

Once Upon a Journey ♦ III

The Day the Rains Came



SMSMITH

While on life's journey—bear in mind,
many things are not as they appear.

~ Seecha ~

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Dedicated in memory of Travers & Belle

In most instances, fantasy ultimately returns us
to our own now re-enchanted world,
reminding us that it is neither prosaic
nor meaningless, and that how we live
and what we do truly matters.”

~ Michael Dirda ~

Fairy tales to me are never happy, sweet stories.
They're moral stories about overcoming
the dark side and the bad.

~ Joe Wright ~



Most stories of the *Once Upon a Journey* series take place in a mystical suzerain known, from ancient days, as Noo. Noo was founded by wandering survivors after a great cataclysm. *The Day the Rains Came* is the story of that cataclysm.

SMS ~ 2013

Journey ♦ III ~ *The Day the Rains Came*

A prophesied cataclysm brings not just the upending of mountains, but a great schism in a culture of silence and privilege.



Once Upon a Journey series:

- I *The Wren & the Raven*
- II *A Prince to Crown*
- III **The Day the Rains Came****
- IV *Journey to Welkindorn*
- V *Belle of the Ballroom*
- VI *The Pelican's Gift*
- VII *The Princess, the Frog, & the Stranger*

All coming in 2013



Engraving of a coin from old Wzammī
depicting a krizen pillar. These pillars
gave off light and heat
along city streets.

The Day the Rains Came

The house of Gwinn turned seven years the day the rains came to the land of Wzammi for the first time in all its history. Always before, ground mists had risen up and bathed the roots of living things and replenished the wells, so there was never any lack. But from the days of the house of Gwinn, a creeping strangeness had come into the land. Sometimes the ground mists came and sometimes they did not. Sometimes they left vast, muddy pools where before there had been but dampness. And more and more they did not come at all, except in short seasons against a spreading dryness.

It was alarming at first, but then the Wzai people became accustomed to the confusion of

the ground mists—even to jest of it as they set about carving out channels and cisterns to conserve what had once come without thought or strategy. But the day the rains came, all jesting ceased as they fled in terror from the flooding, broken sky.

And it was not just a broken sky. The ground had suddenly moaned and shuddered; then quaked and pitched for what seemed an endless duration. Some would later claim to see in night visions how the entire south-half of their palace city had fallen into a yawning chasm.

Many would come to remark how incredibly fortuitous it was that the calamity came on the day of Special Session. That was the annual day of gathering of the Great Fathers of Wzammi, organized to recognize their own achievements; and thereafter to give special hearing to thorny cases that had not been resolved within the mandated time.

It was this gathering at the king's palace that accounted for the strange mix of survivors. On

the one hand, entire wealthy families had come to witness the Great-Father ceremonies; on the other, suffering families had come to lend silent support to the resolution of their thorny cases.

The day had begun with foreboding gloom. Almost every soul remarked on it; and almost every soul who had to venture out wished they could have remained at home. The yellow-tinged air felt tinder dry, static, tense, as though awaiting a spark of something; as though it had a mouth—open, gaping, and gagging to swallow, but parched beyond function. But the Special Session was not an event to be postponed and so the families had gathered. It was the thing that saved their lives.

Indeed, many who were expected to attend did not, believing their excuse would prove unique and sufficient, not realizing how many others had devised the same. But no one would ever know. None of their apologies would ever be presented.

At first, the Session attendees did not know the sky had fissured in a thousand places. They felt only the sudden paralysing heaving of the ground. It was so abruptly violent not a soul could stand—all instantly levelled: rich and poor, old and young, wise and foolish by a single, all encompassing vulnerability and terror.

Yet, incredibly, by some miracle, the palace clave together, but only just. When the endless shuddering ceased, the terrified body saw the immediate peril and rushed together, shepherd-ed under the powerful, commanding voice of their king. He was an old man and never had anyone seen him take such command, but they followed in stumbling, terrorized rush—terrorized by tottering pillars behind them and then, by a torrential sky above. Save for the old king's thundering command, none, but one, would have mustered the courage to step forward into the utter, blinding chaos.

All around, had they the presence to see, they would have discerned heaps of rubble. Not a

thing standing but a tottering palace and a few krizen pillars. In their panic, they saw nothing. The deluge of water proved a double curtain against their vision.

Somehow—though no one comprehended it—their aging king led them up the mountainside into a great, high cavern where they huddled, trembling and weeping. In the past, this cavern had been a forbidden place because of perilous shafts and tunnels, though many had, at one time or other in their youth, managed furtive exploration. To have this hazardous hollow their only refuge was devastating. It seemed incomprehensible. More so, to consider there were maybe two-hundred survivors, at most, from their prosperous city-state.

Their old king tried to speak in calming tones, as the Fathers of the Great Council, in whispered, angry session, sought some cause of blame for their shattered world. Tens of thousands, they guessed—they knew—to be dead; but for now,

many argued, the concern of the Great Fathers had to be only, *only* for those huddled in this uncertain shelter. It was an acrimonious, heated discussion, but in the end, there seemed no better choice than to endure as best they could.

As the storm-ravaged night descended with no abatement from the flooding skies, the pangs of hunger and the cries of suffering children began to fill the cavern. If only someone had thought to bring the sacred Yerben was the silent accusation of every mind, but in the panicked chaos, no one had. In truth, until this catastrophe, those legends of a sacred, sustaining food had seemed alien to a prosperous Wzammi. Thus, that vessel of antiquity, with its strange inscription promising measureless supply, had come to rest in the museum wing of the king's great house. There, it had served a curious focus for tourists and touring school children.

That is not to say the Wzai were unbelievers. At one time or other, most had uncorked the

strange vessel and gazed into its empty interior, yet come away convinced it would give as promised when, if ever, the time came.

In the compelling knowledge that such a time had come, the people trembled as Great Father-grand of Mekiin, eldest of the Great Council, stepped forward. They knew the dreaded selection procedure, always employed to compel acts of danger or drudgery, was about to commence; and from the sounds of the mad world without, none doubted the awful dangers that retrieving the sacred Yerben would entail, if it were even possible.

Great Father-grand of Mekiin climbed upon a large stone as he prepared himself to speak. "As voice for the Great Council, I, Great Father-grand of the Great House of Mekiin, invoke selection by krizen," he said.

There was no need to say more. All knew how it was done. With tremulous hand, every father or father-to-be, save for the Great Fathers, unclasp his light- and warmth-bestowing krizen

from its cord about his neck, and gave it into the hand of a Great Father. In times past, each polished pendant of quartz was placed into the pouch of selection, and into that pouch, the king, as balance- and power-check to the Great Council, would reach for the one whom the Deos would choose. But like the vessel of Yerben, no one had thought of the pouch of selection, so a small heap was made upon a child's cloak and drawn up to simulate a pouch. Therein the king reached. All breath seemed suspended as the old king withdrew his hand and opened it—to the indescribable relief of all but the house of Gwinn.

"Am I a fish that I can breath water?!" father of Gwinn cried. "Or a king that I should die for this people? I say, let the king show himself in this. He has no little children. He has but an old wife and grown sons and few remaining years. Let him defy these sky waters, if he be our king."

"The choice fell to you of the house of Gwinn, and not to the king," the eldest of the Great

Council intoned. "That is the way of Wzammi. That has always been the way, and it shall always be the way."

"Do not tell me the ways of Wzammi," father of Gwinn cried. "This sky sea has changed everything. If we are to be as fish, let he who is king prove us how."

"I would if I could," the old king said, "but the truth is, I am too old. How I got us here, I do not know; only that my strength is utterly gone. My legs tremble—nay, my whole body—even as I speak. I am sorry. I am too old and weak to do what must yet be done."

"Well, I am too young," cried father of Gwinn. "And my children too, that I should die in this rain."

At his words, the people's mouths dropped open and they stared, stunned-eyed at father of Gwinn. They stared because the word *rain* was a foreign, forgotten word in Wzammi, heard for the first time but seven years previous when an ancient speaker had appeared and prophesied

of water from the skies. All of Wzammi had laughed at such absurdity. There had never been water from the sky! A thing called rain! And in their scoffing, they had driven the ancient one out of their land, chanting and mocking and casting stones. Many had flung Wzammi's red and black soils upon themselves and each other in a frenzied parade of ridicule and undulating bodies—waving their hands and garments at the sky, crying, "Rain, rain, unseen, rain, Wash away these stains in vain." But after the ancient one was cast out, that alien word had been entirely forgotten.

Except father of Gwinn had not forgotten—for had not Gwinn been born on that strange, prophetic morning? Had not mother of Gwinn written all things down in her book of memories? Yet it seemed that no other remembered that ancient seer's word until it fell once more from the lips of father of Gwinn.

At last, Great Father of Piliam stepped forward to speak. He was a powerful leader amongst the

Wzammi, for like all Great Fathers, he had come to his entitlement as a firstborn son with a first-born son. But sadly, typically, like many of the Great Fathers of late, Great Father of Piliam had become prideful and boastful—especially before father of Gwinn.

This had not always been so, for scarce ten years previous, these two had been fine friends as firstborn in their Great Houses. In those days, father of Gwinn had been called Telamun, and Great Father of Piliam had been called simply, Piliam.

These fine friends had even married within days of each other, precisely on their twenty-third birthdays as was the custom—to take upon themselves the name “father-to-be”; and to commence their earnest petitions for firstborn sons to preserve their names and their Great Houses.

But the mighty prayers of the Great House of Telamun had come to naught for only he of the Great House of Piliam was blessed in the birth of a firstborn son. Thus did father-to-be of

the Great House of Piliam receive forevermore the name "Great Father of Piliam." And the one, once called Telamun, in the unspeakable misfortune of twin daughters, lost his name forever.

He would have borne forevermore the name "father-to-be," save that two years into his loss, he received a new name in the birthing of a son. But this first son, being a third child, could not endow his father with the title, Great Father, nor even with a place in the Great Council. And it was, by that council's decree that this first son, third child should be called Gwinn, the first of the house of Gwinn. It was a common house that would never find greatness, for only in the birth of a son firstborn of a firstborn could a Great House begin. Such was the law and the way of Wzammi.

Thus it was that Great Father of Piliam could not forget the honour that the Deos had done in giving him a firstborn son to preserve his name and Great House, so whenever he spoke to one of a lesser house, it was as with a barb.

"Let me say to you, father of Gwinn—whose son is not a firstborn," Great Father of Piliam said, pushing his way forward. "Let me say, that our king, Great Great Father-grand of Bekkos and Bekkor, is doubly protected from performing what may be a mission of death. The Deos favour whom they will and choose whom they will. Thus, you will go and bring us the Yerben. And you will test this new world and tell us of its nature and of its endurance."

Great Father of Piliam paused to turn a scanning eye upon the huddled throng. "And I further say," he continued in commanding tone, "that if, in further council, we discover the cause of this disorder; and if it falls to trespassers of our law; and if that trespass is so grievous that the Deos cannot be appeased in this land, then we shall cast out the iniquitous trespassers, and thereafter pass down through the corridors of these mountains into a new and promising land."

Father of Gwinn, in his fright, said something he did not entirely wish to say. "Piliam,"

he blurted out, "are you a father of moles that you speak so?"

In those words, another stunned silence descended, for never before had a common one spoken such disrespect to a Great Father. But then, never before had father of Gwinn been so afraid. In such fear, he counted a stoning death better than venturing into the terrifying unknown of their now demented world.

The shocked silence was broken by the voice of Great Father-grand of Dergon, the appointed scribe and keeper-of-memory of Wzammi. "I have been searching memory," he said, "and I must lay witness against this house of Gwinn. Seven years ago was this house born, in the very hours of a stranger's coming: in the very day the ground mists commenced their confusion. And were we not warned already against this house, two years prior to its beginning: in the birth of sister of Gwinn twin-first—she who speaks not and hears not and sees not. Is it not clear? Can the verdict be any more sure?"

And she, twin-first, of whom he spoke, stood silent, unhearing and unseeing because she had been born thus: a child whose world came through the palms of her hands and the touch of her fingers; a child who was feared by all save those of the house of Gwinn. For nine years, they had led her, protected her, and taught her all things by an invented writing into her hands.

"Is it not clear?" repeated Great Father-grand of Dergon pointing first at Gwinn, and then at the child that many called the un-one. "Can our verdict be any more sure?"

The survivors of Wzammi stared and brooded in confused silence. "Aye, aye, aye" some with public voice began to chorus. But the king, being old and tired, cried above the beginning fray. "What is the verdict? What is so clear?" And everyone fell silent.

"What is the verdict? What is so clear?" the old king cried again. "Speak up, Great Father of Piliam. What is the verdict?"

Like all others, Great Father of Piliam was not

yet sure what was so clear. "O King, I think only the eldest elders should speak in this matter," Great Father of Piliam said as his face flushed red.

"Great Father-grand of Mekiin, then speak you," growled the old king. "What is the verdict? What is so clear?"

"In deepest regard, O King, I think he who has memory should be the one to explain," Great Father-grand of Mekiin hastily replied.

All eyes turned to the keeper-of-memory, Great Father-grand of Dergon. His face scrunched about as his memory churned to envision sufficient cause. At last he spoke, "Why surely, O King, is it not clear this trespass is grave indeed? Perhaps so weighty it should not be spoken openly before this assemblage?"

"No, it is not clear," cried the old king. "But the law is—that there shall be no secrets in Wzammi. None. Not one. Therefore, speak."

The keeper-of-memory closed his eyes and sighed in relief. "O King, your forever wisdom

has made clear the trespass—that one amongst us harbours a hideous secret such as to bring upon us this chaos and this dreadful darkness. Is it not clear?" said Great Father-grand of Dergon.

"Speak it out," thundered the old king in frustration, "and be clear about it."

"I can only s-say," stammered Great Father-grand of Dergon, "that the unspeakable secret is that ..., that ...," He paused closing his eyes again, thinking deeply. "Yes, I see it now, ... that father of Gwinn is not ..., is not father of Gwinn at all."

"What?" the old king cried in astonishment.

Great Father-grand of Dergon opened his eyes and spoke steadfastly on. "Is it not clear in the joining of these calamitous and terrifying events?"

All eyes turned in horror to mother of Gwinn. But as Wzammi custom did not allow her public voice, she could only stand with her face ashen, shaking her head in agonized denial, while all

stood frozen in shock—even to father of Gwinn. That the persecution of his family had descended to such shocking depths left him dumbfounded and speechless.

But sister of Gwinn twin-second, who had been watching and telling it all into the hand of her blind and deaf sister, knew the time had come to do what she had been instructed to do. And though sister of Gwinn twin-second was but nine years of age, she knew the meaning of all that had been spoken.

She had not told anyone, not even her dear parents, how one year before, on the day of Gwinn's sixth birthday, she had been visited in visions of the night by an ancient one who shone brighter than the krizen pillars of Wzammi: a being who had told her many things that were to come. The Ancient One had given her the gift of courage and a name. It was a name she called herself, till even her parents had acquiesced in their privacy, but she never told how she came to it. Nor did she tell how the Ancient One had

came a second time and repeated all things—scarce three days past.

But this second time, he had also told her something new and terrible. Something she would never have guessed. Something a Great Father had done nine years previous to preserve his house; and something a mother had discovered and kept hidden in her heart. Something sister of Gwinn twin-second could not reveal for the Ancient One had compelled her to silence.

"It shall only be for a short time yet," he had said, "and then it shall be confessed; but not by you. But this you must do: when the time comes that I have shown, your first duty shall be to the one you call sister—to secure her safety—and thereafter as I have shown."

So sister of Gwinn twin-second had explained to her sister all that would happen, and together, they had agreed. And now the time had come.

Slowly, sisters of Gwinn rose from their place beside their mother and walked to the entrance of the vast cavern. All eyes followed as if they

could not do otherwise, as more waves of fear and confusion washed over them.

With hands entwined, the sisters turned and sister of Gwinn twin-second drew herself up to full stature and spoke.

"My name is Seecha," she began and the gasp was audible for in speaking those words, she had broken not one, but two sacred rules of the Wzammi: the first, that only firstborn sons could speak in public; and the second, that only first sons could have a name.

But in the people's shock, no one spoke and so Seecha continued. "I will tell you briefly, the history of my father's house," she said. "Ten years ago this day, the Great House of Telamun celebrated wedded union toward the hope and favour of a tenth son firstborn of a firstborn. My father was the ninth Telamun of his Great House. Yet, in required marriage he gave up his name, according to our law, till birth of a firstborn son should restore it. But the records say he was not favoured; that in the birth of we who appear

before you, the Great House of Telamun came to its end. Thus, in that recording, you denied us our rightful name and house, till in the birth of Gwinn we received a partial newness. Now, in this second false accusation that you have just heard, you seek to rob us again—but this time, it shall not be permitted.”

Seecha paused once more, but all remained silent, utterly confused by the absurdity of her charge. What did she mean—false? Twin-first was standing before them!—and though she could not speak, nor see, nor hear, yet she was firstborn and recorded as such. Some almost cried, “Where is the falsity?” but they said nothing, fearing their speech would but sanction this grievous offence they could not seem to stop. So Seecha spoke on.

“And you who say we have no secrets—what of the secret names of the unnamed?” she said.

The gasp was like an explosion. It echoed round the cavern, but Seecha would not be stopped.

"I have told what you allow me to know of my father, but of my mother, you allow me nothing, not even to acknowledge the house of her birth. Yet this I know: mother of Gwinn, until her marriage, was sister of Gherbon. You know how we live by decreed confirmations: how at birth, I was but sister-to-be, worthy of no name; and should have remained so forever, save for the birth of Gwinn. Now I am sister of Gwinn twin-second. She who stands with me is called sister of Gwinn twin-first. She whom I call mother is but mother of Gwinn. And he whom I call father is but father of Gwinn. But in private and against our law, I am Seecha; she who stands beside me is Keyza; he whom I call father is Telamun; and she whom I call mother is Yeensa. These are our names which now you know; and I, Seecha, know even yet of things I cannot tell."

Seecha paused again, but the silence continued. It was as if the people had no power in the shattering of everything that had once been; as if the chaos of the clamouring night had turned

them into puppets and all the strings were in her hands—especially the strings of the Great House of Piliam. And indeed, Great Father of Piliam stood sweating and trembling where moments before he had stood calm and accusing. But no one noticed for all eyes were on Seecha.

“Yes, my silent people,” Seecha continued, “I have been given to know that many of you have your private names, also contrary to our law. You speak of no secrets, but they abound in this kingdom, Wzammi. And though I know many names, I shall not reveal them, for that must fall to each of you. But this I will tell you. The heavens weep because Wzammi denies us names, save for first sons; and because we pretend this comes of the Deos. In the beginning in Wzammi, no one suffered in unnamings nor in decreed silence. Then the changes began. At first, it was only our mothers who suffered; then others; and finally all save first sons. Even within living memory did first sons have both name and voice. Now they have but name without

voice, save they be first sons firstborn. And yet we say, these are the ways of ancient Wzammi. And we pretend there is no suffering. We say the honours of naming and speech come bequeathed of the Deos. We say there is no stigma to those not honoured. But that too is pretence. Was there ever a first- or twin-sister as we, who ever was mother-to-be? Look around you. We shall remain forever but sisters. Why have sister of Yobar, and sister of Dubin, and sister of Kritzar and a hundred more I could name, never been chosen as wife-to-be? And why shall we, sisters of Gwinn, never be chosen? Because we are all stigma. As firstborn, we have denied our fathers a place in the Great Council; denied them the title, Great Father. In our birth comes the death of Great Houses. In us, have our fathers lost their names. Oh, yes, my people, we have secrets. And we have unbearable sufferings."

For the fourth time Seecha paused, but still no one spoke. They did not seem able to respond to the voice of an unspeaker in public.

"I have little else to say," Seecha said, "except to remind that you yet have freedom. There is yet future and there is yet choice: choice to allow each a name, a voice, and an equal place. And choice to speak the truth."

With that the old king seemed to collect himself or perhaps it was to forget himself, for never had a Great Father ever responded to an unspeaker in public. But then never before had an unspeaker dared to publicly address the people or the Great Fathers.

"Choice? Future?" the old king cried. "There is no choice; there is no future without the life-giving Yerben—unless your father, choice of the Deos, will make the choice required of him."

But father of Gwinn was now too frightened to speak, seeing what his daughter, twin-second, had just done, and wondering why the Deos had not struck them all dead. And yet, in the deepest part of him, father of Gwinn wanted to whistle and shout, and sob and dance as was the custom with all who received of firstborn sons. But

for the moment, he could only stand motionless and speechless.

"O King," Seecha replied, "I will bring all that you and this people need for choice and future, and then it shall be up to you."

With that promise, Seecha turned, and leading the blind and deaf Keyza, they walked out into the thundering waters. A blinding, horrific flash of transparent blue and white seemed to swallow them up.

When the thundering echoes in the cavern subsided, there was no sound save for the muffled sobs of mother of Gwinn sheltered in the arms of her trembling Telamun. Seven-year old Gwinn stood upon a nearby boulder, glaring at anyone who would meet his eyes which glistened with hard-fought tears.

There were tears also in another child's eyes which no one saw, for no one was looking at nine-year old Piliam, the preserver of his fathers' Great House and the child everyone said would someday become Great Scribe—for no one

could recall a child of wisdom quite like Piliam the twelfth.

Nor was anyone looking at mother of Piliam. There were more than tears in her eyes. There were great ones coursing down her cheeks, but she kept her head bowed to conceal her heart's breaking. If anyone had seen, they would never have guessed the cause, not even Great Father of Piliam. He had not for years thought of the terrible thing he had done to preserve his Great House, save for a brief moment as Seecha spoke. But as not a living soul could know, why should he think of it? And so he did not.

But the thing young Piliam thought in his tears was this: He had just lost two beloved friends and he could not even cry out for them, for Great Father of Piliam scorned friendship with unspeakers—especially unspeakers of the house of Gwinn. Yet, under the encouraging eye of his mother, young Piliam had found soul mates in secret friendship with the children of that house. Now, two of his most cherished friends had been

swallowed up. He could not comprehend it. Why should they have survived, only to die?

When the echoes died away, the keeper-of-memory spoke. "The Deos are angry," he said. "Have we not heard the roar of their anger? Have we not seen this daughter of appalling trespass consumed by their fire?"

Another roar and terrifying flash interrupted his speech and Great Father-grand of Dergon gulped in fear. But when the echoes subsided for the second time, he was again ready to speak, though his voice trembled ever so slightly. He hoped no one would notice.

"Does this not confirm my speech?" he said. "Does this not assure us, there is no return to our world which has been corrupted and broken? We have but one choice, O King. It is to follow down the corridors of this mountain in search of what is and was and ever shall be."

"We have neither food nor other provision," scoffed the old king, amazed at such thoughtless proposal.

"Well, father of Gwinn must get whatever we need," Great Father of Piliam insisted loudly. "He was chosen and that is that."

"Chosen or not," said the old king, "he has refused. And why, after your most accusing speeches, should this supposed offender of our Deos choose such fate as we have witnessed?"

As if on cue, a rumbling explosion split the air and an unbearable light cracked and sizzled at the cavern entrance.

Great Father of Piliam was the first to regain voice and composure. As he turned to meet the glaring eyes of young Gwinn, he said, "Father of Gwinn will do as the Deos require because there are ways to persuade him."

Young Gwinn held his stare for a long moment, then closing his eyes to shut everything out, Gwinn turned and encircled his parents as best he could with his small arms. After kissing his father's forehead and the smoothness of his mother's shining hair, he sprang from his perch and walked resolutely across the cavern till he

came to the place where Seecha had made her speech. Before anyone fathomed his intent, he bowed deeply to them all, and in imitation of his sisters, marched boldly into the thundering waters and the blinding, transparent light that swallowed him up.

Mother of Gwinn gave a second anguished cry and father of Gwinn staggered backward as if he had been dealt a deadly blow. Recovering, he put his arms about mother of Gwinn and whispered, "I must do as I was chosen to do. I should have done so before."

Mother of Gwinn bowed her head, the tears streaming down her face as father of Gwinn pulled himself tall and straight. Turning, he opened his mouth to speak, but Great Father-grand of Dergon spoke first. "This is becoming unquestionably clear," he said. "The Deos are showing us precisely what they require."

"What they require," cried father of Gwinn, "is an end to this silence and the unnamings of night all this people."

"What they require," thundered Great Father of Piliam, "is obedience—*your* unquestioning obedience. Thus, there is none to blame but yourself if you have suffered losses. You have led an undisciplined house. Had you gone as first instructed, perhaps you would yet have children."

"Whether my children be alive or dead, she, named Seecha—yes, Seecha—she spoke the truth. What the Deos require is a restoration to name and voice and truth—for without them we have become as nothing."

"You still have voice," Great Father of Piliam cried. "No one denied you that when you failed the traditions."

"I have voice only because I was firstborn in my Father's House," said father of Gwinn. "But I am the last, thus when I die, my house shall have no voice—even as these many who stand here silent and unseen by the Great Fathers who once saw all."

"We did not make these laws of the ancient Wzammi," Great Father-grand of Dergon said,

his voice hard and angry. "As keeper-of-memory, I say, What is has always been, and shall always be."

"Then tell me," said father of Gwinn, "why in the records of Wzammi under your care, have you, against our law, taken from my father the name given him forevermore."

"What nonsense is this?" interrupted the old king, "Taken away your father's name?"

"Yes, O King—my father—you knew him—my father, Great Father of Telamun is no longer found in the records save he is called father-grand of Gwinn. Why should my father—father of a firstborn son—be robbed of his titles and of his history against every law and promise? They think what they do is hidden, but it is not."

"He speak lies," Great Father of Piliam cried turning to the people. "And where, I might ask, is his proof? His father has not been robbed. We do not rob dead men."

"Yet, you do," said father of Gwinn. "You do, when you make of me a second-born in your

weaving of records. Is it eventually to take my voice?—one you have found too abrasive—too probing?”

The throbbing tension was broken by the old king’s grunt. “Father of Gwinn,” he said, “you must admit, you have often been a thorn in our peaceful garden. But surely—you cannot be serious in this. Why, we all know you have voice—you are firstborn. Who could be told otherwise?”

“Perhaps you could not be persuaded, O King,” father of Gwinn said, “but what of the king that follows you? What of one like Great Father-grand of Mekiin?”

That thought seemed to bring the old king up short. His eyes and face sawed over the idea as several Great Fathers muttered amongst themselves. But when at last the old king spoke, it was to reveal that he had more pressing matters on his mind.

“Father of Gwinn,” he said, “I should be glad to look into this, to review the records, but

frankly, there is no space for it till I have fed this people: till some measure of normalcy returns to our land. Can you not do as the Deos ask and then we can look to what you say?"

The old king held out the chosen krizen that still rested in his hand. With a heavy sigh, father of Gwinn replaced his krizen about his neck and bowed low before the old king. Then, as was the custom, he took the remaining krizens and returned each to its owner. When all was done, he turned back to his beloved Yeensa. He kissed her and whispered long into her ear before he turned and strode as best he could upon his quaking legs toward the cavern entrance.

"There is no time but for the Yerben," Great Father of Piliam cried as father of Gwinn reached the entrance, but his cry was swallowed up in a thunderous roar and blinding flash that stood hair on end to the furthestmost reaches of the cavern.

Great Father of Piliam shuddered down to the soles of his expensive shoes, and wondered if

such shoes might have any nourishment. If this father of Gwinn did not return, Great Father of Piliam was afraid, it might come to eating his shoes, expensive or not. But there was also fear in the need for such return. If father of Gwinn chose to bring the records, too, how would they explain certain things to the king? Why, oh why, had this fallen to the house of Gwinn? It seemed so regrettable.

For a long time, everyone crouched silently, trying to recover proper vision and pondering their fate and their own private regrets.

At last, the old king spoke, "Well, my people, I am beginning to perceive there is need for great revolution in the ways of Wzammi. But for now, it appears there is little choice, save to wait in hope and trust. Thus, I commend us all to silent petitions for father of Gwinn."

Great Father of Piliam sighed deeply, convinced in his heart that if father of Gwinn did not return, there would be no more exits into

the horrific sound and light that had swallowed every figure. But Great Father of Piliam was wrong.

In the path of his gaze, he saw mother of Gwinn stumble toward the cavern entrance. Surely, she was not thinking to—? He cut off the dreadful thought. No, she was trembling too much. She was neither facing in nor out, but sideways; standing there, shaking uncontrollably, her head bowed. Then she sank down, hugging her knees close, resting her head, with her face turned to the entrance.

As Father of Piliam watched her, wishing with every fibre of his being that this cavern held but the two of them, he let his memories rush in.

He had thought this woman the most desirable creature imaginable since the first day of their acquaintance. For ten long years, it had grated him to the core that the Great House of Telamun had chosen and espoused her before he, the eleventh Piliam, had even known of her existence.

Of course, his chosen one had been desirable, too. He had wanted her; chosen her—but then, he had met the espoused of Telamun. If only there had been some delay—enough time—an excuse sufficient to have interrupted the course of events. Had he only known how strong his feelings would become?

In flights of imagination, he had begun to pursue secret remedies to his passion, until—No! he would not rehearse the intense pain of her rejecting words. But he recalled the unrelenting ache. Even now, it did not seem possible that it had been but a mere half-year of torment—it had seemed like forever—before he had made frantic appeal to that infamous soothsayer in the distant land of Reeken. And she! she had refused him remedy. Then, as if she sought to intensify his intolerable pain, she had mocked him and told him a thing that had stunned him to his core. The Great House of Piliam, she had said, would be forever doomed in the birth of a daughter; but the Great House of Telamun would live on

in the birth of a son and a daughter together. As great as his passion for the one they now called Yeensa, there had been yet a greater—for the preservation of his name and Great House.

With wild threatenings, he had raged throughout Reeken consulting every magian he could, yet none had offered remedy sufficient to his need. Then, one had revealed what all others had hidden—how the births in the two Houses would come in the same hour of the same day. In that revelation, he fixed upon his remedy. The more he had pondered it, the more he had deemed such synchronicity a sign from the Deos—that this mother-to-be in the Great House of Telamun could become an invisible mother to the Great House of Piliam; and that this fortuity of synchronous births would bring the fulfilment of all his desires.

As preserver and defender of the Great House of Piliam, he had felt no qualms. He was but amending, as best he could, the awful blunder of mistaken betrothals.

In the end, the risky birthing switch had proven astonishingly easy—his firstborn daughter for the firstborn son of the Great House of Telamun. The two old midwives, though highly expensive in persuasion, had worked with such subtlety, with entrancing aromas and incense, that no one ever suspected what had been done. He had no regrets. His one lingering sorrow was that the balance of his design was yet unfulfilled.

He had believed that in the fall of the Great House of Telamun, the twofold tragedy of twin daughters would provoke such bitterness, it would open the way for his consolations and tenderness. And when their tragedy had been immeasurably compounded by the unanticipated, defective condition of the one everyone called twin-first, he had been utterly convinced his cause was being aided by unseen forces.

He had sought another private audience, but inexplicably, she had rejected his every secret overture. Still he remained convinced, she would someday be his, the true mother of Piliam the

twelfth. Perhaps, in this catastrophe, if father of Gwinn did not return, there was yet possibility.

Sensing he was being watched, Great Father of Piliam glanced aside and met his wife's eyes. He looked away, angry at her intrusion. Yet not angry. Not angry because she had served the Great House of Piliam like no other Great House. She had a passion for grandeur and galas. His Great House had become the centre around which all the Great Houses orbited. He knew her gifts had elevated him beyond his natural abilities. He knew too, that mother of Gwinn could never have wrought the eminence that mother of Piliam had. These two were as opposites. Yet knowing all that, he could not seem to shed the passion he felt for the mystery of that gentle, quiet mother of Gwinn.

Yes, he grudgingly admitted, he did love mother of Piliam, too—just not as a wife. He glanced her way again, but she, with tears rolling down her face, was watching mother of Gwinn, now rocking in slow, crouched rhythm.

It was all so complicated—so complex. Yet for all those years, he and mother of Piliam had managed an agreeable, unspoken arrangement; but never had he given her further chance to betray the purity of his Great House. If she wept on occasion for unfulfilled love, well, it was not something he could ever explain. Besides, her joys seemed less in his association than in young Piliam, and in the pleasures of engaging and amazing others. His passions seemed beyond his ability to sort in order and simplicity. He wanted one; he needed the other.

Suddenly his confusing thoughts and wished-filled reverie were cut off as he saw mother of Gwinn abruptly rise and heard her soft voice, say simply, "I am Yeensa."

With those words, the mother of *his* Piliam turned and vanished into a roar so thunderous it rocked the entire cavern as waves in the wind. The accompanying light came so blinding that even with their eyelids shut tight in anticipation,

the image of mother of Gwinn seemed branded upon every eye in a blinding transparency. But no one had time to mark the moment for shards of stones tumbled from the cavern ceiling. In united rush, they sought the cavern walls where they crouched and crowded, bruised and again terrified, but otherwise unhurt.

In that instant of thunder and light, Great Father of Piliam cast his unfulfilled dreams into the void and committed his entire focus to preserving his Great House through whatever lay ahead.

As the thunder rolled about the cavern, no one dared move beyond the sheltering walls, save one. But young Piliam had scarce taken two steps toward the cavern entrance when mother of Piliam seized him fast. And so they all remained, eyelids closed, waiting; and wondering if they had any choice or future at all.

But Seecha had told the truth about preserving choice and future, though even she, in the events

that followed, had great cause to wonder if she had promised in vain.

After the first flash and shocking, pain-filled terror of her exit from the cavern, Seecha had found herself and Keyza to be amazingly alive, and after quickly doing her first duty, to shelter Keyza in safety, Seecha had sped, as best she could, down the slippery, steep terrain and through the flooding streets to the king's great house.

In the muted light of the few standing krizen pillars, she could see twisted debris tossing in the waters of the churning Wzai river, now surging against the eastern steps of the great palace. She knew she had to act without delay so she sped dripping and muddy, through the king's grand house, for there was no time for neatness.

There, in the museum wing, inside a lidless, glass box, stood the vessel of Yerben she had promised to deliver. There was nothing securing it for it was sacred and had no other value, except in its proper use. Seecha uncorked the

ancient vessel as the Ancient One had instructed and placed one ladleful of the now brimming sacred food into the new vessel she had been told would be resting beside. Re-corking them both, she tucked each under an arm and fled back into the storm. Hardly had she left the king's house when a cry startled her such that she nearly dropped her precious burdens. She had been so convinced that no living creature could be about, she did not know what to think or expect.

"Seecha, Seecha," the voice cried again, still distorted in the wind. "It's me, Gwinn."

Just as it registered in Seecha's mind what she had heard, her little brother reached her, drenched as she, and looking for all the world like the playful hibba pups that once frolicked on the river's edge. Seecha almost laughed to think of it. But there was no time for laughter.

Shouting against the wind and rain, she cried, "Gwinn, we must hurry. The north mountain is going to come down in a terrible roar and cover

everything—cover it so deep there will be nothing more. It will happen soon; we must hurry.”

Gwinn did not question. He grasped the smaller vessel under his arm to lighten Seecha’s load and together they fought the misery of the driving rain toward the western ridge that would lead them back to the cavern’s edge. It was an almost impossible struggle upon the slippery steepness. Seecha was grateful beyond words for Gwinn’s coming, though even with him carrying a vessel, their progress seemed less than a crawl.

She began to despair they could make it even together. She did not know where they were or how much farther. “I can’t do it,” she wanted to cry out. “I can’t do it. I’m only nine. I’m only nine.” But she kept the words in her head, while the words in her mouth seemed as spoken by another.

“Come on, Gwinn. It’s only a little further. Just a little further, Gwinn. We can do it.”

Suddenly there was a great roar and a flash so

brilliant it seemed as though they had seen each other's bones in the glare. They stood paralysed by the sizzling light. But nothing befell them, except more intense rain in the long, rumbling echoes.

They struggled on, scrambling and clawing one-handed, till Seecha knew she could not go on. "We'll just kneel here for a tiny space," she said, and Gwinn collapsed as if he too knew, it was the end and had nothing left to give.

At that moment, they heard a cascading of stones from above. They started up in fear of a storm-crazed creature, but then they heard the cries carried by the wind, "Seecha, Seecha, Gwinn, Gwinn," and they knew their father's voice.

"Papa," they cried, forgetting that Papa was an undignified word from old Wzammi; and not realizing that the wind carried their words out into the blackness and away. But still their father came on for he had seen two points of light in the intense darkness and knew they must be the

krizens that hung around his children's necks, giving them light.

Within moments, Seecha and Gwinn were embraced by their sobbing father, but there was no time, save for explanation regarding Keyza.

"Yes, Papa, Keyza is safe," Seecha cried, "but we are not. We must get back to the cavern. The great north mountain is coming down, maybe even now and we must be higher."

Without hesitation, father of Gwinn gathered his small son, vessel and all, close to his heart, and calling to Seecha to hold onto his sash, he clambered and clawed their way up the slick, disintegrating slope.

Then once again, their progress was halted in a roar and flash that seemed to split the landscape in two. With their heads bent almost into the rock in their gruelling climb they missed the blinding directness as they pitched forward upon the heaving mountain. They lay together trembling, amidst a grinding, horrific rumble that shook them almost senseless.

It seemed forever before the wind blasts and the grinding and tremoring ceased. And it seemed impossible that they were alive. They stood up, holding each other and straining into the intense blackness, their small krizens unable to penetrate but a few steps. They could not tell if what lay all around was a great hill or a great hole. They only knew that every krizen pillar that had given steady warmth and beam from every street edge since the beginning of Wzammi, was now gone. All seemed one great void.

They did not know which way to turn. In their fear, they had become disoriented. Everywhere seemed up, as if they had fallen into a narrow valley of broken stones. For a few moments they stood trembling in the drenching skies.

"We must stay together," Seecha cried. "And we must listen for the sense of where to go."

After a pause, father of Gwinn said, "I think we go this way." And just as he pointed in the diminished light of his krizen, they heard from that very direction a faint and despairing cry,

"Telamun, Telamun, please, please, answer me. Telamun."

"Mama," the children cried in unison, but again the wind carried their words away into the blackness.

The cries continued. "Seecha. Seecha. Gwinn, Gwinn. Please, someone answer me."

Realizing that the wind would only carry their answers far away, they stood and struggled on, pulled upward by a cord of sound.

In the noise of the wind and thundering echoes, Yeensa heard nothing, but when, at last, she saw the faint light of three approaching kri-zens, she rushed downward the few steps that remained, to meet their embraces. Their joyful cries were carried out into the blackness. Those cowering in the echoing cavern heard nothing but raging storm.

Seecha had not forgotten the instructions of the Ancient One. After directing her family into the safety of Keyza's small dry refuge, Seecha turned

back to the great cavern and entered in. There she saw a sight so strange she hardly knew what to make of it. Against every expanse of wall, the survivors of Wzammi pressed and crouched, seemingly frozen in time with their eyes tight closed. They looked like paintings on a wall, except that their krizens cast distorted, shifting shadows in every direction.

As Seecha gazed at the scene, the last echoes died away, though some did not know for their ears were still ringing from the pyramid of thunderings. No one had yet recovered sight from the last blinding light, so when Seecha spoke, many were unable to orient the sound except as a continuing echo.

At the first syllable, mother of Piliam clasp her son's hand firmly within her own and let her tears fall once more. Seecha noticed and feared. Would young Piliam have any choice in what followed? She did not know for the Ancient One had said she must be patient; must permit the future to reveal itself. Thus, with hope in her

heart, Seecha turned back to her duty and the focus of her speech.

"I have brought the Yerben," she said. "It will renew itself to your needs while the rains endure—but I must warn you. The lands are changed. You will not have the places as before. All things are new."

Seecha set the vessel containing the sacred food well inside the cavern entrance.

"I am going now," she said, "but I leave the counsel I was given: That before the rains end, so must the reign of the Great Fathers. There must be newness in unity—where standing shoulder to shoulder, none shall be above another, but all shall be servants of all."

When the next thunder came, it seemed more distant, though the light came again so blinding that with their eyes still closed they yet saw the cavern, with stones scattered everywhere and a vessel-shaped hump toward the entrance.

Gradually, as their sight returned, they saw the vessel where Seecha had left it. The keeper-

of-memory, Great Father-grand of Dergon, was the first to rush upon the vessel, bruising his toes upon the jagged stones that now littered the cavern floor. After a mincing, chaotic dance, that would have caused enormous mirth in less serious times, he reached the vessel and thrust his arms wide to stay pressing, hungry followers.

"This is sacred," he cried, "reserved but for the Great Houses. You must stand away. It brings instant death to all else."

"That is not true!" cried father of Yobar, one of the common ones. "I have memory too, and this was never reserved for the Great Houses. It was to save Wzammi in time of need."

"Who are you but a common man? You without a Great Father in two-hundred years," cried Great Father-grand of Dergon.

In that rebuke, father of Yobar, shrank back in shame for he was the only firstborn son of his house in two-hundred years. But firstborn of a third-born gave little more than temporary and weak voice.

Witnessing such simple success, Great Father-grand of Dergon pressed home his power. "And who am I?" he cried, "but firstborn of a firstborn, twice six generations—the keeper-of-memory and the scribe of all truth."

"And who am I?" interrupted the old king who was impatient, frustrated, and hungry. "I am forever firstborn and Great Great Father-grand of twice perfection; and older far than you, and I say, Who cares who we are, save we are hungry; so cease this babbling and hoarding. The sacred food renews itself so we—"

"So we don't know that," Great Father-grand of Dergon hissed into the old king's failing ears. "It has never been tried."

"So let us try it," growled the old king wrenching at the cork.

"You must give this thought," Great Father of Piliam whispered as he stood forward to join in rescue of the Yerben. He whispered too loudly though, forgetting that those who must not speak, could still hear.

But the old king was not about to give thought to anything but getting his people fed, so when Great Father of Piliam and Great Father-grand of Dergon would not release their hold upon the cork, the old king scratched them sharply on their hands, and they retreated with haste.

"You left me no choice," the king said as the two Great Fathers gazed in shock at their red-striped hands.

Wrenching the cork free, the old king reached in and withdrew a ladle overflowing with shiny grains of hexagonal roundness.

"What a beautiful serving piece," he exclaimed as he read the inscription upon it. He smiled and extended it toward the keeper-of-memory for his inspection.

Great Father-grand of Dergon read, and glanced briefly at Great Father of Piliam, with a slight lift to his eyes.

The king looked upon his hungry, anxious subjects and held out the engraved ladle. "Who, then, shall be first?" he asked.

But every soul stood motionless, gazing upon the brimming ladle and fearing the keeper-of-memory's words—that this living food would bring instant death to all but the Great Houses.

As for those of the Great Houses, none stood forward either for they had inexpressible fears of their own. Those forever-circulating rumours of mysteriously-altered records; and those forever-surfacing stories from neighbouring kingdoms of precious Wzammi gems being traded for infant sons, had been, until this moment, scandalous, incredulous attacks upon the unimpeachable integrity of the Great Houses of Wzammi. Now, in uncertainty, none wished to test the legitimacy of their claim to a Great House.

"What?! No one is now hungry?" the old king exclaimed, scooping a little into his mouth and savouring it down. "It is superb." He extended the brimming ladle again in invitation.

Children gazed upon their parents with pleading eyes and parents stared blankly into their rock surroundings.

At last, someone pushed to the front. It was sister of Yobar, firstborn of her parents.

"What have I to lose?" she said holding out her cupped hands.

"What!?" said the old King—not for want of hearing, but for the start it gave him to hear such soprano tones in public. It was only the third musical voice he had heard in as many hours.

"I have nothing to lose," sister of Yobar said again.

"Oh, I heard," the old king said. "It's just this hearing will take some getting used to."

As sister of Yobar ate her measured portion, all watched in trepidation for there was no house more common than the house of Yobar. Their luck had been poorer than any other in all Wzammi. After five daughters their house had finally received its name in the birth of a son. And that was above and beyond the two-hundred-year drought of Great Fathers. There could be no better test of the Yerben.

As sister of Yobar swallowed the last of her

portion, the old king leaned close and said, "What is your name, if I might ask?"

"Yoba," she said with a shy, almost ashamed, smile.

"The old king spoke as a tear trickled down his cheek. "How very much, I think, we have put everyone through—and never thought of it. I must wonder where I have been; where these traditions came from that have kept us so blind and deaf—so imprisoned in such thoughtless conduct."

But now that Yoba had spoken, eaten, and lived, everything seemed safe enough, so hands were stretched out by the hundreds with the old king ladling as fast as he could; and as was promised, the Yerben never failed.

But there were many of the Great Houses who ate, silent and angry. They watched and judged and whispered while the old king egregiously encouraged the breaking of their ancient, hallowed code of order and silence. It could not be condoned.

Yet, as it became apparent to all that the Yerben would not fail, the keeper-of-memory, Great Father-grand of Dergon, felt grieved that he might have been misunderstood in his initial pronouncements about the Yerben.

"Fellow citizens," he said, as he shouldered in beside the still-serving king, "I wish to make clear, for those who yet doubt, that our records have proven true. As has been most abundantly demonstrated, my personal conviction that this sacred food will nourish the good citizens of Wzammi as long as needed has been vindicated. In addition, we have a third witness in this ladle: the inscription on it assures, "For the duration of your emergency."

"But what of the voice?" said one who seemed in confusion about much that had transpired.

"What voice?" said the keeper-of-memory.

"Why sister of Gwinn twin-second—she who brought the Yerben," said the confused one. "The one who said, 'It will renew itself *while* the rains endure.'"

Father of Piliam was quick to reply. "Did you see her?" he growled. "Did anyone see her? Of course they did not—for she *is* not. The Yerben was brought by the Deos, not by some offending unspeaker. Besides, did we not all witness the destruction of those responsible for this great catastrophe?"

"And let me say, as well" said the keeper-of-memory, "that I heard no such voice. And if I, keeper-of-memory, heard no voice, there could be none. Thus do not be deceived. These waters are not our emergency. It is this journey to a new place. The Yerben will last till we are settled. You can believe this. The Yerben will not fail us; and we shall not fail you."

At last, when the eating was done, the exhausted people settled as best they could, for what would prove a restful night for many, against every expectation, for their exhaustion was overwhelming. But for many, it was far from what it seemed.

It had been hard to discuss a secret matter in the midst of some who must not know of it, but it was done. And in the end, the Great Fathers, decided not to attempt any coercion with the obviously senile, old king, but to leave him and his few loyal followers lying asleep as the rest set off for uncorrupted lands. And of course, the Yerben would go with the travellers.

Great Father-grand of Dergon volunteered to take the first watch of the night; Great Father of Piliam, the second; and Great Father of Mekiin the third—a most unusual offering considering their status, but as they assured, “These are extraordinary times.”

And so it was settled.

At length, when the old king and his followers lay breathing deeply in their utter exhaustion, the prearranged tapping upon the left hand commenced around the cavern. Many, from both extremes, silently arose and crept down a dark passage in the back wall, following line upon

line, shining their krizens upon the twisting path that descended before them.

As the last silent figure disappeared into the tunnel, Seecha crept into the cavern. She had been waiting with unbearable anxiety to know who would remain.

"I cannot show you their choices before they make them," the Ancient One had said.

In the quiet and near darkness, Seecha could sense that forever choices had been made. There seemed so few remaining, curled into the warmth of their krizens, oblivious to other paths. As Seecha tiptoed and gazed at each sleeping figure, her sense of fear grew. Why had she ever imagined that young Piliam would be given the choice to stay even if he had wanted to? There was so much she wanted to tell. Who he truly was; where he belonged. But the Ancient One had said she must not; and she had obeyed.

She couldn't describe the depth of sadness. Now father and mother of Gwinn would never know the truth.

Seecha pushed the confusions from her mind and made her last despairing search for Piliam. He was not to be found. But then, near the back of the cavern, she heard a faint sound. Creeping to the opening that led into descending darkness, she paused and listened: voices ever so faint, and one, angry. Concealing her krizen, she crept forward. Feeling for every stone so as not to disturb it, she descended till she could see in the krizen light of Great Father of Piliam.

"I absolutely, utterly forbid you," Great Father of Piliam was saying in a tight, angry voice. "And I am not going to argue. I have a people to lead, and being at their backs is not where I intend to be, so either you come of your own choice or I will compel you every step of the way."

"Father, please do not misunderstand me," young Piliam said, "and I mean no disrespect, but if my senses tell me you do wrong in this, how can I follow you?"

"What sense?—you are but a boy!" hissed Great Father of Piliam.

"I can sense right from wrong, Father," said Piliam. "You have told me that yourself—it is the Deos' gift to the great Wzammi."

"The Deos' gift is the law—to obey the law, Piliam, until in power, you can become the law," Great Father of Piliam said.

"But Father," said young Piliam, "can any in Wzammi be so right that none else can be?"

"You are a mere boy," said Great Father of Piliam, "and have yet to learn the meaning and difference of many things."

"I think our difference is this, Great Father," said Piliam. "It is that I have considered—even feared—I might be wrong in my choosing and you have not. I have desired not to be in error."

"Fear is a failing of the young," Great Father of Piliam said with his teeth clenched.

"If so, then I wish always to be young," said Piliam.

Great Father of Piliam clenched his hands trying to control the frustration that had welled up inside him from the moment young Piliam had

insisted on this moment of privacy. Great Father of Piliam's foremost desire was to lead Wzammi and his foremost irritation was being where each passing moment the distance from his followers increased. He was angry too, because he didn't have the faintest notion how he was going to force young Piliam into a prolonged march of obedience. He would just have to keep control and use persuasive reasoning.

"Do you think it right that I, Great Father of a Great House should bow to a boy?" Great Father of Piliam said, thinking that was the persuasion he needed.

"If I be right Great Father, what does my age matter?" said Piliam.

"If you be right?! Is it right to defend one who has scorned and broken the ancient law?!" said Great Father of Piliam.

"Perhaps the ancient law has been honoured and reborn," Piliam replied.

"Piliam," said Great Father of Piliam in a dangerously quiet voice, "I have heard enough;

and I am going to say this only once. Either you come of your own choice or you will come of my choice."

"With due respect, Great Father," said Piliam in a sad, quiet tone, "I shall not come by either choice—for I shall not come at all."

Great Father of Piliam, with his face contorting in rage, raised his arm to snatch at young Piliam when, in a flash, mother of Piliam stood in his way. Her uninvited presence so startled Great Father of Piliam that he froze in momentary shock as she quietly said: "He is not yours to govern, father-to-be."

"What?!" Great Father of Piliam cried in a voice so loud Seecha feared it might cascade the stones. But immediately it was followed by a thundering rumble that came echoing down the tunnel. Thus, if sleepers were disturbed it was only to make them turn over and seek comfort in their discomfort. Great Father of Piliam stood grinding his teeth and waiting till the echoes passed.

"How dare you?" he hissed. "How dare you?"

"Because it is true," said mother of Piliam. "Under Wzammi law, you are still father-to-be and I am mother-to-be for we had no son. This I know—and I have known it from the third day of its happening."

"You know nothing," hissed Great Father of Piliam, dropping his voice even lower as if afraid of the slightest overhearing.

"But I do know," said mother of Piliam. "The old birthing one you sent to Reeken to visit her son—the one who died in the river-crossing—she spoke to me the day of her leaving; she told me everything."

"She lied—that faithless one," Great Father of Piliam cried.

"Not so," continued mother of Piliam, "for the one who died of the fever—the week of your gift to her—well, at my pressing, she confessed the same to me upon her death bed. I had my two witnesses, Piliam. And I have my greatest

witness in the very face and form of our living daughter. In her, I see my own mother, as if she lived."

"You see nothing. And you know nothing, for if you did, then you are guilty, even to death, for harbouring such as this," Great Father of Piliam said.

"Yes, I am guilty," mother of Piliam said. "And I am not going to say, I kept it because I feared you, though, at times, I did. But I did it as much for my own sake. Like you, I was too hungry for the honours and privilege—for the grandeur—of the Great Houses. And when finally I acknowledged what we had both done, I did not know how best to correct it; but now I do."

Great Father of Piliam's voice became chillingly quiet. "If what you say is true—that I would go to such lengths to preserve my House—then how foolish, I say, confessing in this lonely place."

"It is but a small distance back and I can scream, against the law or not," said mother of Piliam with a tremor in her voice.

A smile crept about Great Father of Piliam's face as his eyes fixed on the krizen ribbon that hung about the neck of mother of Piliam. Just as his hand reached toward it, a voice spoke out of the darkness, so close behind Seecha that she almost collapsed in fright.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," the old king said and Great Father of Piliam froze again in shock. The old king continued. "I suggest father-to-be, that you take your fading krizen and begin your journey down—and that you do it now."

"It's all a lie," the wide-eyed, eleventh Piliam cried, staring into the darkness.

"Get," said the old king, "before I think to defend myself."

Piliam the eleventh, knew exactly what the old king meant for the king carried upon his person at all times a most effective deterrent to any who should think to harm him. In a flash of self-preserving insight—that his only hope lay in the lower corridors of the mountain where he would always and forever be Great Father of

Piliam—Piliam the eleventh whirled about and strode down into the darkness.

He would not even have to make explanation, he thought, for the Great Fathers always travelled ahead of their families, so if his family did not arrive, how could he be blamed? His weeping and mourning could be agonized and long. But that was all in the future. For now, he had only to overtake his future kingdom, scurry past the conforming unspeakers in the shrouded darkness with his krizen concealed, and none would know what had transpired. Difficult as things were, he decided, they could be worse.

Seecha and the others remained motionless, listening to the fading footsteps. When they could be heard no more, the king pulled his krizen from its concealment, and said, "Come, it is time for rest. Tomorrow will be a new and difficult day." Then he reached his hand out to mother Piliam and said, "What is your name?"

"I do not have one," she said. "I have never had one."

"Do you wish one?" said the old king.

"Yes," she said, "Should my child consent, I would like to be called after her. I should like to be called Keyzoma."

"And so you shall, in her consent," said the old king.

"And what of you, young man?" the king asked, turning to Piliam. "Do you have a wish? Any desire for a new name?"

"I would like to be called Teliun," said the young boy.

"And so you shall," said the old king. "So come now, let us rest."

But Seecha and Piliam, now called Teliun, could not. With the old king's permission they raced into the drenching night to tell what their hearts had told them since their birth. They were twins, brother and sister in the Great House of Telamun, though it did not matter now whether it was a Great House or a common one. All that mattered was that they were reunited and that their parents should know. Yet Seecha grieved

too for the great wrongs which had been done—especially the wrongs to Keyza.

While awaiting the unfolding of choices within the great cavern, Seecha had sat in the shadow of an alcove and suffered deeply the dilemma of her desires. She wanted the truth revealed, yet at the same time she wanted to spare Keyza the pain of it. It had seemed impossible that she could have both.

But Seecha had not been told all things, so the shock and joy of her life awaited. As she and Teliun burst into the neighbouring, small cave, the first to turn and look at them was Keyza. Her eyes looked with sight and she had the widest, dazzling smile Seecha had ever seen. In a flash, Keyza's hands were spelling out things, Seecha could barely comprehend.

"It happened when you led me out into the rain," Keyza signed. "I felt something. It hurt dreadfully, but it did something to my eyes, and now the darkness is all gone. But that is not all."

She was signing so fast Seecha could scarcely keep up. "The great noise that shook me—the one you said would bury our lands—it was the one that opened my ears and now I can hear a little, but more and more it comes—like my eyes. It is wonderful. It is wonderful. It is more than wonderful."

In her joy, Keyza hugged Seecha so tight they could scarcely breathe. Then in the privacy of Seecha's hand, Keyza asked, "Do you think mother Piliam will ever want me?"

Seecha knew then that Keyza understood more than any mortal could have told her.

"What mother Piliam will want, I cannot say," Seecha spelled with her fingers, "but we do. We shall always want you."

Seecha knew that even though Keyza could now hear—it would yet take many months to teach her the meanings of the many sounds of her new world, so with her fingers translating into Keyza's palm, Seecha and Teliun revealed to their father and mother and Gwinn the news that

made them thrill to copious tears. And it was not for the discovery of a firstborn son in the Great House of Telamun. It was for the healing of that strange, plaguing loss they had not known how to endure or explain.

In their brimming joy, the house of Telamun and Yeensa returned to the great cavern where all remained asleep save for the old king who kept the watch; and of course, save for mother Piliam who could not sleep as she pondered how to tell her only child what she had condoned.

She had decided she would not tell Keyza everything at once for fear it would prove too great a shock. She would first build a bridge, now more open and strong than the one she had sought to forge with the silent, distant child who had sometimes sat in her garden while the others had played. It was as much a selfish reason as any why she had encouraged the secret friendships. It had helped, just seeing her small child and doing tender things.

As Keyza entered the cavern, she kept her eyes downcast in shyness and fear, so mother Piliam did not know that anything was changed as she flew to gather her only child into her arms. When she could speak, mother Piliam asked Seecha to sign her words to Keyza.

"Keyza, do you remember me—the mother with the garden?" mother Piliam asked, caressing her daughter's down-cast face. When the signing was finished, Keyza nodded, but still she did not look up.

"My dear Keyza," mother Piliam began, "I am going to say some things you may not understand, but someday I hope you will. You see, I am so much like you, though not as good or kind. Once I heard a thing, yet I did not speak, thus it was as if I could not speak—as if I could not hear. And for a long time, I closed my eyes to many things. So you see how very like you, I am. How in you is the witness of all I have been. And though, I have no right to ask anything of you, I would ask, if I can be your friend? If I

can be your eyes and your ears and your voice, whenever you have need?"

As the sounds were made words in her hand, Keyza began to nod; and the tears started once again down the cheeks of mother Piliam.

"I can learn everything Seecha does," mother Piliam continued, "and then you will have two sets of eyes, and ears, and even two voices. Can I be your friend, Keyza?"

Seecha saw the smile form on Keyza's face as the sounds made sense in her hand. As soon as Seecha had finished, Keyza took her mother's hand and spelled so Seecha could see and translate. Keyza wrote, "You may be more than my friend. If you wish, mother-of-me, you can be my mother, two."

And though in spoken translation the double meaning was lost, yet mother Piliam understood there would always be two mothers for Keyza.

But Keyza was not finished. Looking straight into her mother's eyes she said into her mother's hand, "A dream told me you might wish to be

called after me, and I am glad. I think you shall be called, Keyzoma, as you wish. As for me, you shall always be called mother.”

As Seecha translated, she realized there was much yet to tell of their dreams and visions.

As mother Piliam, now called Keyzoma, tried to take in the reality of her child’s sight, and all that had been, she thought there could be none more blessed nor forgiven than herself. She wondered if the flash of light that began the restoration of Keyza’s sight was like the flash that had pierced her mind just hours before in the midst of the Special Session.

As she had watched the grand recognitions—with the Great House of Piliam accepting the greatest number of lavish accolades—she had determined, this would be the last. Not because of any premonition of pending catastrophe, but because she was, at last, committed to confessing all she knew to the king, regardless of the cost. She knew the extremes of possible outcome: that the entire culture of Wzammi could

be upended in a chaos that could take years to resolve, if ever; or, more likely, that she would be cast into immediate exile, or even secretly executed, wherein nothing would change. But she could no longer bear the suppressed conflict within herself, or the unrelenting pain she saw in the lives of so many.

She had been approaching the king to slip him a note requesting private audience, when everything had turned to utter chaos. As she had fled, then huddled in the high cavern, she had become confused. Had the Deos intervened to prevent her confession; to avert the destruction of Wzammi—of the Great Houses? But, as she watched how the Great Houses were bent on self-preservation even at the expense of all else, she had known there was no cost too great.

Yet now, incredibly, the cost had turned to an indescribable restoration. It was more than she could comprehend. More than she felt she could ever merit.

At last, in their joy and exhaustion, they lay down to sleep—their krizens resting against them to regulate their warmth. The spare vessel of sacred Yerben rested beside the old king who remained awake to watch and ponder all that had been and would yet be. And he knew in his heart—it was going to require an upheaval of ways and customs, perhaps as catastrophic as they had just endured; and also, of necessity, a gruelling journey to an unknown land. A land that something told him would be called Noo. But the greater journey, he knew, he had just witnessed in the soul of Keyzoma.

THE END

(of Wzammi; the beginning of Noo)

**Whatever—wherever the journey,
one always finds the full range
of human nature, whether in
oneself or one's companions.**

**~ King Bekkos ~
Last King of Wzammi**

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