her to fly off before he reached her, but there was no time.

He brandished the staff menacingly, savoring the feel and sight of how it swelled with power at his slightest thought.

"That's for Tau!" he cried, cheering himself on, and struck Tsarad a wound in the left leg.

He snarled, swaying, and drew back his paw. His golden eyes blazed on, fixed upon Tak; his nostrils flared wide, and his ears, despite himself, lay pressed flat against his skull. Did the beast know it would never go out hunting again?

"For Dzhera!"

Tak swung his staff with all his hatred, aiming to tear the monster's throat, but it lurched clumsily aside, and the crystal seared across his shoulder. Tsarad bunched himself into a crouch, head lowered, and Tak understood that no better moment could be asked for.

In the steps of the Dark Juju!

He flung himself at the beast with a cry—and it suddenly reared up, its forepaws sweeping high back over its head. Tak caught a glimpse of its eyes flashing with madness before it crashed down with its full weight, chin tucked to its chest. The staff crackled, spitting flashes of light in every direction, but in the next instant it was struck from Tak's hands.

Tsarad's horns raked across the old scars on his chest, and he went down on his back, the world flickering black and white before his eyes for a heartbeat or two. Tsarad, no longer quite so nimble, hesitated. Tak heard the beast's snorting, then a wet rustle as it raised its paw, claws dragging along the ground.

"Tak!" Flora shrieked, and he glimpsed her bright green glow.

The next moment a white shadow flashed above him. And then, all at once, it grew very quiet.

Before Tak could catch his breath, Flora came rushing toward him, nearly toppling over him. She had already taken her usual form of a girl, yet her aura, her mana, still shone fiercely about her.

"Tak! Get up, quickly! Fauna has drawn Tsarad away—we have to hurry!"

Yes, it has to be done. But he could use a couple of minutes to catch his breath.

Flora slid her arms around his shoulders and tried to raise him. As always, she carried the sweet scent of orchids, and her skin felt like cool petals—though these should have been the last things worth noticing just then. Tak forced himself upright, even though the pain and weight in his chest made him long for nothing more than to sink down and die.

"Oh, my poor dear, look what he's done to you…"

Flora pressed her palms to his wounds, and Tak flinched. But the flare of pain faded quickly, giving way to a blessed coolness.

“There’s no better remedy for bleeding than taman,” Flora whispered, drawing her hands back. “It won’t hold long; you’ll need to find real sap, or… But now—onward, after Tsarad! Fauna will keep him busy as long as she can. Come on, let’s go!”

Tak wanted badly to say that he trusted Fauna completely, that there was no need for such haste—but he obediently picked up the staff and hurried after Juju. What would he ever do without the daughters of the Moon…

“Faster! Faster!”

Tak pushed after Flora as best he could, understanding that she was anxious about her sister. But running was such an ordeal! His legs buckled beneath him, and his body, mangled by the monster, ached at the slightest movement. He could barely make out anything ahead and fixed his eyes only on the little flame of the spirit, wrapped in its dark shroud.

Fauna was far stronger than he had imagined. She could easily keep the monster at bay for an hour, even longer. Still, he pressed on, for the red-haired Juju lacked one quality—patience. Should the game bore her, she would walk away without so much as a blink.

Race over the stars!

Thanks to Flora’s touch, the pain receded — if only for a while — and with it the weariness drained away. Just imagine: the beast had been within his grasp! A moment more, and Tak would have snapped its neck. His fingers tightened around the burning handle of his staff. If only he could wield magic unaided, the way all the Juju could, Tsarad would already be dead…

“Faster, Tak! Faster!”

Flora had become a green spark once more, darting swiftly above the bushes. Ahead of her, somewhere deep in the valley, an orange blaze was flaring, and something was roaring — but Tak had no time to stop and listen.

Race over the Moon!

The lines of the ancient song still pounded in his head, as though some inner voice were struggling to reach him. Tak would gladly have rid himself of the insistent verse, but nothing worked. So instead he forced himself to think only of how he would finish Tsarad off. He would strike the sorcerer with such power that not a crumb of him would remain — the whole world would tremble from the blast…

The Seer will be right — Tak would hardly welcome that, at least not now. He had grown too weary of chasing the elusive beast; he had spent too much mana on protection and other spells; and it cut him deeply to have left Dzhera alone in the jungle. But the beast was here — which meant she was safe.

“This way, Tak!”

Flora hovered above the black bushes, beyond which orange magic glowed hot — as bright as Fauna’s hair. Tak poured all his remaining strength into one final surge forward, and the staff in his hands flared with pink light once more.

Run! Take flight!..

He roared and plunged straight through the underbrush, nearly leaving his tupa behind in the tangle. Tak darted forward, lifting his staff above his head, seeing nothing around him but Tsarad looming ahead. The beast stood with its back turned, growling deep in its chest, raking the air with its forepaws as though grasping at something unseen. Orange light flared around it — the glow of a shield Fauna had conjured. She had ringed the monster so it could not flee, leaving a single gap — one meant only for Tak. He swept his arm forward and

loosed a powerful burst of magic, pouring every last ounce of the staff's strength into the strike.

And at last — kill it…

The breath was driven from his lungs; he dropped to his knees and the staff fell from his hands. The flash swept across the clearing and burst against Tsarad. He saw it too late. The magic slammed into him, scorching the earth in a burning ring, charring every plant and tree within a dozen paces.

The impact hurled the beast skyward; it roared, paws flailing, then crashed heavily to the ground. Pink glimmers rippled through its short fur, devouring its essence. The smell of burning rose into the air. Tsarad's paws clawed at the soil, his tail twitched once, and then he lay still.

The crackle of magic faded around them. The fires died. The air hung thick with the sharp reek of scorched trees, singed fur — and something else, faintly salty.

With the back of his hand, Tak wiped his eyes, forcing himself to move slowly. His hands trembled; a violent shudder shook his entire body. He lacked even the strength to look at the beast's corpse. And besides, it seemed Juju's sisters had vanished.

Drawing a full chest of the rancid air, Tak finally lifted his head — and everything went dark before his eyes.

Only now did he realize that Dzhera had been there all along.

Tsarad had not killed her. He had merely mauled her, the way a clumsy child mauls a favorite toy. When Tak rushed to her side, it never once occurred to him that the magic might have touched her. His power never harmed his friends, had never hurt them so much as once — because he himself had never wished it to. However frightening the tales might be about the troubles and dangers his magic visited upon

others, Tak was, in truth, more than certain that he could never kill someone dear to him, even if he suddenly set his mind to it.

After all, hadn't he spared Kiko when the love potion drove him out of his wits and he nearly leveled the whole village in a fit of jealousy?

And Lok had emerged without a single scratch from the time Tak helped him demolish everything immovable in the jungle.

Even the twins had come to no harm when Tak lost his temper with them. So what if they spent half an hour as sheep…

And yet it was little wonder that Dzhera flinched each time he wheeled toward her abruptly, or lifted his staff, or simply bounded up to her when she least expected it.

But he.

Would never.

Have hurt her.

"Dzhera?" he called softly, not daring to touch her. "Dzhera! How did you get here?"

Her friend lay motionless on the ground, lips parted, eyelids not quite shut, her eyes glinting in narrow slits between her lashes. Perhaps the flash had only stunned her for a moment; perhaps she was simply too terrified of Tsarad. Tak bent over her and gently shook her shoulder. The instant he touched her, he braced himself to be snapped at, to have his hand struck away. But Dzhera gave no sign whatsoever that she felt his palm upon her shoulder.

"Dzhera, I killed Tsarad!" He had bitten the tip of his tongue slightly, marveling that he had somehow managed to pronounce her complicated name after all. "Get up — it's all over!"

It was then that he noticed how silent everything around him had become, as though someone had stuffed straw into his ears.

An uneasy chill climbed from his stomach into his arms, and Tak shook Dzhera harder — desperate to wake her quickly, and to calm himself.

“ Get up! Can you hear me? Dzhera!..”

His voice cracked, and he bit his lip. He glanced around, but the Juju sisters had vanished without a trace. The silence bore down on him, and the ragged, thunderous sound of his own breathing seemed strange, alien, in this place.

“ Stop scaring me…”

He shook her once more, then bent down and pressed his ear firmly against Dzhera’s chest, praying to everything in the world that she was still alive. But his own blood was pounding so violently at his temples that he could distinguish nothing beyond it. He squeezed her wrist, searching for a pulse, but his hands trembled so hard that he could make out nothing at all.

“ No. Thing. At. All.”

“ Dzhera! Please, get up,” he whispered, feeling cool tears clouding his eyes.

Tak wasn’t afraid of her seeing him like this — in truth, he wanted nothing else right now: only for his friend to look at him, hear all of it, and laugh at him. She would tell him how pathetic he looked, nudge his arm, smile…

He ran his fingers gently along her neck, afraid to press too hard, yet tears were already pouring from his eyes in rivers, and his heart was shriveling within him — it might burst at any moment, unable to bear it all. His throat was tightening from the inside, too. One more second, and he would choke on his own cry.

Even before his fingers finally found the right vein beneath her skin, before his palm settled over the place where a heartbeat should have been, Tak knew that Dzhera was dead.

***

...you have Juju's power!..

...I throw just fine — it's you who can't catch!..

...you're late, you blockhead...

...but you don't want to marry her, do you?..

...I never doubted you...

...you don't know how to fight!..

...you left me for Blita?..

...what will they do to you, Juju, when they learn you killed one of their own?..

...hey, fragile boy...

***

Tak's eyes flew open as he sensed a change in the air around him. At first he saw nothing, his vision drowned in tears, but soon he realized there was nothing to see anyway.

Everything had vanished into a dense fog that had risen from out of nowhere.

Tak lay half-propped up, knees against the ground, forehead pressed to Dzhera's chest. The cloak felt cold, as though soaked through with water. Somewhere close by lay the staff, glowing with its own light. Slowly turning his gaze toward it, Tak nearly seized it. He could have snapped it over his knee like a twig! Beat every trace of magic from its chest with a club! Let the blood from that great vein, until every last drop of Juju drained out of him!..

But Tak did not stir. He shut his eyes once more, letting all the strangeness slip away, and strained to catch any sound beyond the thundering of his own heart.

A familiar voice spoke—but only inside his head.

…thank you, traitor…

…just pretend you don't know me…

…it’s only a game!..

…we will miss you, Tak…

…I love him!

Tak gulped air through his mouth and dissolved into a coughing fit, realizing he had held his breath far too long. His nose and chest ached; he could hardly draw breath in—but that was the last thing troubling him now. His muscles had grown heavy, and the cloak pressed down upon him, flattening him against the ground almost entirely. His fingers, clenched into fists, had gone numb.

He could not bring himself to rise, or even to shift his position. It had become impossible even to open his eyes. If you linger too long in the dark and the silence, listening only to Dzhera’s voice in your head, then one day it will become the truth, filling the emptiness around you. He would open his eyes and realize he had merely endured a bad, oppressive dream. Perhaps he had fallen slightly ill, or the World of Nightmares had drawn him in too deep—but it would pass soon enough; the important thing was to know it wasn’t real…

Because the real world could not be so cruel, so cold and quiet.

“This is the World of Dreams.”

Tak forced his eyelids apart with difficulty, but upon catching sight of the spotted pelt of a top before him, he squeezed them shut again.

“You have been here many times already…”

No. No-no-no…

“…in your dreams…”

He spun around with a jerk, and only then opened his eyes.

“…but this time you have been summoned here on a matter of great importance…”

Amid the thick billows of white fog stood a white antelope with golden eyes, and upon its back sat Tleylok.

“I’m asleep!” — Tak exulted. — “Of course! Nothing else could be possible.”

He didn’t even trouble himself to wipe his face, merely attempting a smirk. Tleylok was in full regalia, resplendent in his rich headdress and already free of the bandages. Tsarad looked as if freshly created — pristine, without a single scratch. And no wonder: this was only a dream, and in the Waking World they were both dead.

Tleylok sat enthroned upon the beast as though it were a rhinoceros or a moa — Tak had never seen anyone ride an antelope before. Then again, the Babuzonki hadn’t called Tsarad an antelope; they had used some other word…

“What is it, Tak?” — Tleylok called to him calmly. — “Do the stones weep, does the earth sob? Why did you drag the girl here, then? That witch has amassed so much mana that trouble was bound to follow. But not today. Had she kept her distance from you, she would be safe right now. Or are you unaware of how it goes for ones like you?”

“I’m asleep,” — Tak repeated stubbornly to himself, gazing at Tsarad’s slender white horns and refusing to lift his eyes any higher, — “this is only a dream. Let him talk all he wants; I know the truth…”

“Ones like you,” — Tleylok went on slowly, as though addressing a particularly dull pupil, — “are dangerous. You should never have existed at all. A far too vile mixture of Juju’s power and human stupidity. You can see for yourself what it has led to.”

Tleylok gave him a significant nod toward something behind his back. Tak swallowed but didn’t turn around. There’s nothing there. Only two ghosts haunt this dream, and they were standing right in front of him.

“What...” this time he decided to speak, though his voice came out too hoarse and faint. He cleared his throat and tried again: “What do you want?”

Tleylok paused, studying him, then graciously chose to make conversation, since Tak refused to answer his questions.

“The Dream World is my element, ever since my body was broken. Here I am strong and mighty as never before. And besides,” he smiled slyly and ruffled Tsarad’s ear as though the beast were a tiny papikins baby, — “this is where this handsome fellow and I first met. I’m no longer angry with him for trying to kill me, and he has no need to try again.”

“I’m glad you two became friends,” Tak muttered, glancing around and searching for some way to wake himself and return to the real world.

But Tleylok wasn’t finished.

“Want to know how it happened?” he asked in a wheedling tone, and Tsarad took a couple of soundless steps, drawing closer to Tak. Now Tleylok towered over him, gazing down with haughty pride. “Want to know how I managed to tame the beast?”

Tak couldn’t have cared less. He regarded the white antelope hide now without fear or hatred — with nothing but indifference. It’s only a dream. Yet something in Tleylok’s voice was unsettling, and he understood that he had to know. How the Devourer had been tamed.

“Well?”

The shaman, clinging to Tsarad’s neck, leaned in close until his eyes were level with Tak’s. His long lips stretched slowly into a smile as he studied him.

“Because I fed him. With sheep, and with the souls of your kin. Tsarad savored it.”

It did not take Tak long to grasp what the sorcerer meant. And when Tleylok saw understanding dawn in his eyes, he leaned in even lower, barely holding himself upright against Tsarad.

“And now, boy, you will try to kill me.”

The staff found Tak’s palm before he even knew he wanted it. Tleylok bared his teeth in a grin and straightened, lifting his head. Tak stood facing him, feeling the smooth haft of the staff, cool and strangely heavy. Something in his head refused to come together, and so the crystal did not glow. Something here was wrong.

Why does this ghost keep speaking to him of death?

Tleylok clicked his tongue loudly.

“Tsarad, my friend, just look at this wretch. He has only just learned who is to blame for the deaths of his kin, and he does not care. So weary, so broken, so lost” look at him…

Tak’s mind ceased to make sense of the words. The staff slipped from his hand, and he doubled over, sinking to his knees.

Enough. Stop. In some ways the sorcerer was right — he was so very tired. So very.

If only he could sleep as he ought, fearing nothing, expecting nothing, hunting no one.

But he was asleep already, wasn’t he?

Wasn’t he?

“Hey, boy,” Tleylok’s rumbling voice sounded once more. “Are you truly not going to avenge your kin, for the pain I brought upon your family? You were raised by the Pupununu, and they take such matters very seriously.”

The shaman’s voice seemed to come from every direction at once; Tak lifted his head, but there was no one anywhere near him.

“Or have your strength given out?” he went on, and his voice drifted away, only to sound again almost at Tak’s very ear. “You’re

utterly worn through, aren't you? Tired of running, of fretting, of being afraid, of trying to make sense of everything around you? I told you—I told you long ago—but did you listen?"

The voice faded into the distance, and Tak lowered his head, unable to tell whether he regretted that Tleylok was gone or was, in truth, relieved. It hardly mattered. He could never have fought the shaman again just then, even had he wished to. And why would he? Tleylok was dead, and this—this was only his dream.

Or nightmare.

Tak rose to his feet, swayed, and picked up his staff out of habit. Everything around him was white, blindingly white, as though the world had not yet been made—before the spirits of Juju appeared, before Moana poured forth from the shell and gave birth to the island. Before any life existed at all, and, with it, death.

His hand strayed of its own accord to his chest and found the stone clasp of his cloak, yet even the touch of something solid could not restore his sense of the real. If nothing and no one existed yet—if all this was his dream—then why did he feel so wretched, so aching, so bitter?

If all of this was only a dream—then why did he feel so utterly terrible?

He glanced down at the staff and, for the first time, wondered why it weighed so much; then he swung it. A ring of magic burst outward from him in a spray of pink sparks, and Tak flinched, a sharp pain lancing through his chest.

The mist began to thin, melting away like sea foam. Tak squeezed his eyes shut, then open, straining to make out something—anything—around him. Surely he would wake up now? Open his eyes and find himself in a tent beside Kiko and Lok. Or no—in his own room, in the shamans' house.

He closed his eyes again, picturing his bedroom in every detail: scrolls of spells and recipes heaped in the corner, a shelf of pots and vials up near the ceiling, a hammock slung beneath the small round window…

He had merely been dreaming again, that was all. Nothing to worry about.

Everything was perfectly fine.

He opened his eyes.

Before him, etched against the ink-black sky, stood Tsarad, and upon him sat Tleylok. Stone arches and bridges twisted behind their backs, reaching toward Nowhere and ending in Nothing. Beneath the white antelope's feet spread a sickly brownish-gray blotch that had already corrupted this corner of the World of Dreams. Where it lay, spikes thrust up from the ground, the sky above had darkened, and the bridges and arches were cracking and crumbling.

"Poor, poor boy," Tleylok clucked his tongue. — You truly believed you could escape this place? That after what you conjured near the Forgotten Temple, you could simply walk away? This magic is stronger than you, whoever you really are. And it is consuming you—it is controlling you. It was because of it that you killed the witch.

Tak's heart lurched, and for the third time in half an hour it shattered to pieces. Even Tleylok fell silent when he saw how Tak's face had changed. But it was too late.

"I never killed anyone!"

The cry tore from him, and with it a blinding flash erupted from his crystal, scattering like a deadly blossom directly above Tleylok's head. Tsarad reared, the shaman threw a hand up to shield his eyes, yet kept his grip on the beast's horn.

"It's only a nightmare!"

Across the darkness-poisoned ground, bolts of lightning slithered like blue serpents, and the monster leapt aside just in time to keep them from searing his hide. Tleylok barely managed to hold on to Tsarad, stretching his other hand out toward Tak in warning, palm forward.

“Quiet, boy…”

“You know nothing!” Tak’s voice swelled louder and louder, drowning out the memory of that silence from which something within him had gone dark. — I am no murderer! I am no danger to anyone! But if you don’t shut your mouth, you fool, I’ll prove you otherwise!

Had Tak not been blinded by fury, he would have seen how frightened Tleylok was — and how wary Tsarad had grown as well. Magic pulsed out of him in flashes, throbs, and jolts, keeping time with his heartbeat. He never noticed how it was draining his mana — on the contrary, the rage seemed to lend him strength. Anger and pain were choking him, aching to break loose, to reveal themselves, to find something to devour. Oh, how gladly he would have grappled with Tleylok hand to hand, or tried to strangle the beast with his bare fingers — anything to be rid of that searing agony beneath his skin.

“It wasn’t you,” Tleylok said soothingly, his palm still raised forward, and Tak flung his head up in fury, glaring at him, “it was your power. Do you see what it’s doing here? You can’t control it. This was bound to happen someday — and it could have maimed or killed one of your kin.”

Tak tightened his grip on the staff, its pommel scraping against the stony ground.

“I haven’t killed anyone! It was only a nightmare!”

“No, Tak,” Tleylok countered, squaring his shoulders. “You truly did it — this was no dream. The witch is dead because your power touched her.”

He had barely finished speaking when a flash of magic swept Tsarad off his feet, rolling across the ground like a wave and casting aside everything in its path. Tleylok flung himself clear of the animal, scrambling up and crossing his arms before his forehead to shield himself from the surge. Tsarad, by contrast, pressed his belly flat to the earth and now watched Tak from there, ears pinned back, tail striking the ground in quick, sharp strokes.

Tak stood facing them, feeling that in another instant his soul, too, would tear free of his body. He would gladly have kept his magic hidden, held it deep within — but nothing in the World of Dreams worked as it did in the Waking World. His second essence, the Juju-part, had pushed right out from under his skin and now blazed with searing fire, ready to incinerate anyone who dared speak a word against it. Tak-the-man himself was wrapped inside it, as though in a cocoon.

“Do you see what she’s doing to you?” Tleylok raised his voice, shouting over the crackle of magic. — She feeds on you and controls you! She did it to your friend. But you can be rid of her.

His voice softened, turning cajoling, and the sorcerer sank to nearly a whisper.

“In all the known worlds, the Juju alone hold power over everything and everyone. Go to them, my boy, and they will lift your curse. Power can never be taken from a spirit, but you are only half Juju.”

Tak’s magic quieted and dimmed somewhat. Tleylok’s words stirred a painful memory — something he had already lived through, already heard, long ago and far past.

“The Dark Juju,” he said aloud, remembering.

When the Dark One learned that Tak was Aurora’s son, he had wanted to seize his power, and he had spoken those very words. And then… Tak gritted his teeth at the recollection.

“It’s agony!” he cried out, and the magic clenched around him at the thought of the tortures the Dark One had inflicted. — I wouldn’t survive it a second time.

“And does it not hurt to kill your friends?” Tleylok raised his voice, and the shield around him thickened in case Tak lost control again. — How many more people must you lose before you understand that this path was best for everyone? Or do you truly believe that beings like you can live out their lives among ordinary folk without causing any trouble? Only the greatest fool could entertain such a thought!

Tsarad, forgotten until this very moment, rose slowly to his feet, bowing his head yet never taking his eyes off Tak. But Tak did not so much as glance his way. For the first time, the thought came to him that perhaps the Dark One had meant well—not only for himself, but for Tak, and perhaps for all of Pupununu. Neither Dzhibolba, nor the Chief, nor any of his friends had ever breathed a word of this; only Tleylok had managed to. Perhaps the Dark One had been right all along when he tried to strip Tak of his magical power.

The sorcerer studied his face, while across his own a smile slowly spread.

“Do you truly believe it will be better for everyone this way?” Tak whispered.

The magic faded out, and everything fell silent.

“Yes, Tak,” the sorcerer breathed. “And deep down, you know it. It won’t bring the witch back, but you won’t lose anyone else.”

Tsarad shot a quick glance in his direction, then turned back to Tak, as if struggling to follow what they were speaking of.

Tak said nothing, absently running his thumb along the warm handle of his staff, as was his habit. Tleylok waited patiently for an answer. At last, Tak shook his head.

“Why not?”

“I can’t. Not now.”

“You’re afraid,” contempt crept into Tleylok’s voice. “Afraid like any common man—afraid for yourself, but not for those you love. Very well, then. That girl must not have meant so much to you after all.”

Tak frowned, yet still he answered:

“That isn’t the reason. I remembered something. Juju the Seer uttered a prophecy.”

“And what did it say?” Tleylok asked grimly, his eyes narrowing slowly.

“I must kill Tsarad.”

And once more the crystal blazed in the darkness.

Chapter 17

So, am I first? You're going to love this story, everyone—just you wait.

Well, actually, it hasn't happened yet. Many months will pass before our party sets out for the forgotten Vog valley in search of coconut oil…

Hey, I was telling it… What do you mean, "a story can't be a story if it hasn't happened yet"? It will happen, exactly as I'm telling it! Now hush, sis, and let me finish.

Nine people will set out for the Vog valley, and I won't name any names. Some went eagerly, others were simply made to go, but not one of them thought the journey would be dangerous. They just set off for the Vog valley, and that was that.

The first turned back home, because he had forgotten to say goodbye to his family.

The second fell off a cliff as the party walked along the rim of the upper valley. To keep such a thing from happening again, they turned into the jungle.

And then a snake bit the third.

That night they camped not far from the valley, but as they slept, the third tragedy struck. The spirits sent one of the men a terrible dream, and he hacked down the fourth man lying beside him and wounded the fifth. The party decided to leave the wounded man behind—he couldn't walk on his own and would only be a burden.

Four descended into the valley. Better than nothing!

But then the sixth man vanished.

Three remained, and still they gathered coconut oil, just as they had been ordered.

But they never made it home. To this day they wander somewhere in the valley, searching for the sixth man and for healing herbs to save the fifth.

No, I didn't make this story up—we only tell true ones, don't we? It will be true, and you'll see for yourselves.

But you won't understand. You'll forget all about it. And when, many moons from now, they send us out for coconut oil, then... well, laugh all you like. You two never understand anything anyway.

Tsarad had managed to strike him, quick as he was. The claw landed between Tak's eyes, tearing across his nose. Then the terrible beast vanished, swallowed in a blinding flash. Only ash—snow-white, like his fur—drifted through the air, dissolving before it ever touched the ground.

Tak exhaled sharply, staring at the empty space, still half-expecting the monster to reappear. He felt nothing. No joy. No triumph. No relief. Just as the Seer, who is never wrong, had foretold.

Tak had killed Tsarad, yet he took no pleasure in it. In recent days, the Dark beast had been their adventure, their mystery, their very purpose. They had feared him, hunted him, spoken of him, cursed him. But now he was gone, and something within Tak's soul snapped. Something had ended, forever.

"That's all." The words came heavily from his throat, as if lodged there. "And now I want to go home." Tak looked at Tleylok standing before him, as if seeking his approval, and repeated: "Now I will go home."

The word had become his heart's one desire, kindling a ghostly hope that at home, everything would finally be well. That there Dzhibolba and Dzhera would greet him, the Chief would throw a feast the likes of which no one had seen, and everything would return to the way it once was.

“You think you killed him?” Tleylok spoke at last, before Tak could slip away. “You killed him twice over — first in the Waking World, then again here, in the Realm of Nightmares. Don’t you see? Doesn’t it strike you as strange that you’re chasing ghosts — and as long as you keep chasing, they’ll never leave you. They’ll come to you every time, the instant your eyes close. And on that, you have my word.”

Tak had no answer. He no longer knew whether Tleylok himself was a ghost. But there was no chance to ask, anyway.

A crushing heaviness began flooding his right arm, and the staff slipped from his weakening fingers. Tak tried to move his hand and shake off the unpleasant numbness, but his flesh might as well have turned to stone. The heaviness crawled up over his right shoulder, across his chest, then along his neck — and Tak lost consciousness.

…and how do you intend to fix it?..

…they don’t like you!..

…I don’t care, of course…

…far too strange for me…

The heaviness receded little by little, stretching itself out of his body. Tak felt the cold ground beneath his back. Slowly, the familiar sounds of the jungle began to reach his ears. He drew a deep breath of the fresh scent of greenery and gently opened his eyes. Everything felt so familiar, so soothing, that he expected to see nothing but the village.

Instead, he was deep in the jungle. And the next moment, Kiko’s broad face appeared above him.

“Brother! You’re awake!” he cried joyfully, reaching out a hand to help Tak to his feet. “I thought I had killed you.”

He was smiling, and it was plainly not said in earnest, yet Tak still frowned and took a step back from him. They were in their camp, beside the Forgotten Temple—as if he had never gone anywhere at all. Tak even caught himself glancing involuntarily toward their tent,

expecting to see Dzhera there, though at the last moment he looked away.

His right arm still throbbed with a dull ache; he began feeling over it and at once discovered a small wound, just at the wrist.

“It was I who woke you,” Kiko explained, following his gaze. — You did come back — exactly as you said you would. Your eyes were open, but so empty that even I felt a chill run through me. And you walked on your own two feet, though you could hardly see anything at all. — He paused, and his heavy brows drew down. — I tried to stop you, but you simply shoved me aside. Then here, — he nodded at a coiled, thorny vine lying on the ground. — I scratched you with my secret weapon, remember? You blacked out at once. For a moment I feared it was for good. — He smiled at Tak again, so that he wouldn’t hold any grudge against him.

But Tak had no time for him just now. He sank into thought, rubbing his arm and staring straight ahead. His face was burning, and when he touched the bridge of his nose, his fingers came away warm with blood. A scratch ran across his face, between his eyes, and his nose throbbed with pain. So Tsarad really had done it—truly done it. No matter in which of the worlds their last meeting had taken place.

“Where is Lok?”

He did not recognize his own voice—rough and heavy. As though everything in his chest had turned to stone, and now an echo hummed there.

“He’s gone to check the snares, Kiko muttered in reply, carefully picking up his “weapon.” And where’s Dzhera?”

Tak snatched his hand from his face as though scalded. His heart raced like a lover’s, and a wave of dizziness swept over him. Stooping awkwardly, he sank straight to the ground, grateful for its firm support.

Kiko turned and squinted, watching him. His green eyes—like those of every Pupununu—seemed paler than usual, and far more piercing than the Seer's. Tak was all but certain his friend knew everything.

"You left her somewhere back there, didn't you? he asked abruptly, then looked away." It's all right; she'll find her own way. Won't she? And the beast—was it he who hurt you?

Tak could not force a single word from his throat. He couldn't even shape the answer in his own mind. There was no answer. Not in any of the worlds.

"I killed him, he forced out at last." Twice.

Kiko straightened and waited in silence for an explanation. Tak did not dare meet his gaze. Better to keep his distance altogether, before he once again…

"Though I don't know if it's forever, he confessed, rubbing his dry eyes. They itched and ached, his eyelids swollen. When had he last truly slept?"

"That's more than nothing, Kiko muttered, and lowered himself to the ground opposite him." So can we go back? Home?

Even Kiko, forever an outsider in the tribe, missed the village. Guilt washed over Tak again for dragging them all into this, though they were blameless. Tsarad had appeared because of the Dark One, and the Dark One hated humankind because of Tak's father. So in the end, it was always, only his fault.

"Yes, I suppose we can head back," he sighed, rising slowly to his feet and stretching his numb arms.

Only then did he notice that it was well past noon. It felt as though he had left the camp mere minutes ago. As though everything that had happened were a dream, a nightmare, and so could not have taken

much time. But in all likelihood, he was mistaken, as usual. He might have been gone a year without ever noticing.

“Then we must wait for Luke and Dzhera,” Kiko replied cheerfully, making for their tent.

Tak held his breath and ran his fingers over his scratches once more. If they were real, then... had what happened to Dzhera been real as well?

Only Death knows the answer to that.

“I am setting off for Juju’s realm,” Tak announced. — You and Luke can go back home.

Kiko turned sharply toward him. The eternal carefree look had vanished from his eyes yet again; his heavy brows lowered almost to meet them. He swallowed and took a step forward.

“Brother...”

“Stay away from me!” Tak warned him at once, backing away himself. — Don’t. I shall return to the village with Dzhera, or I shall not return at all. Give my regards to Dzhibolba, and apologize to the Chief on my behalf.

And it seemed that even before he could summon his staff to him, the world around him splintered and crumbled into hundreds upon hundreds of multicolored shards, pulling him into itself.

Tak fell flat on his face, yet it was precisely the pain that jolted him back to his senses. It was as if he had blacked out while hurling himself from the world of humans into the realm of Juju. And that crossing itself had seemed to happen not of his own volition — perhaps it was his magic’s decision, nothing more. His own thoughts, desires, and feelings now felt somehow… foreign. As though they had been left behind in the past — in yesterday, or last year. Here and now stood another Tak — exhausted, wounded,

and alone. Utterly alone. — Well,

well, what have we here, eh? — A human shaman from a human tribe, can't

you see? — Hey, this is no place for a nap,

friend. Tak drew a deep breath, his nose clogged and throbbing. This was not the right Juju — not the one he had needed

. Slowly he rose, rubbing his jaw, his nose, his cheek, almost astonished to find himself still alive — that after all this his heart still beat and his lungs still drew air. Why him? Why couldn't she have done the same?.

Right now, the bright, bizarre world of Juju seemed anything but a cheerful, carefree place. The spirals and zigzags upon the walls — and even upon the bare ground — recalled sinister labyrinths; the stone structures, the realm of Nightmares. Not one of all the possible worlds looked safe, even after he had slain

Tsarad twice. — Hello, Monster, Tak muttered, raising his eyes.

The Juju monster loomed before him, glaring down from above and from either side at once. It was a wondrous creature with three heads — a great horned lizard that spewed blue fire, the head of another horned being with a massive neck and a blunt, thick nose, and a third resembling a fish's. This strange pet of Judge Juju often ventured into the world of humans, soaring on mighty leathery wings over villages and scattering people like startled chickens. It was as large as a rhinoceros, with powerful paws and an immensely long tail tipped by a fin. Muscles rippled beneath the beast's golden hide, and no one could ever say for certain which head governed what.

"Long time no see, Tak," said the lizard's middle head politely, perched atop its long neck. Her name was Tarako, and she always strove to reach peaceful accord with people and to carry herself with dignity — unless…

“Yes, we thought Tsarad had swallowed every last human long ago!” roared the thick-nosed face named Povi, flaring his wide nostrils. His temper was ferociously hot, and Tak was certain that nearly all the havoc the monster wreaked upon humankind was the doing of this very head. “We’d hoped never to clap eyes on you again!”

“Never been so lucky,” muttered the right head, the grumbliest of the three, whose name was Kapa. It looked very much like a fish’s, with scales the color of clay, a wrinkled brow, and Juju’s magical mark upon its cheeks. Kapa fixed Tak with a level stare, fortunately standing at his own height. “Luna said many would die, but that all would perish — that she will not permit. Even a human can grasp that.”

The Monster shifted slightly on its powerful clawed paws, turning Kapa away from Tak, while Tarako leaned in closer to him.

“My dear, you look unwell,” she said gently, surveying Tak with something close to pity. “Have you just come from a fight? And what became of Tsarad?”

Tak had no wish to answer, no desire to explain everything to the curious spirit—but if he merely insulted it or walked off, the Monster would not let the matter rest. Povi certainly would not.

“I killed him.”

The Freak jerked sharply to the right, so that the left head, Povi, came face to face with Tak. Kapa muttered something in protest, but no one heard him.

“Is it true?” Povi growled, and his eyes flooded with blood even more than usual, as though Tsarad had been his dearest friend. “You killed him? You? Is it true?”

He had little command of language, and for want of words and expressions, he scraped furiously at the ground with his thick claws. Whichever of the heads controlled the tail, it was now swaying nervously from side to side.

Prudently, Tak took a step back from the beast.

“Yes. And what of it? The Seer foretold it.” At once, of course, he recalled another of the spirit’s predictions, and his hands clenched into fists. “And before I find Juju’s Death, I’d like to see him!”

Tarako frowned in bewilderment, while Povi had already flung his jaws wide open—and now there would be no stopping him.

“— It’s that no one believed you could kill him! It’s simply impossible — I don’t believe it myself! People always tell more lies than truth. You must have fled from him and hidden here, under Luna’s dress! And what do you need Death for? What do you need the Seer for?”

Tak was already preparing to bolt as far from the three-headed one as his legs would carry him — that would have been far easier than talking any sense into Povi — but then he either heard his own name spoken, or the Seer himself appeared in the air, knowing he would be needed.

Fortunately, Povi fell silent at once and sulked furiously. The Seer turned toward him, and Tak noticed the thin shoulders shudder with disgust.

“Get out of here!” he snapped at the beast, waving his hand. — My head aches from your shrieking! If you don’t believe me, then say it to my face — or would you rather not, hmm?

As always when Juju was involved, Tak braced himself for a long patience. One spirit, even a three-headed one, was only half the trouble; but add the hot-tempered Seer to the mix, and the two of them would argue for centuries before your turn ever came.

But today nothing worked. Tak could not meekly wait for the Seer to deign to notice him. Everything inside him was so shattered that he had no strength left to endure.

“You!” he cried out, forgetting how much the Seer hated shouting. — Everything happened exactly as you said! I destroyed Sarad — not a crumb of him remains! And I took no joy in it, none at all!

The Clairvoyant shot higher into the sky, as though fearing Tak might lunge at him with his fists. He scowled in displeasure and folded his thin arms across his chest. Small purple lightning bolts flickered within the dark cloud that bore his body and hid his legs.

“Well, of course I destroyed it! Have I ever lied? I am the Clairvoy…”

“And you also said!” Tak could not draw enough air and began breathing through his mouth. All three heads of the Monster watched him in silence, with animal curiosity. — You said that I... would become chief, do you remember? Was that a lie too? — He gulped air in quick, repeated breaths, gathering the strength to finish. — You, you said back then... that it would happen after I... after I took Dzhera as my wife!

Once the words were finally spoken aloud, he felt as though he had torn his heart clean from his chest. Large, hot tears slid down his cheeks and stretched downward, scorching his skin. Everything around was impossibly quiet.

“But I killed her!” he shouted, dealing himself the final blow and beginning to choke. — I killed her! Which means... everything you say... it’s all lies! You’ve been lying to us all along!

Tarako growled softly; the monster’s wings drooped, and its tail swept nervously across the ground. The Clairvoyant clenched his fingers into tiny fists, and several lilac sparks scattered from them. His eyes blazed with fire, and for a moment Tak believed he was about to incinerate him — and then all his prophecies would truly crumble to dust.

How foolish it had been to believe a single word that spewed from this smug charlatan's mouth.

"Did you not hear a word I said to you?" he shrieked, turning purple with rage like an overripe taro. — I told you plainly, and as usual you understood nothing! People never understand anything, even when you speak their language! Plain! Simple! Words!

"But you said Tsarad would kill Dzhibolba!" Tak shouted back, all instinct for self-preservation abandoned. — I warned him, and because of that the future changed?

The Seer lowered himself slightly, craning his neck to peer into Tak's eyes. The sickly purple was draining from his face.

"I never said Tsarad would kill Dzhibolba," he replied slowly, with surprising calm. — Are you going to argue with me? People always get everything wrong, invent nonsense in their empty heads, refuse to listen, and then come crawling back to lay the blame at my feet. — He swung round sharply toward the Monster, which still loomed behind him. — Did I say Tsarad would kill the old shaman?

The creature had only the faintest notion of what he meant, but it nodded all three of its heads in unison.

Tak tried to recall exactly what the Seer had told him, but everything in his mind had tangled itself into one hopeless knot.

"What I said," Juju began obligingly, — was that someone dear to you would die. The one who had taken the place of your family. The one brimming with mana. You all look alike, and your names are impossible to keep straight. But I never said it would be Dzhibolba, because it was certainly not him.

"But it wasn't Tsarad who killed her, muttered Tak, too weary to go on arguing." It was I.

The Seer sighed — just like a true human being.

“Because you weren’t listening, Tak. I never said Tsarad would kill the witch.”

Tak’s eyes dried in an instant. He tried to summon that conversation back, word for word. But he couldn’t. Again.

“I see no names, Tak, but I see someone bound to you” like family, the kind you never had. And this person’s mana would be enough to feed Tsarad. That is what I told you. Nothing more. But you went off and decided Tsarad would kill Dzhibolba, and then you even had the nerve to blame me. It seems your mother never taught you any…

“Then why didn’t you tell me I would be the one to kill her?” he cried, only now grasping what a colossal mistake he had been making all this time. — Was that some trifling detail I was simply meant to guess on my own?!

If only he had known! If only the Seer had deigned to be even a little clearer! He would have sent Dzhera home the moment she came to him, without a word of argument. And then she would be safe now — back in the village, beside her father.

“Have you ever heard of anyone receiving prophecies so complete and detailed? the Seer snapped, stubborn.” Besides, I knew you wouldn’t have believed me. You would have thought exactly what you did think, because that’s far easier to accept than the truth: that you were destined to become a killer.

“I am not a killer.”

The Seer merely spread his hands. He didn’t care.

A long silence settled over them, and then Povi spoke up:

“Why do you want Juju’s Death?”

Tak had all but forgotten the Monster existed. But before he could answer, the Seer wheeled toward the creature, delighted at the chance to flaunt his knowledge.

“Because he is going to the World of Spirits. Tsarad did not devour the witch’s soul, and it departed to wherever they all go.” Then he turned back to Tak. — You have been there once, but you know how it is — Death won’t take kindly to you dropping in every chance you get.

“Where is he? Just tell me where he is!”

The Seer scowled with displeasure, yet answered all the same, grudgingly:

“You will find Death of Juju near the Judge’s house. He is attending today’s council. And thank the heavens and the Moon that I am in a good mood” and that you look too repulsive and pitiful to be worth finishing off.

Before Tak could utter a single word, the Seer vanished into thin air.

Tarako clicked her tongue.

“Rough day, buddy. I don’t even know what to say to you. And where will you find ghosts to carry you across into their World?”

“I don’t know,” Tak answered quietly.

Last time, the ancient chiefs of Pupununu had come to his aid, but afterwards they had settled back into their graves. And there was no time to return to the cemetery — he could not face any of his kinsmen now. Not until he brought Dzhera home was the way back open to him.

“Well, your problems are yours to solve,” Povi rumbled, and the Monster spread its sound wings. — We won’t even wish you luck — it wouldn’t help anyway.

The Beast had already pushed off the ground, wings beating, when suddenly it folded them clumsily, jerked its right paw, and sank heavily back down. Povi roared with fury.

“May Nerbils take you… Tarako! What are you doing? It’s time we went home! Do you want us locked in a cage for being late?”

He shook his head irritably, trying to scratch Tarako's neck with his horn. But she no longer paid him any mind, studying Tak instead.

"We can take you with us," she offered at last. "We need to see the Judge anyway, and you have troubles enough as it is. It would be no burden to us."

"Oh, speak for yourself!" Povi snapped, and the creature's body jerked backward. "I'm not some litter to haul him about on!"

"Hold your tongue, just once in your life, my dear!" Tarako hissed, thin tongues of blue flame flickering between her clenched teeth. "We can take you with us," she repeated, turning back to Tak.

At first he meant to refuse, but then he understood that time was not on his side. The sooner he found the Death of Juju, and then the ghosts, the sooner he would see Dzhera. Everything within him ached at the thought of her as it had never ached before.

"Very well," he agreed, squeezing his eyes shut as the Monster lunged toward him.

Tarako caught him with her right paw, curling her fingers carefully so her claws would not scratch him. The beast would sooner have gnawed off its own tail than let anyone—let alone a human—climb onto its back.

Judge Juju's towering house seemed to strain heavenward with its very peak. Its entrance was fashioned as an enormous head — humanoid in shape, much like the one at the Forgotten Temple. The purple walls bore an otherworldly hue, as though the building itself had been raised from starlight and moonlight. Beside the house, hovering in midair, floated a flat round stone — a landing platform for Juju's Monster, the Judge's pet beast. The three-headed creature touched down upon it, flinging Tak to the ground.

"That's as far as we can take you, Tarako said in farewell."

"And that's a great deal indeed, Povi muttered."

Kapa offered no parting words; he only cast Tak one last, heavy look. The Monster waved its long tail, spread its wings, and vanished into the tower, as though the stone head had swallowed it whole.

Tak looked around, rubbing his bruised elbows. Ordinarily, Juju's death was hard to miss — he was among the noisiest of spirits, always delighted to greet guests in this world. Yet all around the tower there was only silence; even the gremlins, the Judge's lackeys, were nowhere to be seen.

Waiting for Death, Tak leaned his back against a column. The realm resembled the World of Dreams: Juju was fond of stone arches, staircases, and columns, and the land of Dreams seemed to be striving to become just like this place — so that people who stood not the slightest chance of visiting Juju's realm might at least glimpse its reflection in their dreams.

And yet, what exactly was the Waking World—with the Pupununu tribe, its dense jungles, ancient temples, and wild beasts—and where did the World of Dreams begin: those lands where nothing could be trusted, where everything turned against you, where strange things happened, and where a single nudge was enough for that place to become the World of Nightmares? Where lay the sphere in which the two intersected and mingled? And how could they ever be told apart?

Defeated by the question, Tak thought of Dzhera with an aching heart, even though he tried by every means to drive her image from his mind, if only for a while. She had been alive, hadn't she? The Clairvoyant and Tleylok claimed that he had killed her—but that couldn't be true, could it? Dzhera had never died, even though they had been through ordeals so harrowing it was frightening even to recall them.

But that terrible silence… Those dreadful words of Tleylok's—it couldn't have been a dream, unless it was an extraordinarily, chillingly

real one, one that all but reached out to touch you. And yet believing in Dzhera's death was just as hard as believing in Moana's, or the Log-Hermit's, or…

"Tak!"

He started in surprise, gripping his staff until his knuckles ached. At first he took the figure for Flora, but it was Fauna who materialized beside him, stepping out of an orange flash.

Tak could hardly hide his astonishment at seeing her, but Fauna spared him no time. She seized his hand and leaned in close, peering into his eyes. She hovered in midair, her skin glowing with an amber light, and Tak snatched his hand back almost by instinct, as if from fire.

"I need to talk to you, the Juju whispered. Her predatory eyes were unusually wide now, her pupils trembling." Alone, somewhere where no one can eavesdrop on us.

It was hard going. In Juju's world, even the walls and trees had ears. Fauna flung her arms wide, and Tak squeezed his eyes shut against the scarlet blaze.

As bright as a bonfire.

"No one will hear us here."

Tak glanced around, taking in the menhirs that ringed him, and let his gaze come to rest at last on the face of the stone chief. The chief had always regarded him with disapproval; now, it seemed, he despised him with the whole of his cold soul.

"The altar of Juju?" Tak scowled. — Whatever it is, make it quick. I have Death to find.

Under any other circumstances, Fauna would have flared up in fury at being hurried and ordered about. But not today. She gnawed nervously at the nail of her thumb like any ordinary girl beset by worry. And Tak's patience for listening to whatever host of Juju's spirits had assembled to tell him had long since run dry. They always

spouted nonsense, stuffing his hours with idle chatter so that he might miss the most important words of his life.

“Fauna...”

“Luna told us to help you with Tsarad,” she blurted out in a single breath. — She said you could never manage without us, and that you must survive and slay the beast, whatever it takes. So Flora and I came to you.

Tak stood in silence, unable to fathom why she was telling him all this. He knew the sisters had helped him — so what? Was he meant to dash his forehead against the ground before her now in gratitude? No moment could have been worse for it.

“Yes, and we truly believed we were acting for the best.” Fauna circled the altar, wringing her hands, her gaze darting between the menhirs and the sky. — In short… we knew the princess possessed a great deal of mana.

Tak grew wary, but wariness soon gave way to pain.

“She was a princess, after all,” he muttered.

“No, not for that reason.” At last Fauna turned to face him. — She had so much mana because she often visited our realm, because she spent so much time with you, — even now she held back from some quip or jab about it. — The truth is, the supreme family doesn’t have nearly so much mana. The girl simply absorbed it from you.

It was said as though Dzhera had caught something from him.

“And so,” Juju went on with a sigh, — we thought Tsarad might take an interest in her. Interested enough to leave you alone — armed and dangerous. And that you could turn that to your advantage. And that is exactly what happened.

Tak froze, staring at her. Everything that had happened was growing clearer, yet the moment he opened his mouth, Fauna shrieked:

“We never thought she would die! We only meant to keep her in one place, to distract Tsarad from you. Who could have known you would strike him with magic like that!”

She licked her lips quickly, never taking her eyes off him. Her pupil had narrowed to a slit, like a crocodile’s. Her bright red hair bristled into needles and seemed, at moments, to stir of its own accord.

That was what Dzhera’s true killer looked like.

“It was you!..”

“I swear to you, we never meant for her to die!”

Fauna did something the spirit had never done in Tak’s memory. She bowed her head, pressed her palms together, and lifted her hands above herself.

“It was an accident. I swear it.”

She let out a long breath and straightened, regarding him with guilt in her eyes. Something in her face faintly recalled Dzhera — perhaps the way her eyebrows lifted, or how her lips parted just slightly.

Tak drew a deep breath, hoping at least to seem calm and composed on the surface. But how could anyone deceive a Juju — especially in a matter like this?

“So she really died?” he asked, his voice hollow. “Is it true?”

Even if she nodded, he still would not have believed it. It was impossible to believe — utterly impossible.

“By accident,” Fauna repeated. “And she was fortunate her soul wasn’t devoured by Tsarad…”

She said something more, trying to turn the conversation elsewhere, but Tak was no longer listening. He stared down at his feet, at the worn stones of the altar where Dzhera had once walked. It was easier to believe the whole altar had crumbled, that the Jujus had abandoned humankind forever, that half the island had sunk beneath Moana…

Anything but this — that he would never hear his friend's voice again.

"Tak?" Fauna called to him cautiously and came closer. She raised her hand to rest it on his shoulder, then thought better of it. "It's all over now. You slew the beast and saved your tribe. You can go home."

She tried to speak gently, with sympathy — in Flora's manner. But against her will, the words still came out sharp, like the whistle of arrows. It was no fault of hers; her nature was that of wild creatures, not of flowers and grass.

"I must find Death," Tak said stubbornly, refusing to meet her gaze. — I will not return to the village without Dzhera.

Fauna opened her mouth, then shut it again, her brow furrowing. Her skin no longer glowed; the spirit could easily have been mistaken for an ordinary human. Why had she taken such a form, so close to mortal flesh? Did it vex her? Or had it been her own choosing?

"You mean to go to the World of Spirits? Is it worth the risk? Have you forgotten—last time you barely escaped with your life. And look at yourself now: weak, wounded. The spirits would tear you apart before you could draw breath!"

Tak looked into Fauna's fiery eyes and knew he would find no ally in her. He raised his staff higher.

"I don't care. If I don't go now, Dzhera will never leave those lands again."

"But you'll perish yourself, you fool—don't you see that?" Fauna hissed through clenched teeth. For the first time in Tak's memory, alarm flickered in her eyes. — And what good would that do anyone? You can go home—right now, this very moment—and that is exactly what you must do. You are... you are nearly human. You won't manage it.

She laid her hand upon the crystal, barring him from its power.

“You are already living in your own world,” she pressed on, refusing to yield. — You have done everything you were meant to do. People die; it has always been so, and so it will always be. You cannot save them all.

Tak wrenched the staff away in anger, its edge scraping across Fauna’s palm.

“You don’t understand...” he began, and the spirit rolled her eyes.

“Oh, I see right through you! Your human feelings show more plainly than your tattoos.” She pressed her lips together, then muttered, meeting Tak’s eyes: — You’ll need white butterfly pollen for the crossing. Haven’t worked out yet where to find it?

Tak had no chance to reply, and Juju didn’t need one. She touched her fingertips to her lips, then blew something off them with a flick of the hand. Instinctively, Tak raised his arm to shield himself, unsure what she meant to do. But when he looked down, he saw his skin dusted with a fine layer of gleaming, snow-white pollen.

“Oh, Fauna...”

“Run to her, or you’ll be late!” she barked, clapping her hands sharply.

The sound struck him like a blow; darkness veiled his eyes.

Tak found Juju’s Death exactly where the Clairvoyant had promised — near the Judge’s house. As it happened, the skeleton had approached the tower at the very moment Tak reappeared there, returning from the altar. Catching sight of him, the Death rattled his bones with delight.

“Old man! Long time no see! What news from the humans” has everyone stopped dying these days? — He broke off abruptly, taking in Tak’s face and his battered state overall. The skeleton’s own shoulders slumped. — Though, pity for anyone who has. What happened, step-brother?

Juju the Death only looked frightening; it was his name that truly struck fear. A human skeleton draped in a long, flowing canopy of rich purple, he was in fact one of the friendliest and most cheerful of the Jujus. He was short on wits, but if Death had a heart, it would have been the biggest in the whole realm of Jujus. Tak knew that he genuinely loved his wife, the Joy-Killer Juju, as much as a spirit ever could.

Tak gathered his strength to draw air into his chest and spoke:

“I need your help. Dzhera is dead.”

It seemed to him that he had heard these words from somewhere far off, as though they had not come from his own lips. He drew another deep breath, for his body had suddenly stopped breathing on its own, and weakness washed over his head.

It was easier to believe that…

Juju the Death bit the bony tip of his finger and chewed on it. For several seconds there came a hideous clacking and grinding of bone against bone, until at last the spirit spoke:

“I know. A terrible shame. I was so upset, truly I was. But look, Tsarad didn’t devour her, so the princess will rest peacefully in the World of the Dead, free of every care. Give her a lavish funeral, so that…”

“Be quiet!” Tak cried out. It was unbearable to listen to this — from Juju or from anyone. “Do you think I intend to endure this? Death, I came seeking you so you would guide me to the World of Spirits. I will bring Dzhera back.”

The skeleton’s lower jaw dropped, clattering against the vertebrae of his neck. But he quickly pulled himself together.

“Stepbrother, this is a terrible idea,” he hissed, dropping his voice and nearly doubling over. Bony fingers clutched at his robe, twisting the thick fabric. — Last time only a miracle saved you — and do you

remember how much you suffered? If you go now, trouble is bound to find you.

“Oh, really?” Tak flared up. — That’s all I’ve been hearing these past days! “You’ll never beat Tsarad!” “You’ll never kill him!” And now this, too. Of course, I’m terribly flattered that all the Jujus have such faith in me and all that, but maybe I get to decide for myself what I’m going to do? I need to reach the World of the Dead — and as quickly as possible!

“All right, all right, don’t shout,” Death said peaceably, stretching out his hands, palms forward. — I understand. But you do realize that…

“...I need a ghost to cross over, yes. I thought maybe I could ask that Babuzonka the beast killed. She must have been a hundred years old, if not more. But she wasn’t from Pupununu.”

Death regarded him in silence, the living eyes in his skull glowing faintly.

“I haven’t met a single Babuzonka in a very long time. You say Tsarad killed her?”

Only then did Tak grasp his mistake. There was no ghost of Veterishche because the monster had devoured her.

He fell into a sulk. This was the most badly thought-out part of the whole plan, and he felt like weeping at the helplessness of it — separated from Dzhera by some ghost who was next to impossible to find.

“We could try the burial mound,” he offered uncertainly. — Last time, the ancient chiefs guided me through. They’re asleep now, of course, but perhaps someone else still lingers there?

Death pondered for a moment.

“Do you have any dead relatives?”

Tak let out a sharp breath and shook his head. His father was certainly dead — but who knew where he had ended up. Or, rather, this: most likely not even a ghost of him remained, for the Dark One had destroyed him outright. Perhaps he had even fed his soul to Tsarad afterward — why not? Tak considered this for the first time and nearly shuddered with revulsion.

“Then things are far more complicated, said Death, sounding troubled.” The ghost must be powerful enough, belong to your tribe, and ideally be someone you know.

Tak paced in a circle, helpless. Not a single name came to mind — no one who could serve as a guide! He might as well march to the Pupununu graveyard and work his way through the graves one by one.

Indistinct shouts drifted down from the Judge’s Tower. Probably another trial over some poor wretch was going badly. Scarcely any of the Juju had any patience; having lived so long and seen so much, each of them considered himself cleverer than the rest. That was the root of nearly all their quarrels.

“Hey, hey, wait, wait! Death suddenly cried, flailing his arms.” Why, just last night, right around the time of your friend, a sorcerer from Pupununu died. Tleylok.

Tak whipped around. A lump rose in his throat.

“Tleylok?”

“Yes, Tleylok. It’s a slim chance, but what if he agrees to guide you?”

Tak had no time to learn what had become of Tleylok. Dead, finally and fully — and yet somehow Tak still could not bring himself to believe it was forever. He quickly licked his parched lips and tasted salt on his tongue.

“Fine, let’s give him a chance. Excellent — Tleylok will do.” He drew a deep breath, fighting the urge to dwell on how things had ended

with the shaman. “He is powerful, and he hails from Pupununu, wherever that may be. He will be able to guide me. Yes, he will.”

Death waited patiently for him to finish muttering, then said:

“Then prepare to die. Here and now, my stepbrother.”

Chapter 18

Oh, very well, you've worn me down. I'll tell you what the World of Spirits was like when I pulled Loka out of it — but no interrupting. Ow! And pinching is strictly forbidden too…

So, that world resembles Juju's realm, only madder still. Long tables stretch everywhere, laid out as though for the grandest of feasts, and the food upon them never runs dry. Music plays, though the musicians themselves are nowhere to be seen. The air is heavy with the scent of manuka and oranges, and the people do nothing but dance, chat around bonfires, and eat their fill. Lok, of course, remembers nothing, so don't even bother asking him. He was right there among the crowd, eating for two and gawking at the dancing girls — well, you know how he is.

The greatest peril is this: touch nothing on the tables, and do not dance. So much as whistle along with the tune, and it's all over — the World of Spirits will claim you, and there you'll remain forever. Lok was terribly fortunate that I care nothing for dancing and had no appetite. I seized him by the cloak and hauled him all the way to the World's edge. He begged me to leave him behind, drove me off, but I paid him no heed. Mind you, had Dzhibolba not commanded it, I'd never have set foot in that place at all — so our Lok was lucky indeed.

Oh, and beautiful girls tried to bar our way as well, and behind them all the great heroes and chieftains who ever walked the earth called out to us — but I didn't fall for that trick either. With a good kick, I sent Lok's soul flying back into the world of the living, and warned him it was the first and the last time.

Well, now you know where you'll go when you die. Take my word for it.

“It’s a mistake, truly you mustn’t… not with wounds like those… the ghosts will scent living blood, and they will never let you pass… it’s a mistake, truly you mustn’t…”

Death’s voice rang in Tak’s ears like a strange echo, reverberating deep in his bones — now faint, now swelling loud again. He could not see Juju himself; he could see nothing at all, though his eyes stood open. He had not yet crossed into the World of Spirits; he stood at the very border, waiting for the ghost of Tleylok.

So the sorcerer had died after all. Tsarad had slain him, yet his soul lived on.

How would Dzhibolba bear it?

Tak’s heart ached at the thought of his uncle, whom he felt he had not seen in an eternity. If he returned home… no — when he returned home — he would never again be angry with the old man, never quarrel with him again.

“Here he is” he’s come…

Tak saw nothing, but suddenly the voice of Tleylok reached him — it, too, echoed as if through a cavern, swirling about him.

“You again, boy… You’ll never let anyone rest, not even on the other side…” his voice trailed away in a hiss, then rose once more, nearer this time: — You trouble the dead, and you would do well to know that this will not end well…

“Tleylok?” Tak turned his head helplessly from side to side. — I need your help.

He could not tell whether he had truly spoken the words or merely thought them. He felt no movement of his lips, no strain in his throat, no breath passing through his chest. But Tleylok began to laugh. So he had heard him after all.

“Help? The first time we met, you tried to kill me. And now, all of a sudden, you come asking for my aid… Not very bright, are you…”

The voice faded little by little, and silence swelled around him once more.

“Dzhibolba tried to save you.”

If Tak could have managed it, he would have said those words as quietly as possible. Because “tried” always sounds wretched, no matter what you mean by it. And worst of all when you say “tried to save your life.” That sounds about as grim as it gets.

“The old man is good for nothing anymore, came the reply.” His time ended twenty years ago, yet he still refuses to accept it.

Tak racked his brain for something to say in his uncle’s defense without provoking Tleylok further — and then he heard Death whispering in his ear:

“Your tribe has performed all the proper honors for him.”

How very like Pupununu. Fear of angry spirits outweighs personal dislike, and no one wanted a vengeful ghost like Tleylok on their hands.

“Pupununu held a lavish funeral for you all the same, he began, addressing Tleylok, though he had no idea where the shaman was.” They didn’t bury your body outside the village, didn’t burn it like a sheep’s carcass. They laid you in the common burial mound, as one of their own. Tell me honestly — did you deserve that?

Without seeing the shaman’s face, Tak could have sworn he frowned. He felt the old man’s fury on his skin, for evil ghosts are like thin night breezes sweeping down from the raki-fanakenga, chilling you to the bone.

“Your wretched tribe needn’t have troubled themselves, he said at last.” I don’t want their honors or their remembrance. They ceased being kin to me long ago. Even my voodoo dolls were dearer to me than this rabble — especially as it has become under the new chief.

Tak held back the retort that rose to his lips. He could never bring himself to say that Tleylok was his last hope of saving Dzhera.

“But you know,” Tleylok’s voice turned familiar again, insinuating and dangerous, like the hiss of a serpent, — I rather like your idea of going to the World of Spirits. In your condition. For the second time. It’s pure suicide, and I’m curious to see where it leads you. Or rather, how quickly. — A chuckle, barely perceptible—not so much heard as felt, a trembling in the chest. — Very well, boy. I shall be your guide.

Tak could find no words to thank the sorcerer; they would have been wasted on him anyway. He kept silent, and almost at once felt a chill run down his legs. It was like a breeze from the ordinary world—if only there were wind in the lands of the dead. Tak recognized the state of transition; he had felt the same thing five years ago, and his stomach, just as then, knotted sharply.

He recoiled, arms flailing. The ground seemed to dissolve beneath his feet. A ghostly chill clung to his skin, then sank into his body. His lungs went cold, his heart ached and seemed to stop beating. Tak tried to exhale, but nothing came. His throat was parched.

Then he felt bony fingers close around his hand.

“We have arrived,” Death muttered.

Tak knew it. He felt it. Blinking, he finally saw the lands of the dead spread out before him: a dim green field of grass that never stirred in any wind, and all around a dark blue haze concealing everything else.

Fog. Why had he been doing nothing but wandering through fog of late?

He tried to speak, but his body refused to obey at once. With great effort he forced apart his parched lips, peeling his tongue from the roof of his mouth, and rasped:

“Not quite yet…”

This was not the true World of Spirits — only its protective shell, like the hard husk of a coconut. The real world lay hidden beneath it. It was here, right now, right under Tak's feet — yet he could neither see nor hear it. It was hiding, like tender flesh and sweet milk.

Tak could no longer see or hear Tleylok, but the shaman's spirit had to be somewhere close by, on the other side. At the moment of Juju's death, the spirit had given him one last look, and Tak had suddenly understood that he would have given anything for that kind soul to keep him company.

"Good luck, half-brother" you'll surely need it. Oh, and since you're here, don't forget to pass on my greetings to your acquaintances. No one ever returns from this place.

The skeleton gave Tak a light pat on the shoulder in farewell and vanished into the silver gleam of the chasm.

Left alone, Tak struggled to calm himself, for his living body was now screaming with terror, with the conviction that everything about this was very, very wrong. He wasn't ready to be here. Not yet — just as before.

But he had survived; he had endured it all. He could manage a second time — all the more so for Dzhera's sake, not for Lok's. For his sake, Dzhera would have borne it with ease.

Having tried to breathe and failed, Tak simply clenched his fingers into tight fists and pressed onward.

…would never have dated…

…what's wrong with your magic?..

…stop showing off already…

…to make amends for his guilt?..

He had taken fewer than ten steps when several dark, lumbering shapes lunged at him out of the fog. Grunting and squealing, they

bounded forward, sinking heavily onto all fours and swinging their thick tails from side to side.

“Nerbils,” Tak whispered.

And this time it was no curse word. Three full-grown nerbils were bearing down on him, and they were, evidently, hungry.

Dzhibolba described nerbils as dark creatures, and long ago their name had turned into a curse in both the world of humans and the realm of Juju. Everyone seemed to loathe them, and with good reason.

Vexing beasts with elongated snouts, oversized ears, and cruel claws. They could scurry on all fours with their bellies flat against the ground like lizards, or rear up on their hind legs and lash out with their forepaws. Worst of all, they could leap high enough to knock a grown person flat. Nerbils were horribly tenacious, but killing them was not enough. The moment they died, their malevolent ghosts materialized in the air and remained exceedingly dangerous. They would pounce on anyone nearby, often without the victim even noticing. Nerbils did not devour souls as Tsarad did; instead, they tore at the soul with their ghostly fangs, leaving a person feeling worse than any ordinary wound could. A bitten soul takes far longer to heal.

Tak tightened his grip on his staff, with no idea how magic would behave in the World of Spirits—if it would answer him at all. Bare-handed, he simply could not take on the predators. Though, of course, if the magic failed, there was always the option of clubbing the beasts with the pommel…

By the time the first nerbil had all but finished its leap at him, Tak swept his staff in an arc before himself. The magic flared an uncanny silver, scattering into glittering dust. With a howl the creature shrank back, flattening its good ear and drawing in its scorched paws. The other two were already closing in, and Tak swung the staff again, nearly losing his grip on it. No — this was wrong. If he squandered all

his mana, all his strength, now, then not only would he fail to lead Dzhera out; he himself would be trapped here for all eternity.

He straightened, tried once more to draw a breath, and failed once more. The nerbils were circling on every side, but he fought off the panic threatening to swallow him — one of Pupununu's little talents, inherited along with his father's blood. Steady, Tak. Everyone who cared to speak had told him he would never succeed, so it was high time he proved them wrong.

He had to find the Source, not stand about wasting time.

Another flash — but this time the nerbils recoiled less far. Still, it was enough to press forward.

Tak ran, knew he was moving, yet scarcely felt it — scarcely felt his legs at all. The blue haze parted before him, unveiling the same lifeless fields. They stretched away on every side, as far as the eye could reach. Dull grass and a brooding sky. Such was the shell of the World of Spirits.

The nerbils screeched at his heels, but the witless beasts kept colliding with one another, snapping and snarling as they ran, incapable of hunting as a pack, too dim to grasp that they might simply split up.

Tak strained his eyes toward the elusive line where grass met sky, which was emerging from the haze and even seemed to be drawing closer. The source had to be somewhere nearby — last time he had found it almost the moment he arrived. But last time he had simply been lucky, in more ways than one.

The first nerbil was panting quite close, right at his back, but before Tak could turn around, the cursed creature sank its teeth into his ankle. He fell, yet immediately twisted around and brought his staff down on the beast's head with all his strength. The animal sprang away, whimpering plaintively. Tak glanced quickly at his leg. There was no blood, but his foot had certainly gone numb, and he could almost feel,

deep in his heart, particles of his soul being drawn out through a wound invisible upon his body.

Before his companions caught up with him, he hauled himself off the ground in a single jerk and looked around. And that was the only thing that allowed him to notice the feather.

It was standing upright among the lifeless grass. Bright, orange — as if a fiery bird had passed this way. Tak nearly cried out with joy!

He ran past the feather, onward, keeping his eyes fixed on the grass so as not to miss the next marker.

For the feathers will always lead you to your goal.

…we are here because the tribe needs you…

… I'm not a witch!..

…they don't want to get married…

…I'm your friend!..

…not because your friends need you…

...such is the will of Juju...

…your fri…

Tak had passed two more feathers, a green one and a purple one, when a stone arch drifted out of the pale fog. At its base yawned a pit, from which orange-yellow smoke billowed upward.

There they were—the very dents in the nut, the ones you must strike with a cleaver to crack the shell.

Tak made his final lunge, leaping straight through the smoke. The Nerbils roared at his back, then abruptly fell silent.

He landed beyond the arch and staggered. For the first moments, the transformed, unveiled World of Spirits swam and swayed before his eyes. Every color was wrong—dark where it should have been white, a golden sky and grass of purple. But after a few blinks, Tak shook off the illusion, and the ground grew steady beneath him once more.

And all around him, ghosts wandered.

Figures of people, animals, and birds. Some were barely discernible, catching the eye only at the edge of vision. Others seemed almost real, no different from the living. They took no notice of him, nor of one another. The ghosts drifted slowly, faded away, now and then hovering briefly in the air. There were so many spirits that Tak felt, at first, the same timidity he had known the very first time. How would he ever find his friend among them?

This place, too, was crowded with stone arches and bridges, like the World of Dreams and Juju's realm, for all of them were offspring of a single essence. Dreams are the whisper of death, and the immortal kingdom of spirits is this world's land of longing.

The sky hung dark gray, yet spectral silver rays pierced through it, as if from the Moon. A faint white haze creeping along the ground lent the place an even greater airlessness, and a kind of desperate sorrow.

"You took your time getting here."

Tak nearly flinched at the sound of Tleylok's voice. The sorcerer had materialized right beside him, looking as solid as any living man. Only his eyes betrayed him, glowing from within with a pale white light, the pupils all but swallowed up. The Phoenix's feathers burned brighter than they ever had in the real world, swaying gently as though stirred by some phantom breeze.

"So the nerbils didn't devour you after all, the sorcerer went on, favoring him with the familiar smirk Tak had long since grown used to." It seems you've spent your very last crumbs of luck. Still refusing to accept that you'll never leave this place?

Tak made a point of ignoring the specters drifting around him, keeping his gaze fixed on Tleylok alone so as not to provoke him into storming off. He nearly smiled back — and only then did it strike him that he would never see that grin again, from anyone, ever. There would be no one left to blame for half of Pupununu's misfortunes. No

one would ever again turn up out of nowhere on their village's doorstep, bent simply on destroying them.

What is it like, vanishing from the world?

"We'll see about that, old man. Honestly, for me it's hardly more than a stroll. Well then" will you show me the way?

He fought down a wave of weakness and forced himself upright. From the moment he had crossed over to the inner side of the world, he had begun to feel himself dying. The World of Spirits is merciful to the dead — even to the likes of Tleylok. But the instant a living creature wandered in, this place set about draining the life from him. The heartbeat. The warmth. The world lapped the blood from his wounds, licked the beads of sweat from his brow, and had no intention of ever letting go.

Watching the white figures of people and beasts melt into one seamless, glowing silhouette, Tak suddenly realized how much the Spirit World resembled Tsarad. For many reasons.

"I won't show you a thing, the sorcerer muttered, circling him slowly before coming to a halt directly behind his back."

Tak did not turn toward him, unwilling to waste his strength. Tleylok is simply stalling for time so that I grow weaker.

"You will see everything for yourself."

Before Tak could react, Tleylok's cold, weightless palms settled over his eyes. With the calloused pads of his thumbs he pressed against his temples, pushing painfully into the spirals of the tattoo.

"Pupununu, the sorcerer murmured, barely audible." Their signs are on your skin, their blood is in your blood, their names are in your bones. Brothers and sisters.

Tleylok bore down on his skull so hard that Tak nearly tore himself free. Blood thundered in his temples, and the sorcerer's spectral flesh drank in every beat.

“Yes. Now look at them.”

At last he removed his hands, and Tak blinked several times, struggling to grasp what had changed. Then he saw it.

Some of the spirits — both those that already seemed like mere wisps of white vapor and those that still looked quite alive — suddenly revealed their tattoos. Patterns bearing the spiral familiar from infancy glowed around them in vivid colors, like rare flowers in a clearing. On legs, arms, faces, backs, bellies, necks. The ghosts wandered and faded, and the markings vanished along with them.

Tak looked around in bewilderment.

“It will still be hard…”

“And what did you expect, boy?” Tleylok snapped at him. When Tak turned, he saw that the shaman’s tattoos, too, had grown brighter, standing out sharply against his pale skin and encircling his pearl-luminous eyes. — Did you imagine I would murmur a few magic words and the witch would materialize before you out of thin air, hmm?

Perhaps. When Tak had come for Lok, of course, he had had to wander about as well, but the warrior — whether he had sensed someone approaching or was simply a fool — had lingered almost within arm’s reach of the portal. For some reason, Tak felt certain he would find Dzhera here too. Could she truly have made her peace with her own death? Was such a thing even possible?

“Fine,” he muttered, taking his first steps forward. — I’ll find her regardless.

“We shall see, answered the voice behind him with indifference.”

Every step was heavy and slow, as though Tak were wading through a swamp. He tried not to pass through the ghosts, keeping his distance from them wherever he could, and soon realized that the spirits themselves preferred to scatter rather than gather in crowds. He saw

their empty, glowing-white eyes turning to follow him, yet none drew near, none spoke. Perhaps they took him for a newcomer, had not yet heard the beating of his heart, had not noticed how his blood shimmered. Or perhaps they simply did not care.

Tak let his eyes slide quickly over the tattoos, careful not to linger on the people beneath them. They were all his kin, and perhaps he had snared some of them while they still breathed, but there was no time for such thoughts now. All he needed was the familiar coral-colored pattern circling the left eye. He had gazed upon it thousands upon thousands of times, knew it as intimately as his own, and could have picked it out from a single fleeting glimpse.

One of the spirits paused near him as Tak passed. Of course, he glanced at it briefly, then immediately looked away in the other direction. Pupununu, but not Dzhera.

“I know…”

Tak looked at the ghost again. Had he imagined it, or had the spirit actually spoken?

“…whom you… seek…”

The voice was barely audible, so faint it might have been a delusion, light as a hibiscus petal. Tak stopped and turned toward the spirit. Her skin, dress, and hair had already faded to pallor, yet the figure of a woman with a high ponytail could still be made out. A soft lilac spiral wound its way around her right arm, just above the elbow. Tak had never known her in life.

“You know?”

Tak tried to keep his voice low, but against the ghost’s whisper it felt as though he had shouted at the top of his lungs.

The spirit swayed toward him and reached out her hand toward his wound, but Tak quickly stepped back. The ghost let out a barely

audible sound — half a chuckle, half a curse — and waved a hand in a friendly gesture.

"Follow me…"

But Tak held his ground.

"And how am I to know that you know precisely what I'm looking for?"

He knew, in his rational mind, that he shouldn't squander time and strength on a spirit that hardly resembled a human being anymore—yet this way, at least, he clung to some faint hope of help.

The ghost hesitated a moment, then breathed softly:

"Dzhera."

The spirit drifted weightlessly ahead of him, its feet never touching the ground. Tak raced after it with every ounce of strength he had, but his feet sank into the grass, his heartbeat faltered, and before he knew it he could no longer keep to the path—he veered straight through some spirit that had nothing to do with Pupununu.

The ghost seized on him at once, stretching its incorporeal hands toward his chest. At first Tak held out his palms in warning, signaling it to keep its distance, but he quickly realized that this posture would only invite its touch. He flinched aside, and in the same instant something cold slashed across his heart.

He gasped, pressing a hand to his chest, and the ghost of a woman wheeled to face him. Behind Tak stood another spirit, and before his eyes it was growing brighter, as though flesh were gathering upon it. Its hand rested against Tak's back, on the very side where his heart was beating.

"Stay away from me!" he cried out in terror, stumbling back from the ghost. "Don't touch me!"

It was like ordering Juju about or trying to give commands to the Chief. The ghosts had already marked him and were converging from

every direction. They reached out their hands toward him, opened their mouths, and their dead, gleaming eyes fixed on him with greed and cruelty.

Tak tried to summon his staff, but swiftly recalled that magic held no power in this place. None at all.

“Over here!”

His guide broke through to him and seized his hand, as though that alone could help. Tak’s pulse echoed through the spirit’s vague silhouette, and her skin, dress, and hair grew brighter, as if a layer of dust had been washed away. She snatched her hand back at once, but now Tak could pick her out clearly among the other spirits—even those still distinctly visible. Without wasting a moment, the woman turned and began to run, and the ghosts parted before her out of old habit.

And Tak rushed after her in pursuit.

Someone managed to brush him with a hand and steal a fragment of his life. Someone tried to cut across his path. Tak did not swerve, did not squander time and strength on fending them off. It was bound to happen sooner or later, and now he dared not linger in one place—dared not squander time, or his own life.

“This way!”

The stranger glided ahead of him, yet neither her hair nor her dress stirred with motion, and she needed no help from her hands. She needed no effort at all for that flight.

Just like the other spirits.

“They’re everywhere!” Tak cried out, struggling to draw in air, or whatever stood in for air here.

His chest burned, his heart ached, and the only thought left in his head was that everyone had been right—he would never escape this place, with Jera or without her.

“This way! the woman repeated stubbornly, without glancing back at him.” Follow me!

She flew through the archway, and Tak darted after her. Beyond it there were no human ghosts to be seen—only animals—and Tak allowed himself to lean back against a stone pillar for a few seconds, gasping with weakness. No spirit had yet followed them here. Perhaps they had simply forgotten about him, having lost sight of him.

The old ghosts, whom none of the living remembered, no longer possessed memories of their own—only faint, feeble echoes from the past. They were incapable of anything. But those who still knew who they had been in life, those still recalled on feast days—those were far more dangerous. They could hunt him down, for they understood what living meant, and now they longed to return—or merely to feel again what it was like to have something beating inside you.

“We must hurry, the woman whispered, and Tak thought her voice sounded clearer now than before.” They are coming.

She trembled before him, gazing up with her vast snow-white eyes. A short blue dress was cinched at the waist with a ribbon of flowers, and bright green feathers swayed about her neck. All of it was clearly visible now—everything except her face.

Yet before following her again, Tak dared to ask.

“Who are you?” He could not bring himself to voice the question that circled not even in his thoughts, but somewhere near his heart. — You… do you know Dzhera?

At the mention of the name, the ghost stirred from head to foot. She turned toward him, and Tak thought he caught the glimpse of a smile. The woman pressed her hands to her chest.

“My daughter!” she sobbed.

Chapter 19

Silence, you two old fools — quit your cackling! I'll tell you a story as true as any ever told, one that really happened in this world, not in some Nerbils-forsaken corner of nowhere!

Anyway, it was Zariya who told me. Not long after you and I were born, a dreadful drought fell upon the jungle — far crueler than the year before. The cattle perished, the entire harvest withered, and sickness crept through the people. Alisia lost her child, and Itu and Tau's father died. Dzhibolba was helpless, for venturing out to gather oils and nubu was far too perilous, and without tika, the Juju would never answer. Well, no great surprise there.

Then one of the women resolved to beg the Moon for aid herself, without a shaman. And lo, that great protectress of Pupununu appeared. But she set her price for bringing the rain. They always want something in return — forever squeezing some toll out of people... And don't give me that look, Tak; you know it's true.

That woman had to give herself to Tiokai. She bound stones to her hands and feet so the current could not sweep her away, and waded out to the very heart of the river. As luck would have it, the drought had shrunk the river so low it was all but a swamp. She did not drown — she suffocated, swallowed by mud and sand. And the moment she died, a torrential rain came down. The tribe was spared, and so were you and I along with it — we simply don't remember.

Perhaps I'm mistaken, of course, but it seems to me that all our troubles flow from the Juju alone. They rain misfortune down upon us with their own hands, then demand some ruinous price just to set things right again.

Sorry, Tak — nothing personal.

Tak and the queen walked on in silence, almost unhurried. Beyond the arch there were no more people — only the gentle souls of beasts. Tak could not tell whether this was some kind of portal or merely a fortunate turn of events, but he seized upon the respite it offered.

His strength did not return. The World of Spirits kept draining the life out of him — such was the price any living creature paid for treading here. He had to find Dzhera as quickly as possible, before she began to forget her life, and before his own legs gave out beneath him.

He said nothing to his unexpected guide; he did not wish to squander his strength, and besides, he was a little afraid. What could he say to her? That he had slain one of her daughters and never much loved the other? Tak wondered what he would have asked had he met his own father, but only a single question came to mind: what were you thinking back then?!

He had scarcely ever dwelt on his father before. The man's image was vague and blurred — Tak could not imagine the sound of his voice, the way he might have looked at him, what lessons he might have passed on. Aurora, by contrast, he could picture: he had seen her face in the illusions the Dark One and the Shadow of Juju had conjured, heard her voice from the same source, and could well imagine what manner of spirit she had been. Many of the Juju never tired of reminding Tak how powerful, beautiful, and clever Aurora had been — and what a wretched creature her son had turned out to be. So Tak could offer only one observation: he took after his father, all the more so since even the Dark One had remarked upon it.

And the Dark One was the last of the Juju to have known him in person.

Yet Dzhera's mother must have known him too. And she must have seen that fatal likeness as well, if only in his features.

At last Tak made up his mind.

“Ah... forgive me — might I ask you something?”

The ghost of the woman halted and slowly turned toward him. She was still visible, though her form had grown faint and flickering, her features all but impossible to make out. Yet Tak was certain she looked a great deal like Zariya—or rather, that Zariya looked like her. The sisters had always resembled each other, far more than either would have wished, but in their mother’s posture and the way she moved, Tak recognized the elder daughter. Though perhaps Zariya had merely picked up those habits from the queen while she was still alive?

“Of course…”

Straining with all his might to ignore his weakness, Tak stopped and asked carefully:

“Did you know my father?”

He had no idea whether the question was foolish. How much do the souls of the dead concern themselves with the lives of those they leave behind? How deeply are they drawn into them? Dzhera and Zariya’s mother might have forgotten the whole tribe entirely, save for her own family. But before Tak could convince himself of the question’s folly and beg her forgiveness, the apparition repeated, barely audible:

“Of course…”

Tak froze, bewildered by this confession, and the queen went on:

“He was a good man…”

Then, as though after a moment’s reflection, she added:

“My friend…”

She turned and drifted onward, a little faster than before. Tak, gathering his wits, hurried after her, forgetting his weakness and the ache in his chest. He had heard something—just a little, but surely that was better than fifteen years of silence.

Tak struggled to keep pace with the spirit, yet he knew he was growing weaker and slower with every passing minute. Everything

before his eyes kept dissolving, veiled in a hazy film. His heart beat heavily but swiftly, and it seemed already worn with weariness.

The Ghost paused, waiting for him, and then said softly:

“We must make haste… while you are still alive…”

“She is here,” whispered the Queen, halting beside the hill. “Just as though… she were alive.”

Tak craned his neck, searching for Dzhera, but nothing stirred around him—only a pair of white antelopes, which from a distance resembled Tsarad, grazing out of habit, though they no longer had any need to.

“Make haste,” the woman added, turning to Tak.

“But where is she?” he murmured, straining to catch even a glimmer of the transparent spirit, even the faintest white wisp.

“She is hiding, as all daughters do when they are upset,” the Queen replied quietly—and it was the longest, most intricate sentence Tak had heard from her since they first met. “Find her. She is here.”

And it was in that very instant that Tak felt fear for the first time—genuine fear. It was nothing like the dread he had known before Tsarad, nor was it fear for himself. Meeting the Ghost of Tleylok, entering the Spirit World—all of that was nothing. But meeting the soul of the friend he had slain, a soul that perhaps had already begun to forget him—that was truly terrifying. He had no idea what to expect.

“Thank you,” he said, turning to the Queen; and bowing his head, pressing his palm to his chest, he repeated: “My deepest thanks for your help.”

He would gladly have knelt before her, but he feared that once down, he would never rise again. Yet the Chief’s wife was not proud. She reached her hand toward his face and, without touching his skin, let her fingers drift along his cheek.

“Take care of her.”

Oh, if only he could manage it—he would watch over Dzhera like the finest of brothers, whether she wished it or not!

While her mother's soul lingered in one spot, Tak made his careful way toward the hill, his excitement sweeping away all thought of weakness and pain. The ghosts of animals drifted apart the moment he drew near: Fauna's creatures cared nothing for whether he was alive or dead — they had never clung to their lives and their kin as fiercely as people did.

Rounding the hill, Tak steeled himself for the sight of Dzhera beyond it. Even so, the sight of her shook him.

The younger princess looked precisely as she had in life — no glow, no hovering in the air, her skin not the least bit translucent. She sat with her back to him, bent over something in the grass, and the picture felt so natural it might have been their native jungle, near the village. In the World of the Living.

Tak tried and failed to fill his chest with air, and soon abandoned the attempt.

"Dzhera?"

His voice rang far too loud for this dead place. The princess whipped around over her shoulder, and Tak flinched at the sight of her two hollow, white eyes. Like those of every ghost here.

Dzhera was dead. Like them.

"It's me, Tak." He stayed rooted to the spot, holding himself back from running to his friend and taking her in his arms. She was a ghost too, and she would drain away what little of his life remained. — You… you do remember me, don't you, Dzhera?

She rose to her feet, staring at him without a blink. The tattoo around her eye glowed a soft pink, yet for some reason it now struck Tak as something more like a scar or a burn — something… not right.

“I came for you, Dzhera,” Tak went on, his voice breaking. — I will get you out of here. We’ll go back home, to the World of the Living, and everything will be well. I killed Tsarad. Nothing threatens us any longer. We’ll go home, we…

He bit his tongue in astonishment as Dzhera lunged toward him. She hovered right beside him, almost touching him, yet Tak felt neither living warmth nor spectral cold emanating from her.

“You… you do remember me?” he asked softly.

This was what he dreaded above all else — not being trapped here before his time, not perishing at the hands of ghosts, but realizing that he had come too late. That Dzhera was dead. Truly dead, once and for all, for all eternity…

Slowly, Dzhera laid a hand on her chest, where her heart was supposed to beat.

“It was you… you did this to me…” she answered, barely above a whisper.

She frowned in that familiar way, her hands clenching into fists, but Tak did not retreat from her. He chose to read a good omen in it — she remembered what he had done to her, she had not yet forgotten her old habits — and that was a small comfort.

“Yes,” he admitted truthfully. — I did. But I will set everything right. I will take you out of here, back to your father, to our home… Come with me, Dzhera.

She hesitantly stretched out her hand to him, and Tak took it without a moment’s delay.

His palm burned as though seared by fire, and the pain lanced sharply through his heart. He held his breath, striving not to reveal how much it hurt, then gently withdrew his hand. But that fleeting touch was enough. From within, Dzhera’s eyes flashed with warm light.

“You came for me,” she whispered, her eyes never leaving him. “And you’re not dead!”

Tak smiled back at her, forgetting the pain and the weakness. It felt as though he hadn’t seen Dzhera in long, long years. He doubted he would be able to leave her side again any time soon.

Once we’re out of here.

“Come on.”

“He turned, searching for her mother with his eyes, wondering what she would feel—even as a ghost—upon seeing her daughter. But the queen was nowhere in sight. Instead, souls were drifting over the neighboring hill, and their numbers were growing by the minute.”

“We have to hurry,” Tak said, trying to conceal his fear, but his heart, still alive and feeling, clenched with dread. “I can’t linger here. Come, let’s go.”

“As she had done hundreds upon hundreds of times before, Dzhera followed him without question. Tak hastened away from the hill, struggling to recall where the arch lay—the one through which the queen had led him. And still the people kept coming, keep coming, though none of them yet understood which way to turn.”

Dzhera seemed to have forgotten what had happened to her. She ran lightly at his side, though she could have soared through the air. Her face was intent, her movements sure and calm—as if they were not walking the land of the dead at all, but…

In that same instant, Tak noticed two things. The souls had begun streaming toward them, drawn by activity so unlike anything the dead had ever known. And the gates of the portal before him—blocked by a tall, unnaturally luminous ghost.

He turned to Dzhera to point out the arch, but the first spirit had already reached him, plunging its hands into his chest.

His legs buckled, and Tak dropped into the frost-stiffened grass. His throat seized so tightly he feared he would never draw breath again, air or no air. Beneath the mad hammering of blood in his temples and the shrill ringing in his ears, he caught only fragments of Dzhera cursing the wretched ghost — and then she began driving the others off, sparing no choice words; thankfully, her father was not there to hear it.

Seizing on the pause, Tak jerked himself up from the ground, only to slump straight back down. His legs had turned to stone, and the dead cold kept creeping through his body. Beneath the invisible bite of the nerbils, his life was draining away as freely as water through a cracked pot. He could no longer hear his heartbeat — only feel it twitching — and his blood seemed to have grown colder still.

“There are too many of them!” Dzhera shouted. — We have to get away! Tak, on your feet, now!

How absurd it would be to die here and now, after crossing nearly the whole World of Spirits, finding Dzhera, and meeting her mother! Furious with himself, Tak tried to rise but managed only to get onto his knees. His hands would not obey him, and a dark haze swam before his eyes. He could no longer make out the spirits, nor Dzhera herself, and the sounds around him grew muffled. His head spun, his throat was locked so that he could not breathe, even if there had been any air here at all.

Tak made one last attempt. He braced his palms against the ground and pushed — and fell flat on his chest, face down in the dirt. The cold and the darkness had become so overwhelming that, for a moment, consciousness slipped away from him entirely.

“Get up!” Dzhera’s voice came again, and at once he realized she was more frightened than angry now. — Come on, I’ll cover you!

“Go on without me…”

He couldn't tell whether he was speaking aloud or only in his mind, but there was no time to puzzle that out now.

"Tleylok… will bring you back…"

Tak wasn't sure it would work, but perhaps the Death of Juju would come to her aid? He seemed to recall having once heard that a living soul could linger in the World of Spirits in place of a dead one — though perhaps that was merely what he wanted to believe now.

"What?" Dzhera exclaimed, that familiar note of exasperation creeping into her voice: what a blockhead! — And leave you here? Are you out of your mind? Get up, Tak! Come on, come on!

Fail her? Abandon her all over again? Surrender? Tak clawed at the ground with his fingers, trying to lift himself even a little, but he knew perfectly well he couldn't even rise to his knees. He no longer felt the push of his heart, and the pounding had faded from his temples.

Anger gave way to fear. Tak opened his eyes and, with effort, fixed his gaze on his friend's dark-pink mop of hair, which even here, in the lands of the dead, glowed as brightly as in the World of the Living. Everything else around her kept dimming and whirling.

"I can't," he whispered helplessly, barely hearing his own voice. — I've been here too long…

Dzhera touched his hand, and his fingers went numb in an instant. She noticed and drew her hand back.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry…" she fought to keep her voice from trembling. — Try to get up again. The spirits no longer come near you.

"Because they take me for one of their own."

"I won't leave without you," she repeated stubbornly, sinking to her knees beside him.

Tak saw her pale, pupil-less eyes widen. He saw, too, how desperately she wanted to touch him — not merely to feel living warmth, but because the habit had grown so deep in her. She was accustomed to

laying a gentle hand on his shoulder, his back, his elbow — a touch they hardly noticed anymore, yet it soothed them both. Now all she had left were words. And words could not hurt him.

“We began this together, and together we will see it through,” she said. — If I walk away alone, what will I be without you? How could I live knowing you stayed behind? Tak, look at yourself — you couldn’t endure it, and the same would happen to me, you know it would! We never abandon each other!

Tak fixed his gaze with all his remaining strength on her bright hair, willing it not to vanish into the darkness as everything else had. Inwardly he begged her to keep speaking, never to fall silent, lest he sink into that silence himself. It was the only thing that could still hold him here, a little while longer.

“Except for that day” the day I betrayed you and left you all alone… — he murmured.

“Yes. Except for that day.”

She pressed as close to him as she could and lowered her head to the ground to look into his eyes. Tak almost believed he could feel her breath. The freckles, the scratch on her cheek — everything about her still belonged to the living Dzhera, not yet worn away or forgotten by time.

“But you came back,” she added softly, still echoing that long-ago conversation of theirs. — You would never truly abandon me.

Tak could no longer make out her words. He ceased to feel his body. He no longer heard his own heart beating.

Perhaps dying wouldn’t be so terrible? He would never make another foolish mistake, and no one would ever scold him again. He would never again feel pain or frailty, dread or fear. He would stay here with Dzhera, forever and ever, and the two of them would remain teenagers for all eternity.

Perhaps it wouldn’t be bad at all...

“TAK!” Dzhera cried out in a voice unlike her own, and he flinched, feeble. — Don’t close your eyes! Tak, look at me, breathe! Don’t leave me, Tak!

It stung that she was frightened for him, furious with him over his weakness. That he had failed her so utterly.

But there was nothing left he could do.

Tak died.

...you’re liked for being unlike Tak...

...I love you, but we can’t be together...

...it’s your fault, you stupid, rootless...

...it isn’t the tribe that serves the shaman, but...

...you ruin everything, always...

...go away...

...farewell, Tak...

“Will you stay right here? Right before the gates?”

Tak realized, with astonishment, that he could hear again. He tried to open his eyes, and found it surprisingly easy — just as it had been in the World of the Living. But at once he squeezed them shut again.

Juju was standing nearby, and her radiance, after the pale World of Spirits, was almost too bright to bear. After blinking a few times, Tak opened his eyes and pushed himself up on his arms, studying the spirit.

“Luna Juju? What are you doing here?”

His body still betrayed him at every turn, yet the presence of Pupununu’s protectress seemed to lend him strength—and, with it, a flicker of hope of escaping this place. Dzhera settled beside him and, forgetting herself, laid a hand on his shoulder. A jolt of cold shot straight to his heart, and Tak flinched despite himself. Dzhera snatched her hand back and drew away hurriedly.

“Someone begged my forgiveness, desperate to make amends,” Luna answered softly, leaning toward Tak. Her gentle face glowed with the same warmth and care it always bore, and her violet eyes gazed down tenderly. “And then someone else... summoned me from Pupununu itself, commanding me to bring her sister home safe and sound. But I did not come only for that. I was worried about you.”

Tak said nothing, only looked at her, and Luna reached out her hand. The instant his fingers touched her soft skin, a surge of vigor coursed through him—as though, in the blistering height of the dry season, someone had offered him cold, fresh water to drink. Dzhera sprang to her feet right after him and shouted furiously into the spirit’s face:

“Where have you been all this time? Why did you let Tau be killed? Why did you let Tak come here?!”

There are things even the Death of Juju cannot change.

In answer, Luna of Juju extended her other hand to her and offered gently:

“I will lead you out of this place. Come with me.”

The dead did not dare approach Juju, even though they had nothing left to lose. Tak walked beside her, no longer able to make sense of what was happening around him. Had Fauna and Zaria persuaded Luna to help him? And had she truly listened? It felt like wandering through a dream, and a foolish, flickering hope even crossed his mind—that all of this really was a dream. A bad, drawn-out nightmare.

Something jogged his memory and he glanced back, but among the faceless souls he could not find the one who had helped him find Dzhera.

Perhaps one day he would tell her about it. Tell her what her mother had been like.

“And one more thing,” Luna said as they reached the gates, “Tleylok managed to slip away in the confusion. He has fled to the World of the Living. I’m afraid you’ll have to endure that sorcerer for a long time yet.”

Tak had no attention to spare for such matters now. He could feel life on the far side of the chasm, and his heart began beating painfully fast with the longing to be there as soon as possible.

But just before the portal, Luna stopped and turned her head toward Dzhera.

“The crossing will be hard,” she warned. “You will have to hold Tak’s hand—he will share part of his vital energy with you. I hope,” she went on after a pause, “that you will both survive the passage. But my daughter’s mana and the elder princess’s ofind will lend you strength. Never forget this.”

Dzhera’s weightless, cold fingers closed gently around Tak’s wrist, and he did his utmost not to show how much it hurt—how it chilled his chest and set his head spinning. It was fine. He would give her all the energy she needed, even if it broke him.

Luna Juju broke suddenly into a smile as she looked at them, and squeezed Tak’s hand all the tighter. In her face he could now discern at once the features of tender Flora and of reckless Fauna, and Tak had no idea what to expect from her.

“That was one of the maddest and most beautiful human things I have ever witnessed,” she whispered. “Never do it again. Not even my daughter’s tears and the princess’s together would be enough to drag you back and forth.”

And she stepped into the chasm, drawing them along with her.

“…I can’t believe we were in the realm of…”

…if this isn’t Zaria, then…

…don’t worry about me…

…you mustn't lose…

…I would never have traded you for…

…I always loved him…

Tak and Dzhera collapsed into the grass, and for the first few moments could not remember how to breathe. The cold was such that a thin, transparent crust formed over their bodies, though it soon melted into water. Everything around them seemed excessively hard and real —painful, yet tangible. Alive.

Unnameable stars glittered merrily overhead. A warm breeze from the tonga-fanakenga caressed their skin and tangled their hair. The night was as hushed and still as in the World of Spirits, yet here it breathed with life.

"Are you all right?" Tak wheezed, straining to lift himself on his arms—or, at the very least, to roll his limp body onto its side. That much was all he could manage. "Are you… are you alive?"

His fingers found Dzhera's hand in the air — cold and damp, but unmistakably flesh and blood. Tak nearly wept with relief, clasping her wrist tightly, scarcely able to believe he could feel a pulse beneath his fingers. His friend lay beside him, sunk in the grass, her thick, beautiful hair spread loose and tangled among the stems.

"It felt like some strange, terrible dream," she whispered, barely audible, staring blankly through him. Slowly, her fingers tightened around his in answer, and she gave a soft sigh. — I wish I could never go back there again.

Tak moved closer until his nose nearly brushed her hair. Dzhera's eyes were no longer that blind white; the familiar green of her irises seemed all the more lovely for it. Her skin was tanned, and the freckles remained exactly where they had always been. But the wounds were gone — not a single scratch marked her. As if that blinding, horrific explosion had never happened. As if Tsarad had never existed at all.

The claw marks the beast had left on his own body, however, had not faded.

“Tleylok said much the same,” Tak remarked.

A faint smile touched Dzhera’s lips — no more than a twitch at the corners of her mouth.

“And he will keep plotting against us again…”

“…and we will stop him again…”

“…and he will curse us again.” Dzhera sighed and edged closer to Tak, pressing her left shoulder against his chest. — And so it will go on, for all eternity.

Her voice trailed away, as though she had just finished recounting a long and dreadful legend that would nonetheless remain only a legend. Tak lifted his gaze from her and looked upward once more at the stars. How soon would dawn come? And where on earth were they now?

His thoughts turned to Kiko and Loka, who had most likely set off for the village—or perhaps were still waiting for them at the campsite by the Forgotten Temple. He thought of the Chief, storming and raging at the discovery that his daughter had vanished. And he thought of Zaria, who had swallowed her pride and her resentment toward Juju and turned instead to Luna.

How on earth had she learned what had happened?

“Dzhibolba!” Tak realized, and the ache of longing for his uncle flooded his heart once more. Did the old man know that his former student still lived? Sooner or later their paths were bound to cross again, for no matter how far the sorcerer wandered from his native tribe, fate always drew him home.

Tak tried not to think—tried not to worry, just now, about Pupununu. Very soon they would return there, to their kin. Very soon now. But for the time being…

“I don’t know about you,” Tak murmured, shifting carefully to get more comfortable without disturbing his companion, “but I’m utterly exhausted. If I close my eyes, then… I don’t know… I won’t wake until the moon goes down.”

“And I’ll keep you company,” Dzhera mumbled drowsily, without opening her eyes. “We can go back to Kiko and Loka later. Come home later. Let’s just sleep for now, while we’re here and Tsarad isn’t.”

“How did you… say his name?”

“Oh, it’s easy.”

Tak glanced once more at the bright stars gazing straight down upon them and tried to recall their names, but could not. Instead, he remembered something else.

Summoning his last strength to fight off sleep, he raised a hand and blew across his fingertips. Two tiny yorbols—faint and diminutive beside Juju—lifted from his fingers and darted ahead, hastening to Dzhibolba to tell him not to worry: he and Dzhera were alive and well, and would soon be home.

Then he bowed his head, pressing his forehead to the princess’s, and at once fell asleep.

And no nightmares troubled them ever again.

Chapter 20

I don’t know what they told you here before I arrived, but take an old man’s word for it, my boy: Tak is to blame for everything that happened.

Who brought Juju’s disfavor down upon the tribe? It was he who drew that unnameable monster upon us. He is the reason we endured six days of torment without a decent night’s sleep! And it was he, and he alone, who cost us every last sheep — but worst of all, he cost us Tau. Remember this. Remember the misfortunes that rained down upon us because of that shaman. Mark my words — he will be the ruin of this whole cursed tribe.

Yes, of course, it was he who slew the monster. The war party came home puffed up with pride, like an overripe mango. They imagined themselves heroes, never once sparing a thought for what we endured while awaiting their return! They might as well have driven pigs into the jungle to flush the beast out.

And the most shameful part of all — the younger princess came back with them. One glance is enough to see that something is amiss. Wherever that pink-haired witch, the one who once made an entire tribe vanish, chooses to appear, some sort of nerbilsina is sure to follow. Everyone has long known that she bent the shaman to her will, and now the two of them do precisely as they please.

And wouldn’t it have been proper if the elder sister had kept order — with the mother gone, she might have given the girl a good scolding. But that fool threw her arms around her sister’s neck, and then clung to Loka as though he were her lawful husband. To be sure, everything is forgiven the High Family — but if only you knew how things were under the old chief…

The monster has been destroyed — thank Juju for that! We'll finally get some sleep, but will Tau ever know peace again? Has anyone stopped to consider that? Mark my words, there's still trouble brewing.

And do you know, my dear boy, what else Tak managed to do on his journey?

He freed Tleylok from the World of the Dead — the sorcerer of Tleylok, cursed by Pupununu. For deeds like that, the tribe ought to have banished the shaman himself! But the current chieftain is good for nothing but empty threats and mindless grumbling.

So for now, stay alert — keep your eyes open and your ears pricked. One day Tleylok will return, and then Tak will get what he deserves.

Now off to bed with you, and may the Moon grant you sweet dreams, by Juju's grace.