

Losing Light

by Thomas Meurkens, 2014.

1

Running through the thick, shimmering pack of freshly fallen snow, Tlana sucked in the cool morning air that was just beginning to be warmed by the light of day. That precise moment, between the dark, ice-cold night and the bright, warm day, made her feel truly alive.

As she enjoyed the sparse seconds this feeling lasted, gliding thoughtlessly through the loose, pure white snow, along the dispersedly placed rocks covered with thick layers of semi-transparent ice, she could put everything out of her mind, leaving it blank and free for felicity to fill it up. Standing still on one of the hills near her village, and slowly sinking several centimeters into the melting, white snow, she looked over the place she had grown up in, the place she had lived in all her life. She wondered how differently her life would have been, had she grown up somewhere else. Had she not lost her parents early on. Had she not reluctantly been adopted by the rest of the community. Reluctantly on her part, but also on the part of the other villagers. However, these ideas quickly subsided. Partly because Tlana had become so accustomed to having those feelings, and partly because of their complete uselessness, which she knew very well.

She walked farther away, away from the village. Finally she sat herself against one of the protruding rocks, and looked over the snowcapped forest, with its long, straight, upright standing trees. She could easily see which part of the forest was the oldest. The most impressive and wildered trees were the ones planted here long before she was born. Long before her mother had been born. Before her grandmother even. How long the trees had stood there, at the same place they were still standing, silent and tranquil, not caring or bothering themselves with the meager worries and wishes of men and women, she did not know. Only that it couldn't have been for more than 800 years. That she knew for certain.

To the left of the ancient, mysteriously reassuring trees were the younger ones. Decreasing in age from right to left, these less formidable monsters had an air of young children, growing slowly more close to the image of their symbolical, and often also biological, parents to their side. You could almost see them creeping over, trying to become larger and larger as they moved towards their ancient relatives.

But of course, trees did not move. They stood erect, scarcely swaying their branches in the icy gusts of the morning wind that swept through the landscape. Their arrangement, beautiful as it was to behold, also brought a tint of sadness to Tlana. The part of the forest harboring the centuries-old trees was rapidly diminishing. Cut down by people from her village. By her uncles and nephews. By her neighbors and teachers. By herself even, whenever the wining and pushing of the people became too great for her to bear, and she caved in, helping to cut down several of the beautiful giants, in order to calm down the whispering voices that spoke of her laziness and unwillingness to help with the community's chores.

Of course it was sensible to fell the trees and provide all the lands to the north of them with strong, flexible and almost imperishable wood. The trees that grew here were extraordinary. It took decades for them to mature, years of devotion, feeding and caring. Those were the chores Tlana much preferred over cutting them down. Of course, in the back of her mind she was aware the trees were doomed to be cut. Doomed to cease living before their tranquil lives would naturally have ended. But she comforted herself with the fact that the trees she nurtured, would not be cut down during her lifetime. They would still be way too young for that. Who knew what would happen in the meantime? Perhaps people would start needing less and less wood, so the trees could be spared? She didn't even believe them herself whenever she experienced such thoughts.

The fact was that when the trees had reached the right age, they would be reaped. The wood of the trees was incredible, and always in high demand. As hard as metal (though the specially crafted saws used for severing them from their roots were even stronger), and still slightly flexible. Imperishable, and, when dried, as light as the leafy branches used to carry. Furniture, instruments, foundations for houses and digging poles were needed everywhere on the island, and the wood of the trees was the perfect material for it. So, Tlana told herself to stop whining. Besides, it wasn't as if it was doing nature any permanent damage. For each tree that was cut down, a new one was planted. A resource-system that kept itself in balance, well thought out by the imperial rulers. As simple as that.

As she stared at the forest, still in consternation of the

magnificent creatures in front of her, she saw the first villagers gathering in groups, preparing themselves for the morning shift. Saws, ropes, headgear and carts were being collected from the storage buildings near the forest. She tried, pressing her eyelids together so as to make her vision narrower and sharper, to distinguish the individual people, to see their faces and to try to recognize them. Malgi perhaps, who usually preferred working the morning shift. Or Zagda. But the people were too far off for her to truly recognize them. And what did she even care? She broke her gaze away, and started running towards the more rocky terrain, away from the sound of scraping saws that began to be heard in the distance. She focused again on the daylight warming her cool face and filling her with energy and satisfaction.

By lunchtime, after having wandered aimlessly around in the desolate landscape, she returned to her village. The old hut, made by her grandfather who she had never known, was almost indistinguishable from the ones that stood around it. The hut was home to her grandmother, aunts and nieces. It was her home as well, though nobody truly felt that way, least of all Tlana herself. Inside the hut everyone was already eating their soups, made from fish, potatoes and baked ackla berries. While she was eating, silently as always, she thought about what she was going to do in the afternoon. She was supposed to help free some of the trees of the bothersome weed that entangled them, but she knew it was useless. There were always too many people doing the same chore, which only resulted in them getting in the way of each other.

Tlana stirred her soup several times with a fork, and picked out the pieces of fish, or those that looked like they were fish, placing them on the table beside her bowl. Perhaps she would go eastwards, past the town's abandoned storage buildings, and even past the old tree area, where years ago a fire had burned down a small forest that had been growing there for centuries. She had never truly been beyond that black and grey terrain, where the smell of burned plants and wood filled your nose, ushering in the smoke itself that would shortly after fill your lungs and make you cough. The black, almost weightless ashes in that abandoned area were always glad of some company to which they could rub themselves against, after having experienced years and years of complete solitude.

Beyond that dark and uninviting place she had only been one time. And she couldn't remember when. Or why. Or with whom. Yes, she knew for sure now. She would go to the east. Just to see if she could remember anything. Since such a trip was way too long for a single afternoon, she decided she would go the following day. For now, she would just wander around town. Alone, as usual.

Of course, if she had had an animal companion, things would have played out very differently. But she hadn't. The people of her village were all opposed to companions. And even less willing to spend the time and energy required to train them. But Tlana would have done it. She wanted nothing more in her life but to have an animal with whom she could communicate, who would understand her and who could feel and see what she was experiencing. And vice versa of course.

Nevertheless, taking on a companion was an important decision. First of all, you had to find one. Most animals living on the island were just that, animals. Foxes, seals, eagles, goats. But some, those that had appeared after the great shift from centuries ago, were different. They were much smarter, faster, more adapted to the demanding environment. And, with years and years of intensive training, they could learn to understand human thoughts. There could be forged a link between a human and its companion, allowing otherwise impossible things. But of course, there were also disadvantages, Tlana knew.

The consequence that she had most trouble with, was that once an animal had been linked to a human, he could never return to living in the wild. They were shunned by all the other animals. They were doomed to a life of solitude. Or at least to a life with only one friend, a human friend. With that thought Tlana comforted herself. The fact that she didn't have an animal companion also meant that she hadn't stolen anyone's freedom. But still, she desperately wanted something more than the monotonous, meaningless life she was living, having no one around to truly connect with. Ah well, she thought, tomorrow I will be far away from everything. For a while, at least.

2

One of the smooth arrows soared through the dense, dark green forest. Nearly scratching a large, winding tree, it scared away the small birds that were resting themselves on several of its branches, hoping for a quiet afternoon rest. As the arrow flew past several other trees and bushes, it finally smashed into the muscular thigh of a large antelope. With a loud, high-pitched shriek the animal started running, apparently not hindered in the least by the large arrow stuck inside its flesh. Darting through the thick vegetation, Yolulu lost track of him within mere seconds. 'Damn,' she said softly. She had waited for nearly half an hour to get a clear shot on the animal, and now she had lost him.

She seriously disliked it whenever she struck an animal that then didn't die instantly. Or when it wasn't wounded enough for her to track it down and deal it the final blow. However, it was not only her ego that was hurt by her failure to kill an animal. Yolulu knew she was the best hunter from her tribe. Often she would bring home more warthogs, tapirs, birds and deer than anyone else. She had never killed less than six animals on any given day. Nevertheless, she was absolutely sure that even the best had to miss sometimes. That was only human. Every now and again an animal had to slip from the hunter's grasp.

Hunting in the forest was not like cutting down trees or harvesting grain. There was skill involved, and all sorts of considerations to take into account. The wind, the distance, and the many trees and bushes where the animals could hide behind and which could easily deflect or entirely stop arrows from reaching their target. Not to mention of course the labor required for tracking an animal. Though there were plenty of them living in the forest, catching one unaware was a challenge. In truth she didn't care about having lost an animal. The forest was filled with them, and no matter how unlucky she would be, she never had problems procuring the daily amount of six animals that was required of her.

However, what did trouble her mind was the fact that, because of her misdirected shot, a creature was now unnecessarily in pain, wandering through the woods, probably dying a slow, agonizing death. Yolulu was used to it, and she knew it was part of being a huntsman. It was the natural way. Without people hunting animals, men and women

all over the island would starve. Still, she always needed a moment to recompose herself after such a failure. That was the only situation she knew of in which her feelings truly got the better of her. She really disliked what she had done. But only for a moment.

Yolulu continued walking through the forest. With her bow placed on her shoulder, and her quiver hanging from her back, she could easily dart between the trees, automatically avoiding the branches, bones and dead trees that covered the ground. She was so used to this forest, that she felt she knew it by heart. Despite the vastness of it, and the fact that there was little to distinguish one part of the forest from the next, she knew her way around. Most of her tribe preferred hunting on the dry steppes, which were situated closer to the village. Few went beyond the steppes, to the temperate forest where Yolulu spent most of her time. And even fewer ventured into the jungle. The tropical jungle, with its enormous trees and lianas, lay even further away, and was considered more dangerous than either the steppes or the forest. Harvesting jaguars, venomous ants, mosquitoes, and unknown diseases, most people simply avoided it and chose to hunt their animals in safer places.

Yolulu had occasionally been in the jungle. She was not afraid of it, but the journey took several hours. And depending on how many big animals you shot, you had to travel back and forth several times. This made it difficult, since you had only one day in which the six animals had to be hunted. That was the deal. So you had to carefully plan when and where you would be during the day, so as to make sure you would not wind up with either too few animals, or with a pitch-black jungle surrounding you. Being in the jungle when night fell was basically a death sentence. And since Yolulu was not fond of planning in the least, the forest and not the jungle was where she spent most of her time. Plentiful animals, little competition, and still close enough to make the journey worthwhile.

After having found a good position, just beneath a fallen tree, Yolulu crouched down. After a while she spotted another deer roaming around in the open spot in front of her. She tried to get a clear shot at it. As she readied her arrow and aimed it at the beautiful animal, ready to release it as soon as the creature turned its neck towards her, something else flew through the air and struck the creature in the

shoulder. Yolulu quickly looked to her right, where the arrow had come from, and spotted a figure aiming another shot at the already wounded deer. Damn, she thought. She raised herself, wanting to confront the other hunter, while at the same time wishing to find another animal to hunt as soon as possible. Commotion always scared animals away.

‘You scared it!’ a man yelled at her.

‘Did not!’ Yolulu answered as she started walking away from him, not in the mood to waste time on the issue.

‘I was aiming right at his neck, and you made it turn!’ the man said.

Yolulu knew who he was. Tsatso was his name, and he was an average huntsman. Less than average in fact. And he was known for trying to blame others of his failures. Usually Yolulu responded fiercely to such insults, but with him, it wasn’t even worth the effort.

‘Hey, don’t walk away from me,’ he said indignantly.

This, coupled with her desire to teach him yet again a lesson of dignity, only encouraged her to quickly dart away from him, into the thickly packed trees. For several seconds she heard his yells and footsteps behind her, getting fainter and fainter. After that, there was only silence. She liked how easily she could outrun her fellow villagers.

After she had shot two fat, colorful birds that were sleeping in one of the middle sized trees, she started walking towards the edge of the forest. The place where the trees became gradually less densely spaced, and where the dry atmosphere of the steppes began to make itself noticeable. With the dead birds placed on her shoulder, she took several steps in the direction of the steppes. But suddenly she heard an unfamiliar sound to her right.

Having spend most of her life in these woods, she could distinguish every sound that was produced, recognize every song or growl that was made, and she could match it to the animal that was responsible for it. This one was new for her. Dead silent, Yolulu walked carefully towards the sound that was becoming more audible with every step. It almost sounded like something scratching against an iron arrowhead, the ones that several of the hunters she knew used. She had tried it once, but had decided she preferred the lighter, fully wooden arrows she was used to. The sound she now heard seemed intertwined with the gnarling of an animal, probably a warthog, Yolulu thought.

The first thing that crossed her mind was that the animal had

found a lost iron arrowhead, and was investigating it thoroughly. However, as she came closer, she saw that the huge warthog was battling against some sort of iron object, much larger than an arrowhead. It was round and elongated, she saw. In fact, it resembled rather strikingly the object she was carrying on her back, and from which she was so used to draw arrows. She could not see if the thing was hollow or not. It seemed to have at least one sealed lid. What struck her most was the material, for as far as she could see it. It seemed unlike anything she knew, giving off a golden glow, mingled with a dark and deep red.

How in the world did the beast come up with this?, Yolulu thought. She decided that he must have dug it up somewhere. As the warthog struggled with his new toy, ignorant of Yolulu watching him, a hook-shaped part of one of the ends caught on the animal's fang, encouraging him even more in his effort of proving his strength to no one but himself. An even more furious battle between the ferocious animal and the stoic object ensued. As the object was smashed several times against a nearby tree, the sound reverberated through the forest, causing birds to flee from their branches, and rabbits to abandon their burrows. The warthog didn't make a sound when the arrow struck him between the eyes.

3

Why were people always repeating things to him?, Mestavo asked himself. Over and over again. Teacher after teacher. Always coming inevitably back to the same old stories, the same lectures, the same explanations. It was not that they were not interesting in and of themselves. It was just that he had heard them so many times already. He was afraid he couldn't forget them even if he became a hundred years old.

He knew that, being the third son of the emperor, he had no right to the throne, but was expected to advise and counsel the future emperor. In other words, one of his older brothers. And advising meant knowing how the empire fitted together, up to the smallest details. Instead of learning to wield a sword or to pursue something that his heart desired, he had to learn how the Pre-Shift Era had been, how the different parts of the Empire played their roles, and how to address people in court. It was not fair. He got much less prestige and power than his older brothers, yet he needed to work infinitely harder to get it.

But in the end he had learned to live with it, more or less. The obligatory lectures he received each day were repetitious, and he had set himself the goal of gaining some new information with each session, whatever it might be. He asked questions whenever he wanted to know something, and his current teacher at least had the decency to answer them each time in a different manner, though new information was still hard to find beneath the layers of drilled in rules and dogmas. Nevertheless, he usually managed to learn something new. Sort of.

Mestavo knew his teacher was rattling on about something related to historians, whose job it was to reconstruct the Pre-Shift Era, so he figured it was a suitable moment to ask him a related question.

'Teacher, how come there have survived so few documents from before the Shift?'

'Yes, my prince. Few documents have survived from that time. And the ones we do have, are in fact barely readable.'

'So,' Mestavo continued, ignoring the circumvention of his question, 'how can you reconstruct an entire civilization with so few clues?'

‘I wouldn’t say there weren’t enough clues to show us more or less how life was before,’ the teacher answered. He walked to one of the bookcases and took out a thick volume. He placed it on the table. ‘In this book,’ he gestures in front of him, ‘all the surviving pages we have are gathered. Mind you, this is of course only a copy. And only of the texts that are readable by us. There are many texts from which words and letters might be recognizable, but meaning not at all. And documents that show only strange signs and little drawings are also among the surviving artifacts. We have yet to understand those. That is what our historians are working on at the moment.’

He opened the book, apparently randomly, and started reading some passages.

Great, Mestavo thought, since they had already read and discussed the entire book twice, and that was not even a year ago. But before he could interject, the old teacher started to speak with his low toned voice, conveying determination and an intolerance to interruptions. Whenever he used that tone, it was better not to immediately go against it. For your own sake.

‘This is one of the passages we have recovered from a large, heavily damaged book,’ the teacher said, and he started reading in a deep, ominous voice:

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

He flipped a couple of pages. ‘Here we have a passage from another book:’

No one has crossed through the mountains for twelve leagues it is darkness throughout, dense is the darkness, and light there is none.

‘And this one is slightly more incomprehensible, but we can still grasp the message:’

*No more shall ye behold such sights of woe,
Deeds I have suffered and myself have wrought;
Henceforward quenched in darkness shall ye see
Those ye should ne'er have seen; now blind to those
Whom, when I saw, I vainly yearned to know.*

‘And it goes on, even more terrible sounding:’

*Dark, dark! The horror of darkness, like a shroud,
Wraps me and bears me on through mist and cloud.
Ah me, ah me! What spasms athwart me shoot,
What pangs of agonizing memory?*

‘Yes, I know,’ Mestavo said in spite of himself, interrupting the old man before he could continue any further. ‘They all speak of darkness, and something that seems to be destroying them and their society. But perhaps this is only a very small portion of what there existed. These texts look quite diverse, so maybe they are just an insignificant selection. And perhaps we interpret it completely wrong. There are so many things that make no sense at all. How can we know what they really mean?’

‘That of course,’ the teacher said, ‘is the work of the historians.’

Mestavo had already feared that answer. It got him nowhere. One day, he would be able to speak with one of those supposed historians. But until then, he just had to accept the answers his teacher gave him.

But Mestavo’s current preoccupations were not predominantly with the unanswered historical, social and political questions. The fact that he had dozens of women that wanted to marry him, bothered him significantly more. Women in their twenties, the one more noble and more beautiful than the other. All trying to get his hand in marriage. However rich they already were, however high they were born, nothing could match being the wife of an emperor’s son, even if that son was the third son and would have no more chance at becoming emperor than any other man living on the island. Succession went from first born son, to second born son, and then to first born nephew, second born nephew, and so forth. The high fertility of the family ensured that this could go on almost indefinitely, and the system prevented serious

rivalry between brothers. All this didn't take away the fact that Mestavo, being a prince, was popular among women.

He didn't think there was anything really wrong with these women. They were kind, amiable ladies, masking well their desires of rising a step on the social ladder. And they brought him the most extravagant gifts from all over the country. Flasks of the most exotic drinks he had ever tasted. Coats made from the most beautiful and mesmerizing materials he had ever laid his eyes on. Puppets that could perform the most extraordinary feats. Truly, he was fond of these gifts.

The problem was, however, that he was not in the least interested in any of those who brought him the presents. In truth, he could not muster up any real feelings or emotions for any of them. For women in general, as a matter of fact. Usually this would not be a big deal, it hadn't been up till now at least. The problem was that, since he had turned 20 last year, he had to designate one of the women to be his wife. Within less than a year. He had to choose who he would marry, and there was little time. He had to decide with whom he would spend the rest of his life, day and night. And he had to make the decision before he turned 21.

His teacher was still reading passages from the book that lay in front of him. Fortunately Mestavo noticed from the clock hanging above the door, that it was almost night, which meant the end of his lectures. He had just finished gathering his notebook and quill, when the hand indicated it was 12 o'clock. He said goodbye to his teacher, and left the artificially lit chamber. Since he couldn't get the issue of marriage out of his mind anyway, he decided to go and admire the gifts he had received. The gifts he had received until now, that was. In the upcoming months he would receive many, many more. Perhaps exposing himself to the matter might serve as a useful therapy. Or perhaps the complete opposite. He didn't know.

Mestavo went into his Treasure Chamber, the name he had chosen for the room that housed a variety of items, ranging from childhood dolls to swords, and from hand drawn maps of the island to miniatures of his animal companion, the large scorpion he had spent almost all of his free time with when he was young. And of course, the gifts of his

suitors. Several he had already admired at length, whereas others he now barely recognized, or not at all.

Each day women gave him presents. All this went through one of his advisers of course. The women gave his adviser their name and age, and their present. Mestavo then had to decide which gifts he liked most, and the names that accompanied them were retrieved, and those women were invited for an audition where he himself was also present. Out of them he would make a selection. And from those few he had to pick one in the end. But that were worries for the future. The near future, unfortunately. But now the deal was mostly receiving gifts, and picking out the ones he liked most.

However, in the beginning there had been so many suitors, that one of his advisers had taken the task upon himself to help with the sorting of gifts. Therefore, part of what lay in this chamber he himself hadn't even glanced upon. Which, now he thought of it, sort of defied the notion of him choosing the women whose gifts most spoke to him. Whose choice best matched his own. The selection his adviser would make seemed like a weak substitution. But he didn't really care. There were already too many anyway, he had no time to manage it all.

He walked around, looking for something especially worth seeing. Between all the glimmering and shining items that were lying around, one partially exposed object caught his eyes. Covered beneath cups decorated with large, sparkling stones and a set of knives that reflected whatever was directed at them, making them nearly invisible when used, lay a rounded, tube-like object. It was not the shape that had him gaze at the thing without being able to think clearly and coherently. It was the color. A red, darker and more intense than blood. And throughout this, streaks and waves of gold were visible, flowing into, and protruding out of, the deep red. The longer he looked at it, the more captivating it became. So strange and unlike anything he had ever seen, yet at the same time he could not imagine anything more natural in the world that this object that lay in front of him.

Mestavo took it out of the treasure pile, cursing himself for the fact that he had let someone else decide what were the worthwhile gifts and what weren't. He should have been informed about such a marvelous thing, whatever it might turn out to be. He studied it intently. It looked remarkably like a quiver for carrying arrows, only

that the top was covered with some sort of seal, coming from the body itself.

The material must be some sort of metal, Mestavo said to himself. At least it was no wood, stone or ceramic, as he could feel from the texture. He took a magnet out of his pocket, something he always carried with him, and tried to see whether it would stick to the quiver. Not a single shred of magnetic force. He tried opening the seal, but it wouldn't budge a hairsbreadth. He had to know what was inside. He just had to. An object this beautiful? And sealed? It had to contain something of great value. Clutching the red and gold quiver underneath his arm, he ran up the stairs, heading for the imperial blacksmith.

4

Beautiful as always was the ocean. No one could deny it, Garco thought. After he gathered his instruments from the table, making the required movements without even truly noticing them, he opened the door. Darkness still covered the coast town in which he lived. The town in which many generations of his family had spent their time perfecting the art of fishing, making it into the most enjoyable and rewarding occupation that had ever existed. Guided by his candle, Garco strode along the gravel roads towards the coast. Practice had taught that being at sea with first light, fishing gear already deployed, yielded the most gain. There were many different types of fish, ranging from large, two meter long algae eating species, to deadly carnivores of less than a centimeter in length.

The majority of these were attracted to the first minutes of light after they had spent the previous twelve hours in complete darkness. In the morning, the little light that penetrated the water would wake them and draw them towards the surface. Ideal for the fishermen that awaited them with their nets and hooks, adjusted to avoid the most dangerous species, and carefully balanced between yielding the most kilograms of meat and giving the equipment the longest lifespan. The nets were made from the almost unbreakable kihka fibers, extracted from agave-like plants found in the western forest, all the way at the other end of the island. These fibers were the only lightweight material that would resist the ferocious teeth of the sea creatures for more than a couple of months. If not overly burdened, they could last for years.

Garco had reached his boat, given to him by his father, after it had become clear that Garco's older brother, Gatosch, would neglect and even abandoned his duty and privilege of living a fisherman's life. Though everyone in his family had noticed the lack of enthusiasm shown by Gatosch for the family fishing business, all had been devastated when the 17 year old boy had truly and definitively decided to leave the coast, to forsake the sea, and to abandon the perfect life of a fisherman. He had decided to enter into the sorrowful trade of a merchant, and had moved to the Midlands.

Garco had seen his brother on several occasions, and apparently he had done quite well for himself. But he wouldn't switch places with him

for anything in the world. Fishing was everything for Garco, all other things he would rather keep at the other side of the ocean, beyond the ferocious winds, horrendous torrents and deadly currents.

Having rowed several meters offshore, he stopped to prepare his instruments and gear. Soon now the darkness would flee from the light, providing the ideal moment for catching large amounts of fish. Throwing his eleven month old net overboard, he thought of the sea, with all of its beauties. Tranquility, alternated with majestic and devastating power and destruction. Beautiful and demanding respect. Stories of brave, or foolish, men that had crossed the border were plentiful. No one who had ventured more than two kilometer off shore had ever returned from the wild torments, hurricanes and lightning storms that reigned there.

Wondering about this paradoxical notion of something so gorgeous being so devastating at the same time, he was suddenly rushed out of his line of thought, as he felt the net catching on something heavy. With enthusiasm he thought about what it might be. However, as several seconds went by without the prey trying to put the net out of its capturer's hands, the idea of having hooked onto some living thing abandoned Garco fairly quickly.

Perhaps just a stray log, or a poisoned or injured sea creature, he thought. Garco began pulling in the net. As several small, slimy fish and algae began to emerge from the water, struggling to escape their newly formed prison, something else came with them as well. The rounded contours of an object emerged, clearly not an animal or anything related to it, given the smoothness and the straight lines of the thing. Garco's aversion to the new and the unknown, especially when not directly related to the fishing business, quickly overcame his instinctive sense of curiosity.

He finished taking the net and its content into his small boat. After he had placed the small fish into a basket, he reluctantly brushed off the debris in which his other catch was covered. The tube-like object that emerged appeared to consist of some sort of metal he had never seen before. The surface glittered red and gold, and it looked to Garco to be very recently deposited, given the complete lack of rust and erosion.

He couldn't just throw it back into the ocean. He knew that.

But neither did he have an interest in trying to open the lid, which looked as if it could be unlocked. The fact that he had no idea where the object could have come from bothered him slightly. He pondered the possibility that it had drifted to this place from beyond. From whatever beauties or horrors that lay beyond the border. But that couldn't be. Nothing had ever crossed the border that was located all around the island, always at around two kilometers distance from the shores.

Of course, many people had tried. But all the boats had been crushed by the enormous waves, and most of the people had either been hit by lightning, killed by one of the large sea creatures that occasionally seemed to roam there, or had simply drowned. There were survivors however. But the few people who were unfortunate enough to survive reaching the border had from that point on completely lost their minds, and were unable to do anything, or to even recount what had happened to them. Those few that didn't lose their minds were determined never to try such a journey ever again, and refused to give details of their adventure to anyone.

Besides the many boats and ships that had given it a try, there had also been airships. Wooden constructions with sails, resembling large ships, that could fly through the sky. They had been specifically built by the Empire to explore the outer ocean. But had failed again and again, just as miserably as the boats had. With the only difference being that there had been no survivors whatsoever, just pieces of wood and sails. It goes without saying that the Empire soon gave up such enterprises.

Remembering that, Garco was sure the object had not come from beyond. And with that knowledge, he decided to just ignore the rest of it. He continued with his daily business of rowing over the water, throwing his nets out, catching dozens of fish, and enjoying the tranquility all of this gave him. At the end of the day, Garco slowly rowed back to the shore. He looked at the baskets he had managed to fill with fish, and was content.

However, the thing that was lying besides the baskets managed to scour off some of his happiness. He could not decide what to do. Throwing it overboard again was no option, he thought. For that it was just a fraction to uncommon and out of the ordinary. He just couldn't do it. As he stepped on shore, he froze because of a sudden realization.

‘Of course,’ he exclaimed, more to himself than to anyone else. ‘This is precisely something that Gatosch would be interested in. Or at least something that he would know how to handle. ‘Why didn’t I think of this before?’

In a rush of brotherly love and obligation, he decided that he would visit Gatosch, taking the queer object with him. He just hoped that his brother still occupied the same market stance, because searching for him in the enormously crowded and suffocating city simply went too far. Now already he dreaded taking on the long journey, away from the boat he cherished and away from the sea he knew so well.

5

Digging, as usual, Johteng thought as he lifted himself from his orderly kept bed in the corner of the small, rectangular compartment. The five others living there were also getting up, some grumpy and muttering to themselves, but most just solemnly and contently doing their daily business.

‘Digging?’, Johteng asked the muscular man doing his morning stretches. ‘Nope, I finally get to go to sorting. So make sure you guys break the stones up as small as you can!’, he said with a wry smile covering his face.

Johteng enjoyed the few breaths of fresh air he could get before descending into the enormous, underground mining systems. Humming one of his favorite songs, he got into the line before the entrance. He picked up his mouth cap, pickaxe, freshly washed sweat cloth, lunchbox, water bottle and emergency torch. Sticking the items in his pockets and along his belt, and swinging his pickaxe over his shoulder, he followed the rest of the workers into the narrow passages of the mines.

Singing with the rest of his team, he walked for half an hour towards Area C, Tunnel 14. Taking a left turn, continuing for ten minutes, and turning left into a large passageway, they finally reached the spot they had been working at for the last two weeks. Johteng worked together with Lesno and Irik, his closest companions, alternating the straining efforts needed for working with the almost impenetrable rock formations.

While Johteng was hacking away at the more breakable and manageable parts of the damaged stone walls at the sides, waiting for his turn at the much heavier job of trying to remove pieces from the still untouched rock surfaces that lay before them, he tried to calculate how many years he had been working at the mines.

At 12 he had started working with his father in the mines. His entire village worked there. Well, at least the ones who were resilient enough, he thought. Johteng liked the hard work, and the sense of doing something worthwhile. The stones and metals they found were extremely useful and in high demand. Gems were luxury items for the elite, and so were several other metals, such as silver and gold. But most

in demand were of course the really useful materials, such as the magnetic stones. They were used throughout the island, and featured in various trades, in battles, and of course in the Magames, the highly popular and entertaining games that were played all over the world. Even though Johteng had never witnessed a professional Magame, he thought he would truly enjoy it. He knew little about the game itself. That it were two teams playing against each other, trying to throw magnetic pebbles at the other team's iron spikes to gain points, while the members of the other team tried to deflect them, using their own magnets, he knew. But Johteng found the exact rules and practices confusing and ambiguous. Then again, there had to be many regional variations as well, he imagined.

'19 years already,' he said to himself, slightly surprised. 'Well, minus the two years spent recovering from my injured leg,' he murmured to himself, trying not to think of the hardship he had gone through when he had been forced to stay at home, unable to walk or do anything else. He had been lucky that the medic had said that a full recovery was very likely, else his employer would probably have searched for a permanent replacement. After all, the mining federation had to provide the Empire with a fixed amount of stones and minerals. There were plenty of workers of course, but not everyone was fit enough to do the tasks that were needed. Johteng had a rather high post he was proud of, and he wouldn't want to lose it to someone else because of an injured leg. But that was all in the past now. For the last couple of years he had been fully well, and enjoyed the work in the mine more than ever.

As he hacked away at the stones, his mind began to wander again. Somewhere behind him a man was humming the tune of a song that Johteng had almost forgotten about. The song told about the wonders and mysteries that were hiding in places all over the island. Not only in the caves and mines, but also deep inside the dark forests, in the dry deserts and in the cold, dreary seas. For as long as anyone could remember there had existed hidden mysteries, unknown creatures and mysterious forces, whose origin no one knew, nor dared to find out. The song sang of trees that recited poetry which lured travelers and enticed their hearts. Of sea creatures that dragged unsuspecting seamen down with them, subsequently preventing them from suffocating by

giving them gills to breath. Of desert beings that hid underneath the sand, waiting to catch anything or anyone that walked upon them. Of snakes that could entangle a man's mind. Of wolves that could bite through a man's willpower. Of eagles that picked at people's sanity. And of rivers, slowly shaping the ground around them to their will. Of mountains, ranging from warm comfort to cold despair. Of grasslands, where falling raindrops were caught by millions of tiny blades. Of dunes, whose inclination kept the uncountable grains of sand in permanent movement. Of all these things the song sang, and of many more. Johteng had heard it often in his childhood, and he had wondered about the many strange things the world held in reserve.

Since he had joined the workers in the mine, he had begun to lose his interest in the mysteries that lay beyond the underground passageways. He focused mostly on the mines and the stones within. And of course the dangers that lurked in the darkness. Hearing the song again made him nostalgic. He regretted that he couldn't spend more time in the outside world. But that was just a momentary itching, and it quickly subsided. He had long since accepted his work in the mines. It was hard work, but he had gotten used to it. During the arduous hours of working with the pickaxe, he could turn his mind to blank if he wanted to. He had learned to escape to the inner part of himself, where life was tranquil and quiet, without worries and without pain.

The lack of light and the heavy, dusty air did little to him when he was in that inner sanctuary. His muscles were doing the continuous hacking, while his thoughts seemed to be completely separated, living a life of their own, without the suffering and the boredom. Mostly during the time between work, and whenever he got to go to sorting or selecting, did the two truly join together again. Those were the moments he was most content. The moments he was fully aware of what he was doing, and enjoyed it.

He noticed the man behind him had stopped humming. He wanted to turn around to see the reason for the sudden stop, but as he did so, something else overruled his focus of attention. He looked to his right, as he suddenly heard a deafening crack and the sound of stones tumbling down. It was not uncommon for parts of the underground mines to collapse, crushing or trapping the people

working there. This time they just seemed to have stumbled upon a hollow part of the rock formation, a hidden cave deep under the surface of the earth. That happened occasionally.

The dust settled down, and everyone was trying to peek at the newly discovered cavity. ‘That’s a big one,’ Irik exclaimed. ‘You can say that,’ Johteng affirmed in a low voice, as he picked up a torch and slowly entered the hole in the wall. As always, his interest was spurred by the prospect of discovering new, unknown objects. However, he did not immediately see any glittering of metals or gems trapped inside the walls of the cave. Johteng was one of the few who had specialized himself in recognizing rocks and minerals, and was often employed when such new caves were encountered. He loved it. He knew they needed to inform a headman before entering a new cave, but still, he couldn’t resist the temptation of moving around, of scanning the cavity all by himself.

He moved his light alongside the newly discovered walls. Suddenly he saw a reflection in the distance. These things always got him excited. The notion that something worthwhile was within his reach, but without knowing what exactly it was. And then being the first to discover it? It made his blood rush.

He walked towards it, minding his steps carefully.

‘What do you see,’ someone called out to him.

‘Nothing yet,’ Johteng yelled over his back.

Nothing but the shiny object lying in front of him. Illuminating it with his torch, he removed some of the dust and gravel that covered the object. This is no stone, nor a gem or mineral, he thought. The rounded edges, the strange color, the shape. He lifted it and was surprised by its lightness. This was something different.

He enjoyed discovering beautiful stones, sometimes even unknown types. But not something so utterly different. He didn’t know how to handle it. He heard people walking towards him.

‘What have you found,’ Lesno asked.

‘I truly have not the slightest idea,’ Johteng answered honestly. As his hand moved along the object, feeling its curves and shapes, he noticed that there was some sort of mechanism on top that seemed to seal the tube.

‘Hey, can you get it open,’ someone said?

Johteng didn't answer but started walking back. Back towards the place where he had left his pickaxe.

She was slowly eating her breakfast, forcing herself to eat every last bit, knowing that without it she wouldn't be able to spend the entire day walking through the snow. The people she shared her house with all ate together. Every adult woman cooked something, and shared it with the rest. To Tlana's right stood some steamed fish, covered with salt and seasoning. To her left stood a bowl with indistinguishable meat, probably having belonged to a deer or a pig. And in front of Tlana there was an extremely large bowl of baked ackla berries, a so called specialty of her aunt.

Very few people liked the flavor of the berries. They were hard and prickly on the outside, when you bit them they released a sour flavor, and the inside was comparable to cooked potatoes, only more viscous and completely devoid of flavor. However, there existed nothing that could match the nutritious value they had. One could survive an entire lifetime, without illnesses or weaknesses, on just the ackla berries. If you did, however, you were likely to rip out your tongue after a couple of weeks, fed up with the boring, tasteless substance. Therefore the daily delivery caravans, organized by the empire, provided not only the berries, but also other nourishments such as rice, wheat, various fruits, meat, and fish.

Given Tlana's aversion to animal meat, she was forced to eat mostly bread, fruits and ackla berries, and had become fairly used to it by now. Baking them, as her aunt did, failed to make them any tastier however. But, since there was surprisingly little else on the breakfast table, she was forced to eat the berries nonetheless. When finally she had finished, she quickly packed her bag with some bottles filled with water and a package of berries, and started on her day-journey to the east.

She stumbled between the rocks and shabby bushes, occasionally sinking deep into the cold, melting snow. She was imagining how nice it would be if she would have someone to play with, someone who shared her joy and thoughts. An animal she could race with through the snow, trying to catch it, trying to think of where next it would place its soft paws. She could see herself huddled up with it, far away from the people of her village, far away from everything that bothered her. She walked through the deserted landscape, thinking about all this. And

given the fact that deep thoughts rarely preferred the company of well coordinated movements, Tlana finally stumbled and fell on the ground. Her foot slipped from one of the protruding stones, and as she fell, she felt something smooth brush against her leg, a substance not quite like ice. As she lay there, her face comfortably cushioned by the snow, her pride slightly less, she tried to figure out what it had been. Most likely it was just a rock covered in ice. But it did feel differently.

As she got up, she looked behind her, trying to see the thing she had felt so clearly. Something lay there. Most of it was still covered by loose snow, but she was sure the thing was not natural. It had to be human made. She walked closer and used her hands to remove the snow. As she pulled the object free, she was stunned by what she saw. The intense red and gold burned her eyes. It was almost like looking at the morning light, only more pronounced, more satisfying even.

‘What in world is this?’ she asked herself. She dug into her memory, trying to find something she could relate the object to, something she had heard or seen before. But nothing occurred to her. At most it looked like a quiver, used for hunting and fighting by villages in the West and by the imperial army. The feeling it gave her though, convinced her that it was no ordinary quiver. Perhaps a kind of container, used for storing some important or valuable object?, she wondered.

She noticed that at the bottom of it there was a mechanism attached, holding a lid in place. The mechanism, covered in ice, yielded not a millimeter under Tlana’s efforts to force it open. She struggled with it, but all she managed to get were some obvious realizations. For example, it became evident to her that the lid indicated the top of the object, not the bottom. That didn’t help her, though. Finally her curiosity got the better of her. Carefully aiming, she swung the quiver at a nearby rock. Thung. Nothing. Again she struck the beautiful object against the stone. And again. Being partly frozen ought to weaken the thing, shouldn’t it? Panting, she adjusted her position and kept creating a regular noise of metal against stone, which could be heard for kilometers around her in the desolate landscape. Sweat streamed along her back.

Finally, out of breath and temped to give up the effort, she saw a small crack appearing. This crack, newly born and without any intent

or effort to influence anything or anyone in its immediate surrounding or beyond, managed to give Tlana a new boost of energy. She continued hitting the object against the rock, and finally heard a slightly different bang as the object connected with the stone. She hit it again, and the mechanism dropped off. Holding the quiver still, she looked at it. She was afraid to open the lid, but she was also unable to ignore the mysteriousness and attractiveness of the object and what it might contain. Could it be dangerous? she asked herself. What else could she do but open it? Several minutes passed as she tried to think of the best thing to do. Then, in a rush of boldness, she sat on the ground, placed the quiver between her legs, and carefully pulled off the cover. Slowly the lid began to budge, and then suddenly it flung open.

The brightest light Tlana had ever seen shone from the object. It made the already light environment around her several times more intense. A beam of brightness rose from the opened lid and expanded towards every direction imaginable. She was blinded by it, as well as exalted. The feeling she got from the morning light shining upon her face was nothing compared to this pleasure. Like she had been living in the darkness all her life. As if until now, the nightly twelve hours of full darkness had just alternated with twelve hours of a less intense darkness during the day. This, this was real brightness. No fire could match it. She was unable to stare directly into it, and looking to the side of it was only just bearable. After several minutes however, her caution regained the upper hand, and she carefully closed the lid again. The light disappeared instantly, leaving her in complete darkness until her eyes adjusted to the low daylight she had been used to all her life.

Slowly she started to worry. What if this thing is dangerous, or harmful? Or what if it runs out? And perhaps more fundamentally, what in the world is it? She could not think of anything alike, and she had not seen anything comparable during her 17 years in this world. How could light be contained in such a manner? Of course you could store and move light, like a torch or candle. But this was something quite different. And the brightness...somehow, she had a bad feeling about it. And now she didn't know what to do.

She carefully weighed her options. Giving it to the elders of her village would probably not work. Though they had more knowledge than she did, they were highly conservative and would just ignore it or

send it directly to the emperor. She had to find out for herself what the thing was, and what she had to do with it. For now she would hide it, and try to get her hands on some information. But information about what? She had no points to connect to, nothing similar she could relate it to. But she would come up with something, in the end. In the meantime she dared not use it again. Who knew what could happen? Better safe than sorry, she thought.

After she had returned to her room, her day-journey to the ash fields abandoned, she unraveled the object from the coat in which she had wound it. She stared at it, turning it around, trying to find some sort of clue. What has this container to do with the light that was stored inside? she asked herself. Why does it contain such a powerful brightness? What is it for? She dared not open it again, and after a while she put it away, frustrated with not finding any answers.

She looked at her hourglass. Five minutes until darkness. Should she open it in the dark, to see what would happen? If the light was already that bright during the day, she could not imagine its intensity when everything around it was covered in black. But perhaps it would do something completely different this time, she thought. She looked at the hourglass again. 'Four minutes,' she said to herself, as she started to search for a candle. At that instance, the light suddenly and unexpectedly went out and her heart almost froze. She gasped. This had never happened before, as far as she knew. She had just looked at the time, and there had still been several minutes left, she was sure.

Was her hourglass broken? Was it tempered with? It couldn't be. The devices were made from the best materials, and she had never heard of one being defective. They measured precisely the twelve hours of daylight, and the twelve hours of following nighttime, without exception. They even had built in mechanisms to ensure their accuracy, and they could be adjusted if, for example, they fell and were slightly disrupted. The Empire had made sure of the quality and correctness of these portable hourglasses, since everyone relied so heavily upon the light during the day, and since horrible things could happen if the darkness caught you off guard, when you didn't have any torches or other fires to provide you with at least some source of light to reach safety.

The imperials made sure that everyone in the Empire would have such a flawless and unbreakable hourglass. But the alternative to a broken hourglass was even more unacceptable. Why in the world would night suddenly come several minutes earlier than it had always come?

Yolulu was becoming slightly angry with the fake quiver she was holding. She struggled to get the half torn mechanism off, the mechanism that held the seal in place. After half an hour of tearing and yanking, she finally managed to break it off. Hastily she opened the lid, but before she could bend over to look inside, the bright light threw her back. The object fell, and so did Yolulu. The beam of light shone vertically through the thick forest, illuminating everything in its path and washing away the colors of the trees and birds that dwelled there.

After recovering from the first shock, Yolulu quickly got up and walked towards the object, shading her eyes from the brightness. Without looking directly at the source, she grabbed blindly at the lid, finally finding it with her fingers. Quickly she placed it back on the quiver, and the light extinguished. What remained was only the normal light of day, the soft, dim illumination that allowed her to hunt in the forest and steppes.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘never seen something quite as bright.’ The initial shock quickly faded however, and she started thinking of whether she could use it for something. Though light was certainly essential for trapping animals, too much of it might scare them away. Besides, the standard twelve hours she had were more than enough. When the darkness settled she would eat by the light of burning fires, and afterwards she would sleep in her simple bed, dreaming of catching enormous beasts and tricking the most ingenious species known to mankind.

Perhaps, she pondered, it could be used as a quiver for her arrows. It weighed almost nothing. And the sight of it was quite impressive. Too much reflection, she thought, it would scare away the animals. And besides, she was proud of the quiver she herself had made on her 15th birthday, the day on which she had been accepted to the group of men and women that hunted the lands. Moreover, a quiver that blinded everything whenever you opened it seemed like a terrible item to have.

Yolulu saw no reason to bring the thing back to her village. It would only cause envy, discontent or something else undesirable. Much simpler to just hide it in the forest, where it came from. Since she knew the forest by heart, it was easy for her to find a suitable spot to store

the red and golden object. Covering it up carefully and erasing her tracks as much as possible, thus reducing the chance of an animal finding it and deciding to play with it, she returned to her village.

She looked at her hourglass which indicated that only eleven minutes of daylight remained. ‘Well, I’ve seen enough brightness today anyhow,’ she muttered under her breath. As she strode into the village, darkness abruptly fell. Somewhere in her mind she registered that it fell significantly sooner than usual. As much as she was used to it, the sudden shift of lightness into darkness always caught her slightly off guard. One instance she could see everything around her, the next she didn’t see a single thing. That was of course why the fires were always lit before the night fell, and why it was so important to be back in the village before 12 o’clock.

Yolulu approached one of the fires. Around it sat several people. Guagua, Lurulu, Checheche, Kinini. All nice people, she thought. But she had already decided not to tell anyone about what she had found today. Why would she, it would only cause envy. Or unnecessary rivalry.

They ate around the fire, and for once, not all conversations were centered around the yields of the day. Some were talking of how night had come earlier that day. Others were disputing this claim, saying that it was impossible. Since none of them was entirely sure of what they had seen or noticed, being caught quite off guard by the unique happening, the issue was soon discarded, and everyone began boasting about how many animals they had killed, and about how ferocious they had been.

Tonight, as many nights before, Yolulu noticed how little sympathy everyone had for the forest and the animals living within. Hunting was of course the most thrilling and exciting thing there was, Yolulu was the first to agree. It was just that nobody seemed to care about anything else. At all. She had already stopped telling everyone about how she would like to travel to other places, of how she desired to learn about the Magames in the North, about the fishing people in the East, and about all the exotic goods traded at the markets found in the middle of the island. Though everyone respected her for the huntswoman she was, Yolulu knew that people called her dream-girl behind her back. She didn’t care. Looking for animals in the vast

woods, chasing a tapir through the rainforest, and searching for gazelles roaming on the stretched out steppes, she enjoyed it all.

Especially when her companion was with her. The enormous, swift hawk could see for kilometers in the distance, and could spot animals so far away that she herself had to run for half an hour before she could see them. Through her connection with him she always knew where to go, where to find most animals and how to lead them into a trap. But where was he? she thought. She had grown up with him, spending most of their childhood together. From the time she turned 15 and truly needed to hunt in order to meet her daily quota, they had spent less and less time together. It seemed rather contradictory to her, having a companion so useful for aiding her in her obligations, but spending less time with him from the moment those obligations truly came into view. But it was alright, it didn't matter. She knew it was not because they lacked a tight bond or didn't love each other. She knew he simply needed to fly, he needed to spread his wings and discover new territories, find new landscapes and sights to behold. She also knew that other animals shunned him. But still, he could go anywhere he wanted to. She envied him, with all his freedom. But at the same time she was happy for him. And she missed him. Occasionally he would fly by and land on her shoulder, and she would know that everything was all right. And oftentimes she could feel he was somewhere close by, even though her eyes failed to locate him.

She finished her dinner and walked along the dimly lit path towards her hut. Tomorrow I'll hunt me some tapir, she thought. And some wolves, they are always a challenge. As she tossed her body onto the old, hard bed, the strange light emitting object had already vanished from her mind.

The next morning however, Yolulu woke up with a feeling of dread. Something was bothering her, and she didn't know what. As this was very unusual for her, she started to worry. Which was even more unusual. The only thing that had truly been different in the last week was the quiver she had found and opened, so she blamed it on that. Especially the fact that she had hidden it and kept it quiet for everyone else. That sounded like something that could keep one's mind troubled, Yolulu reasoned. After all, the forest belonged to the entire tribe, as did

the things in it. Animals that had been slain were never kept silent, and were usually boasted about.

That was it, she thought. She should have simply bragged about having found the strange object, not keep it quiet. For some reason she hadn't, and now she could feel the consequences. Unwilling to uncover the quiver and show it to the tribes people, she decided she would make a story out of it. Of how she had found it, what it had looked like, and then how she had lost it. People always liked stories about the forest that were drenched in beauty and mystery. And whether they would believe her or not, it didn't really matter. At least her subconscious mind would be at ease. And therefore her conscious mind as well, she guessed.

‘But why?’ he asked.

‘Well, young prince, because not everyone is satisfied with the Empire looking after their interests,’ answered the teacher in a slightly exhausted voice.

‘Not everyone appreciates the security the emperor provides for his people. Some simply have the urge to rebel, no matter the motive or purpose, and no matter the situation they are in. They do not care for the consequences, they do not care for the damage they deal others by their misconduct. Fortunately, those cases are extremely rare and always controllable.’ He ended his sentence with a definitive tone.

Mestavo didn’t believe a word his teacher told him.

‘And what then of the many reports flooding in, telling of ambushes, skirmishes by groups of bandits, sabotages caused by crooks? Surely they are not made up entirely, and the sheer quantity of the reports must indicate that something is seriously amiss,’ he tried to argue, using his most convincing facial expressions and body language.

The system of justice that the empire adhered to had seemed infallible. Mestavo acknowledged that he could see no system more just than what the Empire had constructed over the years. If everyone kept to their place and did their job, than the system would work. And it had, for several centuries at least. But Mestavo had come to learn that it was in the nature of humans to complain, to feel dissatisfied. Hard and unforgiving penalties seemed the only solution to this, he had thought. But apparently that had not been enough. It worked most of the times, but certainly not always. And there had been increasing amounts of criminality lately. In the past, he himself had often insisted on more severe punishments, even for petty crimes, but in the end he had to admit that often the results were not what he wanted or envisioned them to be. Despite that, he knew of no better solution.

‘There is nothing to worry about, I assure you, my prince,’ his teacher continued.

‘The Empire has stationed troops in every corner of the island, and on the main roads there are watchtowers with never more than one kilometer of distance between them, enough so that each tower can communicate with the next, using the communication-magnets. So rest

assured, if something would be out of order, we would know it within a day, and most of the time we would be able to react almost immediately. The reports you are talking about are mere rumors, or occasional accidents that require attention.'

'Yes, but what if the targets of the rebels are the towers? At least that is what I would do. Piece by piece attacking small groups of our guards, so as not to cause an uproar and risk having us send in a large army. And as you say, the troops are spread throughout the Empire, making them more vulnerable. Don't you see that?'

'You will be among the first to hear if anything goes amiss, I assure you,' the teacher answered, sounding as if he had become fed up with the subject. 'Besides, it is not your concern. Your father, and later your brother, will decide how to employ the army, and how to prevent chaos from reaching our doorsteps. Now we must continue with the lecture, before night falls. Where were we again?' he asked.

Oh dear, here we go, Mestavo said to himself in despair. Every time his teacher had to remind himself of where they had remained in their lectures, he would summarize almost everything they had covered that day. These repetitions were more for himself than for anyone else, Mestavo figured. After all, his teacher was an old man. And truth be told, Mestavo had only himself to blame, trying to question things that ought not to be questioned. He could also choose to let the teacher rattle on with his story without him interrupting, but he preferred to learn new things. Not merely the stuff he had been told all his life. So, in spite of himself, he tried to gather new information whenever he could. But for every successful new piece of knowledge he had to pay the price of ten failings, a couple of annoyances and a large amount of extra repetition.

Before the interruption, the old teacher had been lecturing about the importance of the Maga games, which were the primary form of entertainment all throughout the empire. However, he began to summarize the introductory summary he had given at the beginning of the lecture. Mestavo's thoughts began to flee at the prospect.

'At the time of the Shift,' he began, 'the world as we know it came into being. Before that time, commonly thought to have been 820 years ago as of this year, the world was arranged quite differently. The sparse sources that have survived, stemming from this Pre-Shift Era,

can provide us with glimpses into the past. Despite the inconsistencies and incoherencies of the records, what can be extracted is that the world was very different from what we live in nowadays. There seemed to be chaos everywhere. Darkness, hunger, despair and discontent reigned in the Pre-Shift world. There were no intelligent animals and no ackla berries or other staple foods that could sustain the entire population. There was no stable, reliable separation between night and day, between light and darkness. There was no common tongue, so that people couldn't understand what other people were saying or writing. And there was no system to protect the people from the various treats that arose throughout the world. Whether this unsustainable situation caused the shift, or whether it was something else entirely, we do not know.

What is clear is that from around 800 years ago, things improved beyond believing. The imperial family established peace and order in our world, implemented a common language for everyone, ensured that no one would perish from lack of food or water, and arranged that every part of the island would contribute one or several of the essential products needed for living a satisfactory life.'

Mestavo knew better than to interrupt the old man. The prince had been told all his life that the world that was before, the Pre-Shift world, had been a terrible place. But everyone also told him that there were almost no surviving records, no books that told of the horrific and chaotic life at that time, no documents providing insights into the how and why of the society that was before. Only glimpses, only parts of letters and strips of paper survived. And even then, only a minority was written in the common tongue. The rest was pure gibberish. What was readable did often speak of darkness and suffering, but certainly not always. So why this strong conviction? Why this certainty of the terribleness of before? As a child he had never questioned the things his father and older brothers had told him. But when he grew up, Mestavo began to doubt their words and unfounded assumptions more and more. He had learned not to trust anyone, and to take each promise with a bag of salt.

Ever since they had taken away his companion, his beautiful scorpion with whom he had spend large parts of his childhood and adolescence, he had doubted their words. They had done it just so that

he would focus more on his future, on his obligatory lectures and instructions. And they had succeeded, he thought bitterly. He still held the hope that his companion had walked away by himself, that he had left of his own accord. But deep down he knew that was not the case. Deep down he knew his scorpion had been killed, murdered. He had felt it happen, and he knew that had been the only way to keep the two of them from joining again. Until this day, he oftentimes felt a rush of anger towards his father, whom he suspected of orchestrating the murder. And now he tried to show his small scale defiance by making unc customary inquiries, by questioning the Empire. Perhaps that was why they had now assigned him such a stubborn, old teacher who was a master at avoiding his direct questions.

‘And maintaining this order and secure environment is of the utmost importance,’ the man sitting in front of him continued. ‘As long as everyone keeps fulfilling his or her tasks as assigned to them, no one will suffer from hunger or a lack of anything else. The farmers in the Northeast provide all the necessary ackla for the island, the fishermen in the East give us all the marine products we need, from the South come the trees with their invaluable wood, from the mines in the Southwest we are provided with every stone, gem and magnet we can wish for, the West gives us dozens of different animal species, essential for their meat, furs and bones, the volcanoes in the Northwest give us all the necessary obsidian, and so forth.

The imperial caravans ensure that every corner of the island receives its fair share of the materials. The rest is stored in the North, for when nature strikes an area with disaster. The marketplace in the Midlands, with its merchants and traders, takes care of all the less essential goods and their distribution. And,’ he said while pointing his wrinkled, old finger in the direction of Mestavo, ‘of course there is the army that keeps the peace and prevents anyone from disturbing or troubling the population. From every part of the island soldiers are recruited for this purpose. They are trained extensively and are provided with everything they need. Intelligent rhinoceroses and horses from the eastern inlands, obsidian blades and daggers from the Northwest, and magnetic armor made here in the city. But, as we have mentioned in the last couple of weeks, an army alone is not enough to keep the population satisfied. The Maga games are highly popular with

everyone in this realm, and staging these games keeps the population satisfied and without any desire to rebel.’

Well, that was true for sure, Mestavo thought. The games were indeed extremely exiting, and he loved to watch them, whenever he could. The agility shown by the players was astounding, and you could really feel the tension rising as the players threw their magnetic discs towards the goals, while the opponents tried to deflect them, pulling off the most amazing feats.

‘If I remember well, we had stopped at the games themselves,’ the old man said thoughtfully. Mestavo gave a slight nod. This specific nod usually indicated that his mind was going to choose its own path. His teacher would usually pull off the astonishing feat of making something interesting into something quite the opposite, and oftentimes Mestavo was unwilling to let that happen. For several minutes he managed to escape into fantasies of growing up somewhere else, fantasies of having no obligations to fulfill at all.

‘Are you paying attention?’ sounded the old crackly voice which, apparently, still had enough energy in it to jerk Mestavo back to reality.

‘Yes, of course I am.’

‘All right then. As I was saying, records are kept from the teams that have won the yearly championship. Every community has the right to create their own team and to compete for the honor of winning the prestigious cup. Not only are the names of the members of a winning team engraved into the city’s outer walls, the members also gain the privilege to permanently live in the imperial city, if they choose to. And if they fit the requirements of course.’

Mestavo’s attention began to fail once again.

‘From the time the records have been kept, exactly 367 years ago, the walls have filled up with names of victorious teams, a testament to the unity and well functioning of our Empire. The first of these glorious teams had chosen the name of Speedy Serpents, which was carved into the upper right corner of the central wall. The Speedy Serpents chose dark, red obsidian to use as a filling for their carved in name. After that, an even more impressive tournament was held, in which the Agile Sparrows were victorious. They chose to...’

Mestavo’s thoughts had now truly wandered away, though

unfortunately not towards the direction of warm and joyful fantasies. Instead, he began to think about the thing that had kept paying regular visits to his mind lately. After he had opened the mysterious tube-like object, a gift from one of the women that wanted his hand in marriage, he had lost his interest for the things the other women offered him. All the jewels, robes and weapons had now completely lost their appeal to him. Even the occasional automaton or enchanted mirror, which portrayed the viewer in a different landscape each time the mirror was used, had become boring. He could not get his head around the strange object. Why was it so captivating? Other things gave light, albeit not so intense. Torches and jars with specific insects certainly could illuminate a dark room. But the quiver's light was a thousand times more intense. Much more so than daylight. Still, he was surprised that this intrigued him so. Light was light, right? An exceptionally beautiful cape could not interest him nearly as much, no matter how much more wonderful it was than other capes.

The people he had shown the quiver to, his teacher being one of them, all had wondered about it and had said they knew nothing of the sort. But in the end they had simply told him it was something exotic, harmless, and not particularly valuable. Nevertheless, Mestavo had grown extremely fond of it. For one thing, it sort of helped getting his mind off the upcoming marital decision he had to make. Besides, when he was alone he enjoyed filling his room with the immensely bright light, almost hurting his eyes even when he had them closed. Whether the object had a purpose or not, besides providing illumination, he had no idea of.

'Is it not?'

'Of course,' Mestavo replied to the old man, not knowing what was being asked.

'Exactly. Without the centrally organized Maga games people would come up with all sorts of different entertainment, most likely having harmful and dangerous side effects.'

Mestavo nodded compliantly. His thoughts wandered away just as quickly as they had been called back to order just seconds ago.

A throat was being cleared in the distance. And then again, this time more noticeable.

‘Well, that was it for today,’ the teacher said after scraping his throat a third time.

‘According to the clock, which has been adjusted for the decreased daylight we are experiencing right now, night will fall in...40 seconds.’ He had barely uttered the words, and through the window they saw the light switching to darkness. Half a minute earlier than expected.

Mestavo sighed, not knowing what to think. He looked at the teacher’s face, illuminated by the candles that had been lighted just minutes ago, and knew he was not the only one.

Looking at Garco's muscular back as he walked towards the city gate, Gatosch realized how quickly events had taken place during the last couple of hours.

His brother had come to visit him. Well, not exactly visit him, because he had left after only one drink in a local bar and his goal seemed not to have been establishing contact with his brother. Gatosch had seen the contradicting feelings that troubled his brother. Garco was a fisherman through and through, unlike himself. Gatosch had hated the life in which he had grown up, the life his brother was still living. In truth, Gatosch had been an outcast. His entire community had despised him after he had decided to give up the fishing trade. All his former friends and relatives, including his brother, had first been incredulous to his decision, then extremely disappointed, and finally the feelings had turned to anger and even hatred.

He had left his village feeling sad, despised and betrayed. Perhaps that had strengthened him in trying to become an entrepreneur. Deep inside himself he knew that it still bothered him, but he had learned to cope with it, to turn it into a driving force for his enterprises. He felt that being successful in what he had chosen to do would at least justify his decision, in a sense. At least to himself. His brother had still not accepted it. That had been confirmed during the last hour.

Gatosch had been at a Maga game, or Magame as it was often called. He did not particularly enjoy the matches, but from time to time he would visit one. It were ideal opportunities to keep in touch with some of his most important clients. He had been sitting alone, trying to spot people he knew. The game had just started.

As usual, one team was adorned with blue colors, the other with green. He knew that it used to be blue and red, but had shifted to blue and green because those were more difficult to distinguish, making the game even more challenging and exciting. At least, that was what people had told him. Both teams stood in their own halves of the oval shaped arena, divided by a black line. On the left stood the blue team, on the right the green, both consisting of five players. As always, each players threw one of their magnets at the other field when the signal

was given. Where the magnets landed, iron spikes the size of a grown man's upper arm, were placed in the ground, serving as goals. The goals were circled by a line, one meter in diameter. The five players from each team are always limited to their own half of the field, where they are free to walk around, though they are not allowed inside the circle of any of the goals. Every player has six magnetic discs, the size of a small fist, three positively charged and three negatively. The rest of their bodies are completely stripped of metal.

The aim of the game is for each team to throw as many of their magnets at the iron spikes, for when a disc sticks to a spike, one point is rewarded to the team throwing the disc. Instead of scoring points, the discs can also be used to deflect magnets from the opposite team, which often can prove strategically advantageous. Given that each player only has six discs in total, choices have to be made carefully. After ten minutes a signal is given and the teams change halves, but only when at least two points are scored. All the magnets lying within the one meter circles stay there for the entering team to pick up, while all the magnets that lie beyond the circles are for the leaving team to take back with them. When the teams have shifted, the game automatically continues. It ends when one of the teams scores 60 points in total, or when there are less than two points made within a ten minute match. In that case, the team with the most points wins.

Gatosch had just witnessed the first shift, the blue team being slightly in the lead with six points against five, when he was nudged from behind. He was extremely surprised when he saw his brother standing behind him, holding something in his arms and looking hopeful, ashamed and slightly disgusted at the same time. Gatosch had immediately taken him away from the noisy, crowded arena, and had led him to a nearby bar, inviting him to a drink. It had been a long time since he had seen his brother. When they sat down at the table and ordered their drinks, his brother immediately started talking.

'Brother,' he muttered under his breath, 'I hope you are well.' Before Gatosch could answer, he continued: 'I have found something, and I thought you would perhaps be interested in it, given you...occupation.' He put the tube-shaped object on the table.

Taking a sip of his drink, he looked Gatosch in the eyes. 'I truly hope you are well, and that you can find a purpose for this object. Thank you and farewell.' And he walked away, leaving his brother dumbfounded.

Gatosch had thought about running after him, but decided not to. If he doesn't want to talk, I won't bother him with it either, he reckoned. His attention had turned to the tube lying on the table in front of him. He quickly examined it. Its colors were beautiful. A dark red and an intense gold, mingled together. The tube itself was little less than one and a half meters long, and perhaps 30 centimeters in diameter. One of the ends clearly had a lid on it, which connected to a mechanism that protruded from the side of the tube, located directly under the lid. That is was made from sort of metal was not in doubt.

Of course, Gatosch knew many different metals. He had traded in the most luxurious objects, made from materials that most common people had never seen in their lives. But feeling the texture of this tube, and tapping the material with his nail, he concluded that he did not know its name. He was not sure if he had come across it before or not, but he was sure he didn't remember it. Truth be told, he was certain that he would have remembered seeing something like this. Not only the commercial value was obvious to him, but also the intrinsic quality it seemed to possess. The uniqueness of the thing made it even more interesting. Gatosch understood why his brother had given it to him.

At that moment he changed his mind. He picked up the tube, put it tightly under his right arm, placed some coins on the table, and ran out the door. The busy crowd made it difficult to spot anything, but Gatosch's eyes were trained from spending the greater part of his life in this densely populated city. In the distance he saw his brother walking straight towards the eastern city gate, without looking back or even glancing sideways. Gatosch wondered how someone could be so oblivious to everything that was happening all around the market place. People screaming to sell their goods, small fights between young men, petty thieves being chased by guards, fruits flying through the air. The whole place was alive. But not for Garco, apparently.

Gatosch ran after his brother, dodging the bustling crowd, taking a shortcut through a back alley, and finally catching up with him.

'Wait!' he yelled.

Garco turned around and stared at him.

‘Thank you for bringing me this! Where did you find it?’ Gatosch asked in a loud voice, as he walked towards his brother.

‘At sea,’ he answered bluntly. He turned around and continued walking towards the gate, leaving no doubt as to whether he wanted anymore conversation or any other form of contact with his brother.

On the way back to his house, Gatosch asked himself what he would do with the strange object.

‘Well, first I have to find out what it is, of course,’ he said to himself.

‘And then I can figure out its use.’

As he reached the small house he owned, just outside the city center, he sat down with the object and examined it carefully. When his eyes became too heavy for him to keep them open, he forced himself to go to bed. He had already decided for himself that he would take the tube to a blacksmith next thing in the morning, to take a look at the mechanism that appeared to seal something inside. Something that, by the look of its casing, seemed quite important.

It had taken the large, sturdy blacksmith almost half an hour and a lot of frustration to remove the seal. Gatosch had insisted that he did not open the lid. What if there was something extremely valuable inside? He knew enough of the human nature that such information could result in problematic situations. He was already known as a successful and rather wealthy, though not excessively so, individual, and he didn’t need any more curious eyes on him.

Inside his house, he closed the curtains and slowly opened the lid. He thought he went blind. All he could see was a white-yellow glow. Unable to distinguish any of his furniture or objects situated in the room, he stumbled back and fell on the floor. He scrambled towards the light, or, more accurately, towards the point of light that seemed even more intense than the rest, and grabbed at it, finally closing the lid with some effort. Again he thought he went blind, but now everything was pitch-black. He panicked, but after several seconds he began to distinguish and recognize some of the things around him. Several squares in his wall became distinguishable. The contours of his chair became visible, and even the shape of his table was now clear to him. After a minute or so he recognized the piles of documents that had gathered on his desk.

His panic began to make way for astonishment. His astonishment quickly turned into joy and enthusiasm. Gatosch had no idea what had just happened. But he knew that this was something unique, seen by very few people or even none at all. And he knew that people would pay for this. People would be willing to trade a month's worth of goods for a glimpse at this extraordinary object. All he needed was a catching name and a business plan for the strange tube-like thing. Gatosch sat down smilingly, and started to scribble words related to light, wonder and uniqueness.

He still wondered what they were doing with the object he and his team had found in the newly formed cavity. Johteng had wanted to remove the cover from the object with his pickaxe so that they could see what was inside. But finally the team as a whole had decided it was better to call the chief and let him deal with it. The headman had taken it straight to the managers in Sanda'h, and Johteng and the others had heard no more of it. Probably it was still caught up in the notoriously bureaucratic system of the mining federation in Sanda'h. He hoped they would contact him eventually, even if it only was for gathering information about how they had encountered the object. Anyway, he had enough on his mind for now.

In the cave in which they had found the mysterious object, there turned out to be other things of interest as well. His team had been assigned to the spot, and they were to indentify all the different materials that were present there, in what quantity they were represented, and how difficult it would be to extract them. That was the standard procedure when a new cavity was encountered. The cave turned out to be huge, and their team of five had a hard time organizing a systematic search that would result in a satisfying inventory.

As Johteng was best at recognizing the different types of stone, he would walk in front, along the edges of the cave. Irik, who also had a considerable amount knowledge of rocks and minerals, walked with him, and together they placed signs, indicating the rock type. That way the others, Lesno, Harta and Cho, would be able to recognize instantly what type of rock they were dealing with. They, in turn, would then estimate the amount of rock in a certain area, based on the percentage that was visible and the contours of the cave. Finally they would write down an indication of the required time needed to extract the materials, according to the difficulty of the location combined with the hardness of the different types of stone.

Johteng was very pleased with this new job of his. He had always preferred the cleaning and sorting of the stones above the hard, physical labor of getting them out of the mine. The mining business, exclusively practiced in the southwestern mountain ranges where all the useful and precious rocks from the island came from, was of course a

dangerous occupation. Centuries ago, when the mining just began, the workers used no protection whatsoever. They worked in the mines twelve hours a day, seven days a week. Apart from the lack of light and fresh air, there were much more severe problems. The tiny particles that were released almost continually, and the toxic gasses that occasionally escaped, were deadly to the workers. Most didn't even live to see their 25th year of age. But since several centuries, this had changed considerably.

The emperor had allowed a group of individuals to organize and protect the many thousands that worked in the mines. They, living in the city of Sanda'h, between the mountains, had managed to improve living conditions considerably. For example, special mouth caps were made obligatory, which expanded greatly the life expectancy. Furthermore, the mining job was divided into two shifts. One being the hazardous and demanding extracting of the rocks, the other being the sorting process. One group would go deep into the mines with all their gear and would explore new passageways, make inventories and extract the different types of rock, without paying attention in detail to what kind of rock it was. The sorting group worked in a large, old, abandoned mine, close to the surface. All the crude rocks were transported to them, and they would take the debris off, clean them, and sort them according to the type of rock and the quality.

This was as far as the mining job went, and after this the rocks and stones were transported to the centre of the island, from which they were sent to stonemasons, magnet-makers, jewelers, and so forth.

Johteng didn't really mind the hard work of extracting rocks from the mine, but he preferred the less strenuous, less demanding, and unfortunately less frequently occurring, part where he was assigned to the sorting of the different kinds of stones and minerals. However, most of all he liked the occasional side-job of making inventories, as was the case now.

He and Irik were walking contently along the edges of the cave, looking for new types of rock. They were carrying several torches with them. This was of course a standard procedure and truly essential. Especially for groups smaller than four individuals, the tunnels and passageways could be extremely dangerous. And light was everything. If the light went out, and you were all alone in one of the many tunnels,

things could get nasty. In fact, you could be sure they would. Both Johteng and Irik looked at their torches from time to time, checking if they were still there.

As they walked, Irik slowly began to sing. Of the many songs the mineworkers were used to sing, the song Irik was murmuring was one of the most popular. It told of the mining life, the risks that often could be prevented by precautions, and the dangers that lurked in the darkness, and that were more evil and powerful than anyone could imagine. Johteng joined Irik in the song, and together they walked along the cave edges, singing loudly and cheerfully, blunted to the words' depressive meaning by their continual exposure to them throughout the years:

*This is a song, a song made to gloom,
For it tells of a Digger, the digger Geroom.
The Seven Doomed Torches, is what it is called,
Warnings and counsel is what it heralds.
Geroom was a digger, as good you can find,
Who worked in the mines and for dangers was blind.
One day in the hallways, as his team went to rest,
Geroom was not tired, he felt himself blessed.
Despite all the protests, he singlehandedly went
To discover some more, of the cave still latent.
Smart as he was, he gathered some light,
Seven torches in total, made his confidence right.
As he walked through the cave, he noticed a spot,
With stones of a beauty, in his life he'd seen not.
He cut and he backed at some of these rocks,
And down fell the roof, all in pieces and blocks.
By a fraction they missed him, they fell right behind,
Sealing him off, from the rest of mankind.
Geroom was not worried, anxious or scared,
After all he still lived, and seven torches he bared.
Counting his blessings, Geroom called for help,
Which was timely cut off, by his own shrieking yelp.
The torch that was lit, got attacked from the wall,
By a pack of loose dust, that extinguished it all.*

*Using the fingers, from both of his hands,
He fired a new torch, purely by sense.
But this torch was quenched, by the droplets that fell,
From the roof high above, that lay beneath a big well.
The third torch he lit, he protected from moist,
But still it was doomed, on account of some noise.
He suddenly heard it, in the hall dark as night,
And it made him turn, and extinguish his light.
The fourth now he lit, feeling truly afraid,
As the noise in the distance, kept steady a rate.
It appeared to come closer, and augmenting in sound,
Geroom was so scared, he dropped his torch on the ground.
The fifth one he lit, and was determined to keep,
But the thing was still coming, and it made Geroom weep.
The sounds it was making and the feel that it had,
Made Geroom truly anxious, afraid, even sad.
The sixth only shone for a second or five,
Till the Digger was grabbed, and eaten alive.
The seventh still lay there, trying to bemoan,
That even light cannot save you, when you're all alone.*

The depressing words of the song didn't bother Johteng in the least, used as he was to it. Most of the tales told by miners were of a similar nature, and all the workers knew them. They respected and accepted what was said in the songs, they even used them as informal guidelines, in a moral and practical sense. But they enjoyed singing them. It kept them happy, it forged bonds within the different teams, and it gave them a tool to deal with the uncertainties of their profession.

'What do you think,' Irik said while he pointed at some dark, semi-transparent rocks in the wall.

'Hmm, could be a blackish sapphire?' Johteng answered after having examined the stone from close up. 'But I would guess it's quartz.'

'Yeah, I thought so as well.'

Irik scabbled something in the notebook he was carrying, placed a marker beneath the rock outcropping, wrote '(90%)dark quartz(100%)(10%)black sapphire(100%)' on it, and continued his walk.

Johteng thought about telling him that the quartz was not entirely pure but mixed with tiny particles. But he decided not to. After all, the sorters would take care of those details. And besides, there was much more to discover in the cave.

They strode along the rest of the enormous underground space, examining the walls, recording the data and singing all the while. It seemed to have no end. Johteng wondered whether it even was a cave, and not simply a very broad passageway leading them to somewhere more distant. To the other side of the mountain perhaps. Not that it mattered really. After all, their job was to find as much precious and useful stones as they could, and whether they found it in an abyss, in a subterranean cave, or in a hall that went on for kilometers, was of no importance to the managers.

But to Johteng it was. Even though he didn't really care about physically extracting the stones, he enjoyed discovering new alleys, new paths and new areas to dig in. That's why he had decided to learn all the different stones by heart, and why he spent most of his free time examining intensively the stones he managed to get a hold on. How the light went through them and got diffracted by the stone's interior, how the different colors were visible from different angles, how the weight varied, and so forth.

By knowing all this, and by making sure the chiefs were aware of him having this knowledge and experience, he had assured for himself that he would be chosen often if there was a job to be done involving the discovery and inventorying of new grounds. He had enjoyed his first day of work in the mines, many years ago, and as time went by he enjoyed it even more. The sense of discovering new places where no one before had been, sealed off from the world for thousands of years. The sense of being the first to see and examine certain stones formations and outcroppings. The sense of unraveling mysteries. Johteng thought back to the strange object they had found two days ago, wondering what would have become of it.

While she was packing her bags, the doubts came back to her. Stuffing her backpack, made from old deer hide and adjusted so that the quiver would fit right in the middle, slightly sticking out at the top, she thought about what might be ahead of her. Of course she was used to being alone, used to doing her own thing. But she still knew so little of the world beyond her village. All she had were the stories her family had told her, and those seemed largely made up. What if she got lost? What if she ran out of food or water? What if she lost the quiver? What if..? Nevertheless, Tlana kept telling herself that this was the chance of her life. Perhaps the only chance for adventure, for learning incredible, new things. The only chance of escaping her village and the life that she ought to live. Placing a knife in her bag, she wondered about the dangers of the journey she was planning to make.

Tlana had no experience whatsoever with weapons. She could survive in the cold steppes around her village, but she always made sure she had enough food and water with her. She never hunted, let alone prepare a dead animal. And not only did she know nothing about hunting, true enemies had been just as absent from her life. It was necessary to learn how to fight, to learn how to defend herself. And since she only had the knife, given to her by her grandfather, she would have train with that. She took it out of her backpack again, and fastened it on her belt. The extra space it gained her in her pack she filled with some more ackla, in dread of having to kill an animal for food. She would postpone it as long as possible.

She picked up some rope and several needles from the table and stuffed them in as well. Yes, she was ready for it. What was the worst that could happen? And more importantly, she had never felt so strongly a purpose in her life. Well, not exactly a purpose. More a feeling of something being amiss, broken, and with a chance of being hazardous. And from that followed that she needed to do something, needed to fix the problem, find a solution. She needed to know what the quiver was. And whether it had anything to do with the days slowly becoming shorter, and the nights becoming longer.

With her bag packed, knife fastened to her belt, and a thick coat slung

around her neck, Tlana left her home at first daylight. Which, as she noticed with a feeling of disappointment and despair, was nearly 20 minutes later than it used to be. She had no need of saying goodbye to anyone. A note she had written lay on the table, explaining in vague terms why she had left and why she would not be coming back soon. In vague terms, because even she herself had no clear idea of why she felt the need to do this. Some people were already getting out of their rooms, and several conversations were going on at the town plaza. She walked past it, looking straight ahead and avoiding any eye contact.

When she was beyond the town border, marked by the untamed vegetation that was all around, she sat down and looked at the compass she had brought with her. Using the maps from her grandfather, she had set out a course, leading her to the center of the island. Everyone knew that in the center everything was possible. Valuable objects were traded, information was bought and sold, mercenaries were hired, and a lot more of anything could be sold and acquired than anywhere else. That was why there had been no doubt in Tlana's mind about the direction she would have to take.

The caravans that arrived twice a week to her village, carrying all the necessary goods for her people to survive, and returning with the harvest of wood that the people had gathered, always took the same route. Looking at the maps, Tlana had decided that the most rational thing to do was take that route as well.

It went more or less in a straight line to the center, was guarded by soldiers, and well paved. She'd preferred to take a less crowded alternative, but the maps held surprisingly little information concerning other routes. Lines were drawn occasionally in the land beside the main roads, and words such as 'avoid' and 'not advisable' were written along them. Though she had little trust in the accuracy of the maps, she was not about to risk it. Besides, it was easier to gather information about what was happening when she travelled on the main road. And food was easier to get a hold on. She hoped.

She stared into the distance, trying to spot the morning caravan. She could see only emptiness however, and one imperial watchtower. Though it had happened on several occasions that the caravans were delayed for some reason, the morning caravan usually arrived at first light. 'No reason to wait for it,' Tlana said to herself as

she got up and started walking along the stretched out, desolated road. After half an hour of walking she arrived at the watchtower. She had been here before, and knew better than to ask the two guards stationed there for help. Better not to even look at them. She walked past the tower, and after an hour or so she passed the morning caravan that was riding towards her village.

She continued walking, without any sign of life. She began to worry. She had expected much more people on the road, and with night almost falling, she wondered what she should do. Suddenly she saw a crossroad ahead of her. A small, unpaved path coming from the East, connected to the main road. A jolt of excitement went through her, as she realized that there were people on the crossroad. She ran towards the group of people, but after a couple of steps she stopped.

What do I know of these people? she asked herself. Perhaps better to avoid them. But then again, spending the entire journey trying to avoid contact isn't exactly useful either. Besides, everyone knew that it was safer to travel in a group than to wander around on your own. So, in the end, Tlana's caution was cornered and subdued by her curiosity and her need for company. She increased her pace to catch up with the people walking ahead of her.

‘Bloody brute beasts they be,’ the man sitting beside her said. He was dressed in a ragged rope, torn at every spot imaginable, and adorned with all sorts of different spikes and small gleaming objects. His beard was rough and he wore a band around his head, catching the sweat as it tried to materialize on his forehead. A scar was visible along his neck, undoubtedly indicating a worthwhile story that lay at its foundation, while at the same time preventing anyone from inquiring about it. ‘No normal niceties you can expect from them,’ he said grudgingly.

Tlana had joined with the group of people she had met at the crossroad. They numbered eight in total, six men and two women. They were sitting around a fire they had built alongside the road. The rugged man who was talking, Da’dha he called himself, was many times more friendly than one would guess from his appearance alone. He had the strange habit of constructing sentences with words that began with the same first letter. He called Tlana the Lying Lonely Lady, for example. Not to offend her, she knew. And besides, she had earned it, given that she had not been prepared for all the questions they had asked her when they had started travelling together. She had been caught up in her own web of lies. Fortunately they had realized she had no bad intentions, but that she was just not willing to tell them exactly what she was doing, and where she was going.

They were ok with that. Being named a liar was a small price to pay, Tlana thought. However, she herself didn’t think she was lonely. She just often preferred not to have company. Nevertheless, she could understand why she was seen as being more lonely than people who travelled in a group of eight. The other thing bother her more, being called a lady. But she guessed it was only because ‘girl’ or ‘woman’ didn’t start with the letter L. That explanation comforted her.

The other members of the group were mostly friendly. They were all rough and apparently not pleased with the Empire. As Tlana understood it, they saw themselves as freedom fighters, trying to escape from the imperial oppression and intending to destroy the system they felt they were obliged to live in. Tlana couldn’t see what the fuss was about. She was pleased with the daily loads of ackla, tools and clothing that arrived to her village. And she knew nobody who was discontent

with the fact that they had to provide a certain daily amount of wood for the Empire to distribute among all the other villages and towns of the island. It only seemed fair. Of course she didn't communicate this to the group. She didn't want to risk damaging their kindness towards her, and she simply knew too little of the subject to tell them what she thought.

They had been travelling on the main road for more than a day now. The group was usually relaxed, but became tense whenever they passed a watchtower. She could understand why. Imperial soldiers were quick to anger, and overhearing the group members' insults and complaints would surely give them reason for troublemaking. Tlana was instructed to walk in a steady pace, look straight ahead and not make an unexpected movement whenever they passed a tower. She did as she was told, and the group always relaxed as soon as they were out the tower's reach.

They walked along the road, occasionally taking side roads to avoid the bothersome imperial watchtowers. Sometimes they walked for hours in complete silence, no one contributing any food for conversation. But often there was a general topic they would discuss for hours at a time. And, of course, it was usually related to the Empire's faults. Today everyone was heated on language. Tlana strode alongside several men who were discussing the advantages of having different tongues.

'People should be free to choose how they speak!' one man yelled angrily.

'If I want to say that imperials be evil, I ought be allowed to do so! I won't have anyone correcting my verbs, just cause they think they have the right to distinguish between good and bad language.'

'Exactly,' someone else added. 'In earlier times there were many distinct languages, so different that people could not communicate with each other without learning the other one's tongue. This creates diversity, and promotes interaction!'

Tlana did not quite grasp their argumentation. In fact, she thought it extremely useful that everyone spoke exactly the same language. Different languages would only make matters more complicated, she reckoned. And besides, why would you suddenly want

to develop a different language? Even those complaining about it were still speaking the common tongue. However, she felt the men were right about one thing. It had happened occasionally that the Empire repressed people that tried to speak differently. And their repressions were brutal, and the soldiers quickly provoked. She didn't understand why the Empire was so meticulous on this issue. Occasionally using a new or slightly different word wasn't harmful to anyone, was it? The men continued rattling on about the injustices, and about who, if anyone, had the right of deciding what could and what couldn't be said.

Half an hour later Tlana tuned into the conversation again. Now it had shifted to ridiculing the imperial soldiers, a topic which produced ample laughter among the men. Tlana knew that the Empire required soldiers from every region of the island, and that those selected were given an extremely intensive training, somewhere in the North, she figured. Each imperial soldier or guard, she didn't really know the difference, was heavily equipped. Wearing body armor and helmets made from magnetic material, and wielding an obsidian sword and sometimes a crossbow.

She had once seen two guards who, standing close to each other, were pulled together by the magnetic force of their armor. It looked rather ridiculous, and took them a serious amount of effort to detach themselves. Tlana had heard that soldiers were specifically trained to be constantly aware of everything around them, including the magnetic forces. The soldiers were taught to continuously compensate for the powers that were pulling them together or pushing them apart. What she knew of the magnets she herself possessed, this must be a strenuous exercise.

The men around her were all laughing at the oftentimes hilarious results this system created. Entire squadrons being pulled together into one giant heap of metal. Numerous soldiers being unbalanced by their comrades, and taking each other with them in their fall.

'So,' Tlana ventured to ask, 'why do they even have magnetic armor? I mean, it's only cumbersome, isn't it?' The faces around her became slightly grimmer, and it took a while for anyone to answer.

‘In earlier days, magnetic materials were not involved in warfare at all,’ someone said.

‘The imperials wore iron armor, and fought with iron swords. Years ago there was a huge battle between them and the eastern rebels, which lasted for almost a decade. And somewhere during that time, the imperials suddenly started exploiting their monopoly on the mines, and started making magnetic armor. And since the rebels were all fighting with weapons made from iron..’

‘What?’ Tlana asked, as she noticed that the man had ceased telling his story.

‘Well, the iron armor and weapons started sticking to the imperial armor, throwing the rebels of balance. And since the imperials started using obsidian blades that were not affected by the magnetic force, well, the battle became quite unfair. Needless to say that the imperials butchered each and everyone.’

Tlana hadn’t considered that. She could imagine the dread of suddenly losing control of your sword, disrupting the flow of battle you were in. But still, it seemed like a high price to pay for the imperials. Especially now, when almost nobody used iron weapons anymore. There wasn’t much use for their strange armors now, wasn’t there?

‘Besides,’ someone else added to the conversation that had long since had turned into an uncomfortable silence, ‘it gives the bloody soldiers something to do, something to keep them focused. I mean, they don’t have any ideals to fight or die for, they just obey stupid orders. Having them continuously be aware of the forces that are trying to throw them off balance, keeps their mind occupied. I guess.’

The more she thought about it, the more it seemed beyond her comprehension. Tlana couldn’t even wield a sword. And though she could imagine certain things, she found it difficult to truly understand the advantages and disadvantages of military decisions. However, she noticed that she had managed to turn the joyful discussion of before into something significantly more somber and dark.

The days went by slowly, but Tlana started to feel comfortable in the group. She even started to build up a friendship with one of the members, Quelto. He was far from talkative, but turned out to be full of knowledge, stories and advice. Furthermore, he was a great swordsman, which was just what Tlana needed. Outside the sight of the

towers, he was always practicing with the large array of weapons that he carried with him, from small daggers to broadswords. Having told him that she was in possession of a knife but that she had no idea of how to use it, he had proposed to teach her how to handle it. It had turned out to be a small disaster. She just couldn't disassociate the knife's movements with the killing of other creatures. For her, the two were intrinsically linked, and she couldn't come to terms with it.

Finally, Quelto had come up with a solution. As she wanted to learn how to fight, but was so averse to killing anything, even theoretically, he had decided to lend her a set of his sais. Sais, which always came in a pair, were weapons that could be used in different ways, and whose main purpose was to defend against attacks. A sai had the length of an upper arm, with on each side a handle that went upwards. There were no truly sharp points or edges that could kill, but the weapon was very effective for blocking attacks and for knocking opponents unconscious.

The pair she had been given were made of wood, similar to that which the people in her village harvested. Extremely strong, light weighted and not very flexible. And, as Quelto emphasized, not made of metal. Which was, she had learned, a material more or less useless for fighting against imperial soldiers. 'And other bandits,' Quelto had added.

Tlana had been training fervently with her new sais. Having met the group of dangerously looking people, no matter how nice they actually turned out to be, had made her truly realize how vulnerable she was. She was determined to prepare herself, and to make sure she could put up a proper defense against anyone who tried to harm her. Or against anyone who tried to interfere with her mission.

In the days she had spent with group, Tlana hadn't put much thought into the quiver, despite the fact that it was the main reason for her journey. She always carried it with her however, never losing sight of it. The thing had already gotten her into some trouble, as all the group members wanted to know what it was. She had said it was a device for storing water. She had said, given that she was so accustomed to always having plenty of water to drink in the snowy region she lived in, that she couldn't bear the risk of growing thirsty. Therefore she always carried a large flask of water, which she would

only use in case of emergencies. The people she told this to were skeptical, but at least they stopped asking questions after a while. Still, she didn't leave the quiver out of her sight. As much as she liked her fellow travelers, she couldn't trust them this easily.

As the days went by however, she felt she needed to gain more information, since that was part of her quest as well. Even more, without intelligence there wouldn't be a quest to start with. She felt she wasn't making any progress. One evening, when they were sitting around a fire, Tlana decided to bring the subject up. She had noticed that none of them had mentioned the fact that the days were becoming shorter and shorter, despite the obviousness of it. That night the darkness had fallen nearly 45 minutes earlier than usual.

'So, why do you think the nights are increasing in length?' she asked the people sitting around her.

'Are they? Or are the days becoming shorter?' one of them responded. 'Isn't that the same?' Quelto said, as no one else spoke. 'If the days are becoming shorter it automatically means that the nights will be longer. And vice versa. The question is why it is happening. And no, Tlana, I do not have the answer.'

After a short pause in which nobody spoke, one of them cleared his throat. Jileom, the oldest of their company, spoke with his hoarse, rusty voice.

'It has to be related to the old light and dark gods. You all know the story, am I right?'

Several people nodded, but the others kept still. Tlana looked around her, having no idea what the man was talking about.

Noticing that not everyone knew what he meant, Jileom continued.

'Back in the old times, before the so-called shift occurred, the world was quite different. It is said that before the shift, there were two gods who ruled the sky. One, who was male and who shone with a light so bright it illuminated the entire world, was called S'un. His light was so intense, it warmed the earth, like the heat of a fire experienced close by. The other god who inhabited the sky was called M'oon. She covered the earth in darkness whenever she ran above it, making the temperature drop and letting the colors of the world fade to black.'

These two gods were involved in a divine game of sorts. They chased each other across the sky, and they had done so for thousands of years. S'un would travel above the land, and there would be light everywhere so that the people could work, gather food, build houses and do everything that required illumination. S'un could not do this all day long, however. He was chased by his antithesis M'oon. She would come and drive him and his brightness forward through the sky. Whenever she ran above the land she would plunge it into darkness. Not complete darkness, mind you, since S'un, who was running away, always left behind some of his sparks, preventing the darkness from obscuring everything. The next morning S'un would run across the sky again, and hours later M'oon would follow. This went on for many thousands of years.

However, as time went by, both S'un and M'oon grew tired of chasing each other across the sky. They got sloppy. The distance between them decreased year after year, until M'oon finally managed to catch up with S'un. For so long had they been chasing each other, never able to reach one another, that their ultimate union provided them with joy as they had never known. They were so happy together that they decided to never separate again.

The result, however, was disastrous for the people living beneath them. Having the two gods exerting their godly force upon them, both at the same time, made the world almost explode under the combination of light and darkness, the combined heat and coldness. S'un and M'oon had to choose between their own happiness, and that of the people that were dependent on them. In the end, they decided to move away from the earth, to move beyond the sky that had been their home for so many millennia. They chose a spot where humans could not see them, but where their light and darkness would still be able to reach the surface of the earth, albeit with diminished intensity. They agreed that for half a day S'un would have its illuminating back towards the people, blocking M'oon's darkness and coldness. After half a day they would switch positions, and M'oon's back would cover the world in darkness, blocking completely S'un's light and warmth. And this they continued doing until today.'

Tlana had never heard this story before, and she didn't believe it the least. After all, no one believed in gods anymore. They were all

legends and stories of the past. She knew that gods were an important part of life for the people who lived before the shift. But that was back then. Now the people didn't need help from divine beings. The people themselves arranged everything they needed. With the help of the emperor of course. Although she already started to doubt that point. But some vague gods floating in the sky and shining light and darkness? She didn't buy it. Those were tales of the past.

But to her surprise, Quelto spoke with a serious face. 'So, S'un and M'oon have become somewhat unbalanced, is it not?' Several people nodded in agreement, and that seemed to end the conversation. Not really satisfactory, but no one else had anything useful or intelligent to add. As for Tlana, she was still trying to settle things in her own mind.

Tlana awoke the following morning feeling exhausted and bad tempered. She had dreamt of fierce and evil gods, who had been discussing with her their very own existence and laughing at her for not believing in what she so obviously experienced. She had tried to argue with them that they were just an illusion, produced by a lack of knowledge and a desire for answers. They, however, repudiated her side of the story.

After Tlana and the rest of the group had devoured their tasteless breakfast of ackla mixed with water and spiced with herbs they had gathered along the road, they continued their journey. Tlana was humming songs of her childhood while the hours passed by tediously. Quelto was walking beside her, silent as always. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, he asked her a question. Tlana was taken aback, not only by the fact that he had spoken so abruptly, but also by the directness of his question.

‘I already told you,’ Tlana replied hesitantly, ‘it’s just a water flask, an overly cautious backup, if you will.’
‘Yes, that’s what you told us,’ Quelto said while he looked her in the eyes. The sentence had an obvious undertone, and his staring eyes made Tlana look away, feeling ashamed. He had proven himself kindly after all, not to mention helpful and generous. She thought about it for a few minutes, while they continued walking in silence. What did she have to lose? She was almost certain they wouldn’t steal the object from her. Quelto not, at least. And they wouldn’t sell her out either, she thought. Besides, she still needed help and information about where to go, and what to do.

‘All right then,’ she said. ‘I have no idea what it is.’
He looked at her sideways, waiting for more to come.
‘I found it a couple of weeks ago, frozen in the ice near my home village. When I opened it, a dazzling light escaped. I haven’t opened it since. Truth be told, it scared me. From the moment I found the thing, the days are becoming shorter, as we discussed yesterday. I have no idea how the two are linked, but I have a strong feeling that they are. It can’t be a coincidence. That’s why I decided to take the thing to the Midlands, where I hope I can find out more about it.’

Quelto said nothing for a while.

‘I see,’ he then murmured. ‘The thing is, I haven’t been completely honest either.’

Tlana looked up at him in astonishment. ‘But..’

‘Let me explain,’ Quelto continued.

‘My village, Eqrash, lies just east of the main road where you met us.

Truth is, I only joined the group,’ he gestured towards the people walking several meters in front of them, ‘half a day before you did. This group’s intention is to gather as many people as they can, before joining the rebels in the North. This is also what I mean to do, what I have been training for all these years.

But, since I lived so close to the main road, I learned some interesting things during the days before I began my journey. There had been murmurs about a mysterious, quiver-like object that was found, and subsequently lost, not far from here, in the woodlands. And there are other rumors telling about strange objects in the North, as well. As soon as I saw what you were carrying with you I began to wonder. Seeing that you were so attached to it, I neglected to mention my suspicions yesterday. The others have nothing to do with it, anyway. But I believe you. I believe that these objects that are showing up everywhere, are somehow linked to the nights becoming longer. Linked to the darkness that increasingly surrounds us. Else it would be too much of a coincidence.’

Tlana was flabbergasted. And full with questions.

‘Where are they then? Do they look the same as mine? What have they done with them?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine,’ Quelto answered with a sad smile.

‘I tell you what. The closest one has to be somewhere in the western woodlands, as far as we know. Perhaps in Wegah or Wolk. Or in one of the smaller villages. So why don’t we separate ourselves from the rest, so we can go westwards in search of it? There’s a crossroad not far from here, where a well-traveled, paved road goes to the woods and jungles of the West. What do you say?’

The unsatisfying and precautious feeling that Tlana had had for a couple of seconds, was consequently knocked on the head and buried deep in the ground by the joyful and exiting prospect of having a true lead, a path to follow, and someone to follow it with. Someone pleasant

even. Someone who knew how to fight. Someone who, apparently, was eager to travel with her. Too eager perhaps, her caution whispered. Before she could give an answer however, she saw something in the corner of her eye that caught her attention. And from the look of it, it caught everyone's attention.

'It's a message!' someone gasped.

A large, metallic ball was flying through the air, having been fired by the watchtower they had just past, and travelling towards the next tower.

'Crazy crawling crab!' someone cursed.

'What's the matter?' Tlana asked Quelto.

'We are the only ones that have passed the tower, is it not? And those messages are usually not sent for nothing,' Quelto explained wearily.

Tlana knew more or less how the imperial message system worked. Each tower's upper part was made out of iron, and on top were stationed two soldiers, equipped with two catapults. They had small, round devices made from very strong magnets, which could be closed and opened so that they could contain a note within. The catapults were directed, and carefully calibrated, to the towers in front and behind them. This way, long and complicated messages could be written and passed from one tower to the next at an extremely rapid pace, crossing the island in a matter of hours, instead of the weeks it would take on horseback. The strong magnetism of the message balls ensured they stuck to the towers, even if the wind and distance made their exact landing place variable. Tlana had always found this to be an ingenious system, but she still didn't understand the fuss.

Since her face made this fact obvious, Quelto resolved to explaining her the situation more clearly.

'As you know, we are a rather suspicious looking band of people,' he said. 'The rebellion has grown considerably during the last years, and the imperials are becoming ever more tense and suspicious. There is a chance the guards decided to call for an arrest, to investigate whether we have any connections with the rebels. Those investigations are known for their rigorousness, and it's very possible that one or more of us might crack. Since each of us is planning to join the rebels, it's likely they discover at least something to use against us.'

This took several seconds to sink into Tlana's mind. Not because of the difficulty of either the sentences or the meaning they

conveyed, since there was not much of a challenge to find in either of them, but rather because her mind had still been thinking about what Quelto had said before, and it needed some time to readjust to why the answer about the message flying through the air was of so much importance. She looked around her, but this was of no help whatsoever to her struggling mind. The whole group was looking around, talking to each other, and staring into the distance, clearly not knowing what to do. Just as Tlana had no idea.

‘So...do we flee?’ she asked inquiringly.

‘I don’t think so,’ Quelto replied, while he kept looking suspiciously around. ‘First of all, there is no certainty that the message was a call to arms by the guards. And if we flee, we will surely rouse suspicion. Secondly, if it indeed was a call to arms, the guards will not be arriving for several hours, which buys us time to think. Thirdly, we have nowhere to go to. The only option is to head back. But then the soldier will surely get us, as they move many times faster with their horses and rhinos than we do on foot. Fourthly,’ he added seriously, ‘I don’t like to flee.’

Tlana knew he was right. The horses that the imperials used were trained in the eastern grasslands and were fast as lightning. The rhinos were almost as fast and infinitely more terrifying. At least, that was what she had heard.

‘All right, so what do we do?’

But as she said it, she already saw everyone gathering together to talk it over. Tlana stayed behind however, acknowledging that she simply did not know what to do, and that she would be better off trying to think about how to get to the West. And how to get on from there. All she knew about the western woodlands was what she had gathered from the maps in her village. By now she and the others had most likely passed beyond the southwestern mountain ranges, after which lay the steppes, and beyond that the woodlands. Even more to the west, edging on the coastline, was situated the jungle. She and Quelto would travel westwards, find the quiver, and then go northeastwards to the Midlands and the North.

Quelto nudged Tlana’s arm.

‘The plan is to continue walking. Ghila will scout in front of us, and will report back whenever she sees any sign of approaching soldiers. She

can wave her spear at us from the distance, so we will then have enough time to hide somewhere in the bushes. And then hopefully they will pass us by. That's the best we can do for now.'

They continued walking for almost two more hours, without any signs of danger. The tension did grow with every minute, but subsided slightly when they had passed another tower without any apparent hostility. Still, everyone was staring in the distance, squinting their eyes to no avail.

Then, suddenly, Quelto stood still. Several of the others followed his example. Before Tlana could wonder why, she felt the earth tremble. In the distance she saw a figure, staggering and holding a spike at breast height. The figure was covered by shadows that quickly became bigger and bigger. And then she saw it. Horses and their riders, galloping towards them, shrouded in the cloud of dust their hooves produced. People beside her began to shout and move. Several of them ran straight for the trees that were standing a few meters to their left. Others were fetching their weapons from their belts. Tlana was looking for Quelto, and saw him tranquilly taking his two obsidian swords from his bag. She was scared. In fact, she was so terrified that all the muscles in her body had frozen.

'Run,' she heard Quelto say to her, still in his composed manner but with a definite forcing edge around his voice which somehow made her more conscious of the situation at hand. And of the seriousness of it.

'Run!' he shouted again, even stronger this time. Two soldiers were already down from their horses and slashed at the man who had just slain one of their beasts. He was down in an instance, and the two guards ran towards Quelto and Tlana. In a hurry she managed to get a hold on herself. And, with some difficulty, she grabbed the two sais dangling from her belt. Quelto was fighting both men now, but Tlana saw another one approaching her. She dodged the man's swinging obsidian sword and, propelled by the adrenaline rushing through her body, she jammed one of her sai into the man's jaw. She quickly spun around him as he was staggering to the ground, and planted her other sai in the man's lower back. Turning, she caught a glimpse of something to her right and instantly ducked, barely avoiding

the razor sharp obsidian blade that was lashing through the air at her. The soldier who had wielded the sword had now lost his balance, which Tlana worsened by hitting his skull with the back of her sai. She looked around her, and saw Quelto walking quickly towards her, holding one hand on a slowly growing dark spot on his chest, the other still grasping one of his swords.

‘Run along the road, they won’t notice you,’ he gasped. ‘Take the first turn to your left, that’s the main road to the woodlands. And don’t let anyone see your sais, nor the blood on your rope. And don’t forget the thing!’

Tlana looked briefly at her blood soaked clothes, not knowing or caring who’s blood it was, and sprinted towards her backpack. As she put it on, she saw three men encircling Quelto. She wanted to scream, but couldn’t. It was as if the blood she had lost, if any she had, had been the blood needed for her mouth to produce a scream, needed for warning her friend. The rest of her was full of energy and alertness. But those things couldn’t bridge the distance as quickly as sound could. Finally it did come. She screamed. But it was not a warning as she had meant it to be. It was a cry of despair, a scream of anguish at seeing Quelto’s body falling lifelessly to the ground.

Her mind and body struggled for control. She knew it was foolish to run towards him, there was nothing she could do but endanger her own life in doing so. But she couldn’t just leave him there, lying on the ground. And perhaps he was still alive. But then again, she knew he would only tell her to run, to save her own life. Tlana quickly scanned her surroundings and then ran along the road, avoiding the fighting men and women as much as possible. Luckily, in all the confusion and whirling dust clouds, this turned out to be less troublesome than expected. She continued on the road as fast as she could, and tried to ban from her mind the sounds of screaming men and clashing swords.

The intersection had appeared out of nowhere, after just a few minutes of walking. Or at least it felt that way. The state of mind she was in made it difficult to assess the passing of time. Or anything else, for that matter.

Tlana had turned left on the desolate road, which went through a flat and dry landscape, stretching on as far as her eyes could see. But after a while, the small bushes and sorrowful trees began to become more abundant, more alive. The colors shifted gradually from grey to brown, from brown to green. Leafs were all around her, some even above her, hanging from large, old branches, others sitting close together on low bushes on either side of the road. Only once a caravan passed her, disturbing the sounds of the trees and birds with its cracking wheels and murmuring merchants.

Walking through the tranquil forest had helped Tlana become more at ease. She still felt the pain of what had happened, but it had stopped troubling her mind and had ceased making her feel terrible all the time. Unfortunately, it was only after the caravans had been long gone that she had remembered she was on a quest, and needed to gather information.

She checked her compass again, which was still indicating she was moving westwards. She wondered how far it would be. Taking into account the slightly systematic pattern of increasing nighttime, she estimated from her hourglass that she had 45 minutes left of daylight. The days were still filled with plenty of daylight to travel, but they were clearly becoming shorter. And though the speed with which they were decreasing was not that high, Tlana began to feel the pressure of time creeping onto her. She knew something had to be done soon. And that needed to start with her gaining more knowledge about what was happening. So, she asked herself, where were the villages Quelto had told her about?

When she saw she had more or less five minutes left of light, she sat down by one of the trees at the side of the road. It took her a while to find a comfortable spot against the old tree and on the earth that was filled with leafs, fallen branches and animal droppings. As soon as she settled in, darkness fell. She wanted to check what her

hourglass said, how many seconds the darkness had fallen earlier than yesterday. But there was not a single spot of light anywhere to be found in the forest, so she gave up her wish for that night. At first daylight she would check the hourglass to see what had changed, how many seconds of light had been lost. For now, she just wanted to sleep, despite the dreams that would undoubtedly haunt her during the night.

She woke up the following morning, feeling surprisingly well rested. And, to her surprise as well, she noticed it was already light. One look at her hourglass told her it had already been so for awhile. She picked up her backpack, took out a few ackla berries, drank a sip from her flask, and started walking along the road. After a few hours she encountered a group of people sitting in the middle of the path. Tlana approached them carefully, trying to spot any possible dangers, and finally decided there were none. At least, she could see none.

‘Excuse me,’ she said.

They had all turned towards her. Two middle aged women and one man, all with bows and quivers on their shoulders. They appeared friendly, possessing perhaps a slightly exaggerated dose of confidence. One of the women spoke to Tlana.

‘Good morning. What is a young, inexperienced and weak little girl like you doing here?’

Tlana needed to readjust for a second. Not simply because of the insulting words the woman had said, but because of the fabric they were covered in, and the extreme disparity between the two. The woman had uttered her insult in the most polite of ways, as if she were herself unaware of the meaning of the words and had merely wanted to respond in an amiable and welcoming manner. But the corresponding words that left her mouth had utterly failed her.

‘I beg your pardon?’ was all Tlana managed to get out.

‘Well, ingénue, we live in these lands and know them as the arrows in our quiver, and we rarely get visitors that are so oblivious to their surrounding, and so helpless and ignorant,’ the other woman said, also in an endearing tone. But the sweet wrapping did little to shield the words from stabbing Tlana. She wanted to scream at them in frustration.

'Yes,' the first woman said. 'We have seen you sleeping against one of the trees, and we have walked beside you for several kilometers since.' 'How? And why?' Tlana asked incredulously.

'We are from Wertoa, a village six kilometers in that direction,' the woman said while pointing with a steady hand behind her back. 'But Jijiji here,' she gestured at the young man standing next to her, 'broke his bow so we had to travel to Wirka.'

'I did not,' the man said. 'Someone stole it.'

'Yes yes, you already said that. And then you said that perhaps you had lost it. And now again the theft excuse? If you ask me, you broke it and are afraid to admit your misuse and inexperience in handling a bow. And you're right, you should be ashamed.'

'I. Did. Not. Break. It,' the man said angrily while he stamped his feet on the ground with every word, as if this would make the words more convincing.

The other two looked at him for second, then gave each other a look that was worth more than seven sentences, and both turned to Tlana again.

'So,' one of the women continued, 'we spotted you yesterday, and were intrigued by the sight of such a helpless girl wandering all alone through our woods. So we followed you.'

'Not even trying to hide ourselves or cover our tracks,' the other added with a sweet smile, 'and still you did not notice any one of us.'

Not knowing how to deal with their discordant conduct, Tlana decided to ask directly what she wanted to know.

'I had heard rumors that somewhere in this area there has been found an unknown object that emits light, and I wanted to know more about it. Have you heard anything?'

'Of course we have,' one of the women said. 'But the object has disappeared before anyone else could see it. So I for one do not believe the nonsense some people have spread around.'

'Do you know who found it? And where I can find that person?'

'Someone from Wendo, was it not?' one woman asked the other. 'Yes, I'm pretty sure it was Wendo.'

'A small village north of Wolk,' the young man explained to Tlana. Or at least he thought he explained it to her, but Tlana had not the slightest idea where Wolk lay, so knowing the village was located north of it did

not add any practical knowledge for her. The man too noticed that fact after a while, so he added: 'Wolk is one of the larger towns in the West, it's not far from here. Just follow this road, and at the second crossroad turn right. You practically walk into Wolk. But I advise you to course around it. The road continues and will go past several villages, one of them is Wendo. Just don't ask me which one.'

'Since when are you so helpful to young, lost girls?' one of the women asked the man frowningly.

'Since there are young, lost girls that need help,' the man answered instantly, clearly fed up with the women's company.

'Well, he is right,' the other woman said, looking at Tlana. 'Just follow the road, and take the second turn. And try to be more observant. Perhaps there is no need for that in your own village, but here there are dangers that lurk in the woods. Come on, we will walk with you for a few kilometers.'

After an hour, and after they had passed the first crossroad, the three said goodbye to Tlana and disappeared into the woods. Following the road, just as they had told her, Tlana began to observe carefully her surroundings. The road was about two meters wide, just wide enough for the daily caravans, she thought, and on both sides stood trees and bushes. You could see perhaps several meters into the thick forest, before everything blurred into a greenish whole. She recognized some of the trees from her own region. But most she had never seen before. Thick, yellow trees that wriggled towards the sky. Extremely thin, almost black trees that sprang from the ground and went straight up, with no regard for anything in their way, even slashing through the branches of their relatives. Wide and short trees, coming no higher than Tlana's head, but covered with an immense amount of leaves.

The variety of leaves she saw around her was also astonishing. Not only in every size and shape imaginable, but also with colors that ranged from black to white, from red to blue, from deep purple to bright yellow, though most were simply green. And still, those green leaves showed such a wide range of shades and intensities that it was questionable, nearly impossible even, to assign them all to one general color.

Tlana was amazed by the sight, and wondered whether she had truly been that oblivious of her environment, or if the environment had just started to become so beautiful during the last kilometer or so. Digging into her memory, she found only green, unremarkable vegetation for the past several hours. As she kept looking intently at the forest, she began to notice animals as well. The rustling of leaves, ears perking out of bushes, the indistinguishable clapping of hooves. Tlana kept walking, and her amazement kept growing. Her memory had trouble interrupting the many sensations that were entering her brain, so she was well beyond the crossroad before she even realized she had passed it.

'Damn,' she said out loud, and began to walk back to the crossroad, taking the road to her left when she reached it. After an hour of walking, forcing herself to watch the road and not only the forest around her, she began to spot the contours of a small city. It looked a bit like her hometown, only bigger. And with a wall of dirt placed around it. There was an opening right in front of her, probably serving as a gate of some sort, though no one was guarding it. She could see people and animals inside, but she didn't enter. Better safe than sorry, she thought. Stupid not to have asked the reason why the village should be avoided, but even more stupid to neglect the advice she had been given.

It was easy to walk around the earthen wall, since the trees and bushes around it were burned down, creating a clear path that followed the curving wall.

She took the first road she stumbled upon. It led her along several villages, just as the young man had said. At each village Tlana asked what its name was. Wera, Waro, Weerua, Waroho, and so forth. She was surprised by how many villages there were. And the names here are so similar, she thought. In the South, where she came from, this was not a problem. She knew a dozen or so villages, their names all starting with an S of course, but the western part of the island seemed to be a lot more crowded. And you could only come up with so many names starting with a W, couldn't you?

Finally she arrived at a village which they said was named Wendo, or at least it sounded the same as the name she had heard from the three cloying travelers. Tlana asked several people in the village

about the rumor. They immediately knew what she was talking about, and told her everything they could. The people in the village spoke in a simple manner, without the confusingly sweet tone the two women had given her half a day before. Tlana was relieved, but slightly frustrated that everyone she spoke to directed her to someone else, or could give no definitive name or direction whatsoever. However, several of them had given her the name of Yolulu, but told her that she was probably hunting in the forest and would return just before nightfall, like most hunters did.

Tlana continued wandering around the village. It was a small village, perhaps sheltering some 500 people, she thought. The houses were arranged in circles around plaza's, on which several fires were being prepared. The contrast with her own village struck her. In Sargura the villagers entered their homes when night fell, and there they lit a fire and ate, talked to family members, did small chores, or read books. Sometimes neighbors and friends would come over, but usually the only contact at night was with family members.

But here it seemed that everyone sat together in the plaza, outside their homes. Tlana had walked past several houses, and noticed that they were crammed with simple beds, leaving no space to do anything else. So it was also a necessity to do things such as eating and storytelling at the plaza, Tlana guessed. Finally she became so tired of walking, she fell down near a tree and dozed off, even before the darkness had settled in.

'Hey, wake up!'

'Huh?'

'Hey, come on now, wake up.'

'What? What's wrong?'

'Nothing is wrong, but people keep bugging me that there was a girl wandering around who wanted to see me. I gathered it was you. So, what do you want me for?'

Tlana lifted herself, and removed the sleep from her eyes and from her mind. She was not used to being woken in the middle of the night.

'What time is it?'

'What? You come all the way to my village, spend half a day looking for me, and you ask me what time it is? Well, the light left half an hour ago,

so you figure out the hour. Glad to have been able to help you.
Goodbye then.'

'No, wait! That's not what I wanted to ask. I don't know, I was still half asleep. Please come back.'

The woman stopped and walked back to Tlana.

'All right then, tell me what this is about. But first, let us eat something.'

She walked towards one of the large fires burning on the plaza, clearly choosing the most deserted one. Tlana followed her, which was easier than she thought. The many great fires illuminated her surrounding to a considerable degree. On their way they passed a large kettle placed near one of the fires, and the woman grabbed two bowls and filled them with whatever was inside the kettle. They sat down and the woman, Tlana's brain had agreed that Yolulu was her name, began to eat.

'My name is Tlana, I live in Sargura and I have come here because of some rumors I heard,' Tlana began. 'Something about a mysterious object, that emits light. I heard that you had found such a thing.'

'Yes, I have found the exact same thing you are carrying in your backpack,' Yolulu replied with her mouth full of blackish porridge.

Tlana had forgotten she carried the quiver in her backpack, and that part of it stuck out. She had covered it with some cloths, but the contours were still quite visible.

'How do you know..?'

'Because I could glimpse the strange colors of the thing you are carrying, and I have seen those colors only once. Combined with the shape of the object, I figured it was something very similar to the thing I found in the woods.'

'Please don't tell anyone,' Tlana pleaded with her. 'I already get enough attention here. Everyone sees me as a foreigner.'

'That's because you are a foreigner,' Yolulu said lightly. 'But don't worry, it's safe with me. Besides, most of the people here don't give my word any credit since the day I told them about the thing.'

'How so?'

'I can trust you not to tell this to anyone, right? Because if you do, I won't be able to guard your secret anymore.'

Tlana nodded. 'Of course.'

'All right then. I found the object some weeks ago, while I was in the

woods hunting a ferocious warthog. The thing was round and...well, you know what it looks like. I opened it, and it blinded me with light. I didn't trust it for a bit, so I decided to hide it and not to tell anyone. And so I did. But then it started to nag me, and usually I don't like lying, so I decided to tell people what had happened. And that's where the rumors come from.'

After she had said this, she looked more relieved.

'Well, I'm glad I got that out. But still, I'm not too fond of everyone talking about it.'

'But hasn't anyone tried to find it then?'

'No. Well, of course I said I lost the object, and had no idea where it was. I mean, they don't need to know I hid it intentionally, do they now?'

They were both silent for a moment.

'You're going to tell me why you're so interested in the objects?' Yolulu asked as she finished her bowl.

'It's because...well, it's...,' Tlana thought about how best to communicate to Yolulu the reason for her quest.

'I think that the strange objects have something to do with the days becoming shorter and shorter, I can feel they are linked somehow. And I have the urge to find out what is happening with the light and darkness, and how we can stop it from happening. So, I decided to travel to the Midlands, to learn more. They say that in the Midlands they know things. It's like a gathering place for information from all over the island. But then I found out the object I have is not the only one in existence. So, looking for the others seemed to be my best option, I guessed.'

'I see,' Yolulu said thoughtfully. 'And I will help you. Because if there is anything that can stop my hunting-time from disappearing, I will try it. You can sleep in my community house, and tomorrow we will dig up the thing I found. Let's go.' And she took Tlana by the arm, as if such things were just daily business for her.

They rose the following morning at first light, and went to the spot where Yolulu had hidden the object. After they had dug it up, they stopped to think it over again. Finally they decided to place it back in its hiding place. Travelling with two of the objects would only increase the

risk of one or both being robbed or lost, whereas now at least one would be safe. And retrievable if necessary. Besides, it would save them space in their backpacks.

While Yolulu made the necessary arrangements, packing food, clothing and tools, Tlana was feeling a little sick. She was thinking about what to do next. They could go to the North, were rumor said another quiver had been found. But then what? Just gathering the things couldn't make much of a difference. They had to do something. They had to find out how to use them, or where they came from. She hoped that somehow the solution would present itself on their journey. But she didn't like relying on hope alone. All this made her feel sick. Or perhaps it was the porridge from last night, she pondered.

When all was ready, the two set out to the North. Tlana was slightly surprised, and even a little suspicious, of the woman she had just met, and who had decided so rapidly to join her in her quest, and to leave her hometown behind. But she told herself not to worry. She ought to be relieved that it had all went so smoothly. And besides, she herself had also been very willing to leave her village, so why would someone else not be able to feel the same urge? As she thought about this, she unconsciously started to grab her compass to see which way they would have to go. But then she realized that Yolulu was already several hundred meters ahead of her.

Of course, Tlana thought, she grew up here, and knows where to go. Tlana noticed that her travelling companion didn't say goodbye to anyone in her village, nor did the villagers wave her farewell. Perhaps they truly held a grudge against her for telling an incredulous story about a magical quiver. Or perhaps she had always been an outsider and eager to leave, just as Tlana herself had been all her life.

Mestavo sprang from his bed. He was covered in sweat from the terrible nightmare that had eventually woke him up. In his dream he had married woman after woman, but each one had turned into a blinding light at the moment he touched her. The light burned the women to dust, and made his eyes feel like they would never again know what the absence of pain felt like. But each time his eyes recovered just enough to see his next wife being burned to cinders because of the light evoked by his touch. Only when the last lady had been destroyed did Mestavo wake up, feeling miserable and guilty because of the apparent underlying wish to get rid of his marriage problems.

And now he had to go to another one of the boring and repetitive lectures of his old, old teacher.

Having consumed a sober breakfast of toast and fruit, Mestavo walked towards the lecture room. He tried to ban from his mind any thoughts concerning the upcoming choice he would have to make. As he pushed those thoughts aside, figments about the tube began to fill the void. The beautiful, light emitting object was definitely also responsible for part of his dream. If only he would have more time to spend with it, to find out its use and origin. But his days were filled with lectures, ceremonies, and of course marriage proposals and all the practices that went with them. Long speeches, gift exchanges, elaborate discussions and competitions. He wondered for how many more days he would be able to stand it. He wondered why he was so fed up with the girlish, empty, sweet-talk they all gave him. But what could he do? The teachers was already sitting at his desk when Mestavo entered the room.

‘Good morning to you, my prince,’ he said amiably.

‘Good morning.’

‘Today, we have a very interesting topic on the agenda. Or several, I should say. We will be looking at the overall organization of the Empire, the division of resources and the elaborate system needed to let the Empire run smoothly.’

‘I wouldn’t say smoothly,’ Mestavo said in an undertone, ‘given the increasing number of incidents.’ He immediately regretted saying this,

as his teacher went on and on denying this, using his usual arguments and rusted dogmas. Mestavo began to balance his pen on his finger, something he often practiced during the long lectures.

‘Before the emperor Tzelo, one of your ancestors, began his reign, the world was in chaos. There was no order or justice whatsoever, and some people squandered all the resources while others died of hunger and thirst. Emperor Tzelo divided our island into five districts, the North, the East, the South, the West and the Center, or Midlands as it is often called. He founded many cities and even more smaller towns and villages in each district, decreeing that each settlement choose a name beginning with the first letter of the district, so as to make the geography much more comprehensible and unambiguous. This way, one would always know in which direction Nistam lay, for example. Or Eclars, or Soudramno, or Wolk, or Clestanorima, or any of the other dozens of cities we will discuss in detail in subsequent lectures.’

Mestavo gave a loud and obvious sigh.

‘All these cities were connected by the road system that Tzelo and his son Mealco developed,’ the old man continued. ‘By ensuring that all the resources that were gathered throughout the Empire were transported to one central point, it became possible to provide each locality with the necessary materials and nutrition. Each town is specialized in one or several resources, and can therefore produce that resource extremely efficiently. Caravans collect the resources several times a week, and distribute them to each and every settlement on the island. This way, everyone gets what he needs and no one is left behind. It’s the perfect system, and infallible.’

‘Is it?’ Mestavo questioned.

‘Of course. Everyone has what he needs,’ the teacher continued, ‘so there is no reason for discontent. Surpluses are stored for when a natural disaster strikes an area. And for the few dissidents that exist within every society, we have a well organized and efficient army.’

‘But what if large groups of people start to rise? Not because of insufficient food or materials, but because they simply want something else, for example? What if they want more freedom? Freedom to decide for themselves what they do, what they produce.’

‘Pay attention, young prince. I just told you that for those things we have the army. Did I not?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Mestavo sighed.

In fact, he agreed with the policy the Empire had with dissidents. People who disregarded the rules had to be handled with extreme severity, because if not, a wrong precedent would be created. Giving a mere warning to someone who has openly roused others against the Empire was foolish. Putting him in jail for years would at least deter others from committing the same crime. And besides, the rules of the Empire were made to provide in everyone’s needs and wishes. An act against them was an act against oneself. However, Mestavo knew also that people were prone to change, and that man wanted freedom. He himself often felt the strong urge to disregard the policies concerning princes and court etiquettes. Over the years he had come to understand that people could give into their urges. But still, the only way to contain the problems seemed to him to be severe punishment. Only he doubted whether all the rules of the Empire were as just as they made them seem.

‘Shall we continue?’ the old man said. He was always good at dressing commands as questions. Or the other way around. He pick up a large, colorful map and spread it out in front of him. ‘The center of the northern district is, of course, the seat of the Empire, where all the officials and family members of the emperor live. To the left, near the volcanoes, are located villages that produce weaponry and a variety of tools. To our north, bordering on the coast, are located towns specialized in the production of various staples, such as grain and maize. Rhinoceroses and horses are bred in the eastern part of the northern district. The eastern district as a whole is specialized in ackla and fruit cultivation. In the northern part...’

Mestavo truly couldn’t focus. He understood that some things were worth repeating, and that most people needed to hear things several times before they were imprinted into their minds. But he himself wasn’t one of them. Still, he could never convince his teachers to skip the parts he already knew. They just kept flooding him with stuff that was either too familiar, or too boring to deserve his attention. Some things he had heard so many times already, that every night he was afraid he would dream about them. Fortunately, he did not. Unfortunately, he had even worse nightmares.

When the teacher was wrapping up the lecture, clearly having

lost Mestavo's attention ages ago, he cleared his throat. The prince looked up at him, still not fully focused.

'Tomorrow,' the old man said in a tone which conveyed joy and resentment at the same time, 'we will be witnessing a match from the Maga tournament. This year's competition has just started, and since we spoke about the games several days ago, it seemed a useful addition to the lecture.'

This at least woke Mestavo up. He hadn't been to a match in ages. Sitting in the large, imperial stadium and watching the men and women dart through the fields, throwing and deflecting their disks, was extremely exiting. Especially as the tournament progressed, and the players became more and more eager to win. But one of the beginning matches would be satisfying as well, he thought.

'Great, that seems like a very useful addition to last week's lectures,' he answered.

'Yes, I thought so,' replied the teacher.

‘We should have started with it weeks ago!’ the man in the red garment exclaimed furiously. ‘Why all the waiting? Every day the light-bringer is not on display, is a day of lost revenues. And considerable revenues I dare say!’

‘Yes, Gatosch,’ said the pale, thin, darkly clad woman standing next to him. ‘I don’t quite fully see any reason for delaying the whole business. I have rented the building and arranged the necessary permits, and everything appears to be in order. So why this delay on your part?’

Gatosch sighed. The man and woman standing before him were his associates, people he had worked with for years, people he had started enterprises with, people he had helped gain fortunes, and vice versa. But also people he did not trust at all. Nor did he particularly like them.

Nevertheless, they were good at what they did, and their joined enterprises had always resulted successful. This time, they had taken the idea of using the strange device Gatosch had been given by his brother, as an act, a show. A novelty exclusively on display for the privileged, for the wealthy. They had rented a large barn some kilometers away from the market stalls. At night almost no torchlight from the city reached the barn. And that was the idea, the way to make the sight even more impressive and astounding. They would guide the customers to it, in all secrecy so as to avoid too much attention from the authorities, and show them a glimpse of what the object contained. Dressing it all up of course with mysterious stories and legends of its origin and its workings. That was their specialty, dressing things up to sell it for an extraordinary price. It also helped that most of their goods were already special in and of themselves. Wealthy people didn’t mind paying abundantly for something uncommon, especially if well promoted.

For most of the time Gatosch just went with the flow. Such as when he had started selling a new type of drink, a sort of wine made with honey. He had gathered the idea from a friend, saw great potential in it, and had acted quickly. Buying all available stocks, and making appointments with influential, rich individuals, giving them a taste of the drink which, 9 out of 10 times, made them long for more.

But this time it was different somehow. He did not know what to make of the object. Around the time he had opened it, he had noticed

that the days were beginning to shorten. He had directly related the two things, and had carefully monitored the subsequent days. He had kept the object closed since then, but still the days were beginning to become shorter, with no apparent regularity.

After a week he had opened it once more, which seemed to have no evident effect on the subsequent length of the day and night. Gatosch did not understand it. Was he responsible for setting the process in motion? He could not believe that such a small thing could have an effect on the entire world. Still, he had been reluctant to proceed with their enterprise. He tried subtly to detect problems that weren't there. To show obstacles that were in fact nonexistent. All to the frustration of his companions.

'Come on, Gatosch,' the man said. Let me send the invitations. Let us give it a try. What is there to lose? You are always the enthusiastic one!

Gatosch gave him his fake smile. The enthusiastic one, he thought. Of course. Could he deny it? Not to them. Not to anyone. But the fact was that deep down, he was far from happy. Deep down, he struggled daily, unable to be at peace with himself. People couldn't see it, but inside the enthusiastically appearing Gatosch there was an ongoing war. An eternal war, only he himself was aware of.

His inner world was divided, and full of things that disrupted the peace. In essence it was ruled by a righteous, courageous and fearless knight, who guarded the realm, who protected all that was inside. Most of the time things went smoothly. But lurking in a dark cave of the realm, there was an evil demon. A demon that had happily settled himself there years ago, on a small spot where he bothered no one.

As the years went by however, the demon got more obsessive, trying to add more territory to his dark premises. Oftentimes he ventured out of his home to search for new lands. The knight was always on guard however, fighting the demon back into his own corner. But over the years the demon was gaining in strength. Piece by piece he managed to conquer lands, to greaten his power and influence. During the last years he often headed out at night, daring the knight who protected the realm. They would fight bloody battles. The demon would slash his claws of hopelessness and despair at the knight. He

would bite him with his teeth of depression and apathy. He would stab him with his spear of doom and destruction.

But after the prolonged fights, the knight would always appear victorious, driving the demon back into his cave, but always unable to kill him. Licking its wounds, the demon gathered strength, more and more each time he faced defeat. Full of confidence that one day he would be strong enough to murder the pretentious fool that made him live in the outskirts of the realm. One day, not long from now, the demon would defeat his opponent, and he would rule the realm that had always denied him true entrance.

‘Give me one more day to check the device, and then I promise you we can begin,’ Gatosch said to his companions. They both grudgingly murmured their agreement, and said their farewell, leaving Gatosch alone in his home. He looked at the object that was standing in the corner, and sighed heavily.

Some of the miners were complaining. Mostly it were the same ones as always. They complained about the temperature. About the dust that occasionally entered their mouths when they accidentally brushed their caps off. About the eternal darkness, and the sparse minutes of daylight they were allowed to enjoy. And of course they complained about the arduousness of the work. But the complainers were few in number, and Johteng guessed that most of them were complaining just for the sake of it.

In all the years Johteng had worked at the mining company, only four or five had actually decided to give up their jobs. He didn't know what happened after one had run away, and he didn't really care. One job of which no one ever complained, was the sorting circle. And today Johteng had been lucky, he had been assigned to sort the different types of rock that were extracted from the mines.

The sorting circle was located in an old, abandoned mine. He would have preferred open grounds where there was more daylight, but apparently that was deemed too dangerous. Or too unlike a miner's life and customs. He didn't know. But he also liked sorting in the cool, spacious old mine, whose ceilings and walls were covered with torches, providing all the necessary light.

All over the floor were located large piles of rocks, with some baskets placed in front of them. Johteng sat in front of one of the piles, and quickly scanned it over. Mostly quartz, he thought. Some magnetite perhaps. One by one he grabbed the pieces, greatly varying in size, and removed the parts that were purely sterile rock. The tools he had at his disposal were ideal for the job. He created a large pile of this debris, and the precious rocks and minerals that remained he placed in the different baskets. He loved this job. The minerals and gems were beautiful, each time quite different but always containing its own, specific splendor. Of course they had not yet been cleaned and washed, but still, the beauty was visible. Trying to recognize them was what he liked most.

He had always wanted to learn this trade as best as he could. The Stone Song had been his favorite ever since he began to work in the mines, and he had never passed a sorting day without singing the

song at least once in his head. As he happily removed some of the outer rock shell that had formed around a piece of crystal white quartz, he began to softly sing the song that had already nested itself in his mind.

*Adamite, many colors it has, diverse but alike,
Most of them fluorescent, and seeming truly alive.
Aegirine, blackish it is, and with crystals so long,
So slender, so thin, yet still fairly strong.
Agate, diverse it can be, but only when you decide,
To cut up the rock, and show its inside.
Amethyst, purple it looks, a light shade when it's found,
But when heating it up, then for darker it's bound.
Aquamarine, with crystals so large, and transparent as well,
And a color that's greenish, or blue, who will tell.
Aurichalcite, also greenish and blue, intense as it is,
Composed of many small needles, so tiny, so bliss.
Biotite, with transparent layers, all stacked together,
When treated with water, no doubt it will shatter.
Brochantite, with a color green, mightily deep,
Made up of small needles, that radiate from a heap.
Cerussite, the crystals it forms do truly amaze,
The heavy weight that it has, also merits appraise.
Chalcopyrite, the looks that it has, might confuse one with gold,
But a fool would be he, who would make such a fault.
Crocoite, many it has astounded, wondered, surprised,
With its deep orange color, and a red that's disguised.
Cyanotrichite, being blue and with needles so fragile,
By the first touch they feel, they will crumble, quickly and agile.
Elbaite, there is no color it cannot show,
With its red, blue, green, brown, and clear yellow.
Erythrite, the deep colors it has, reddish and pink,
May surprise many a man, and force him to blink.
Ferberite, the blackness it has comes from the iron inside,*

...

Johteng was suddenly interrupted in his song. Several headmen

were coming towards them, yelling how they had to go and stand together in the middle of the sorting circle. Johteng didn't know what was going on. The last time they were called together by the headmen was years ago, when one of the workers had experienced a fatal accident, and they were given stricter security measures. And now they were called together again. This could only be bad news, Johteng thought.

One of the men, wearing a red helmet which marked him as a high official, spoke to them.

'Men, we have gathered you here to inform you of the current situation in the world. You are rather isolated in this region of the island, and receive little information from the outside. This is not a problem. One might even see it as a blessing. However, given the circumstances and the recent developments, the mining confederation has decided that you ought to be informed of the situation. This way, there is no need for panic, doubt, or unnecessary questions.'

Johteng wondered what was so important that they had to be interrupted from their work. Important enough for the confederation to interfere. Vaguely, somewhere in the back of his head, the object he had found weeks ago came floating to the surface. Still, it didn't penetrate the thickly layered surface which protected Johteng's mind from deeply buried memories and thoughts.

'So, listen up all of you,' the man continued in a loud voice. 'All over the island, the days that are filled with light, have become shorter. The nights, on the other hand, have prolonged. We are aware that you spend little time caring about the daylight, since none of it penetrates the mines. However, it does have certain consequences. Consequences for you all. In the long term, we have to consider that materials may become scarce. Especially wood, which comes from trees that require sufficient sunlight. The demand already has increased significantly. This means that we are unable to provide the workers with unlimited supplies of torches and firewood, as was previously the case. Therefore, a ration will be implemented. Each worker is given five torches daily. They will be provided together with the other tools you receive upon commencing a working day. Bear in mind that other regulations may be decreed later on, but you will be informed when the time is there. That will be all.'

And the men turned around and walked up the stairs, leaving the workers behind. After several minutes everything had returned to normal. Most workers didn't care about the new regulation. The majority of miners used an average of seven or eight torches a day. If they used the torches slightly more economically, it would make the difference almost unnoticeable.

The decree, however, made Johteng remember the strange object he had encountered. Several days ago he had heard rumors of an object, apparently similar to the one he had found, that emitted some sort of extremely bright light. He didn't know how that was possible, and regretted having turned over the thing he had found before even opening it.

But could such an object be related to what was happening right now? Could it somehow have caused the nights becoming longer? He didn't think so. But perhaps it could help compensate for the decreased amount of daylight? He wondered if he should tell someone. Maybe he should tell the mining confederation, who now most likely possessed the object. But surely, they knew already what to do with it.

They had walked for days now. Tlana's feet hurt, and she was tired. Not tired from the seven hours they had walked that day, but tired of the entire journey, tired of the act of walking itself. And tired of being the only one who was tired. Yolulu seemed to be just fine. More than fine even, she looked content and seemed to enjoy their walk along the gradually changing landscape.

Truly nothing had happened since they had left the village. They had seen several caravans, and spotted some other travelers in the distance, but that was it. Tlana had imagined her journey to be quite different, much more adventurous. But if more adventure meant more danger, she was fine with how things were going at the moment. She was just so tired.

After walking for a while in silence, Tlana decide to ask her companion something that she had been thinking about for some time now.

'How come people in the western woodlands have such strange names?'

'How do you mean?' Yolulu answered.

'Well, you all have very different names, but they appear to be similar in some way. You know, with the repetition and all.'

'Oh, that. We, or at least the hunters from our village, are given our names when we turn 15. When we are initiated.'

Tlana didn't understand, and couldn't see how this explained anything. 'So?'

'Well, our names are linked to the sounds produced by the first prey we capture on our 15th birthday. I, for example, managed to shoot a bird from half a kilometer away. It was hiding in one of the branches of an old tree, which made him almost impossible to see. But I hit him with my first try. So my name now resembles the sound that specific kind of bird makes. You see?'

Tlana understood. She thought it was a nice idea, except for the shooting of the bird. But by now she had grown accustomed to Yolulu's hunting stories. In fact, she had discovered that Yolulu was rather pleasant company. She was about her own age, but the resemblance in age was compensated by the dissimilarity in character. Yolulu was a true adventurer, tireless, brave and able to handle

everything that came on her path. Well, that was what Tlana had figured out from her stories. The stories she had heard almost continuously for the last couple of days. However, they had had no opportunity to test her words to the reality. But Tlana believed her companion, and liked being around her. Though she was sure some parts of her stories were heavily exaggerated. Not the tirelessness aspect, thought.

They were still in an area covered with trees and bushes, though the colors had shifted, gradually becoming more bright. They had come by several crossroads and had been forced to choose between directions. Tlana just let Yolulu do the choosing, because she apparently had an infallible sense of direction. But Tlana checked every now and then on her compass to see if they were still going towards the North. The road they were walking on now was going more or less northwards, but was quickly becoming narrower. She thought about telling Yolulu that perhaps they'd better return and take another direction. But she didn't.

However, after half an hour the road had disappeared completely, it had blended in with the forest floor. It was now only recognizable as a path because of the relatively young plants and bushes that grew on it.

'Are you sure we're on the right track?' Tlana eventually ventured. 'Seems like we're not,' Yolulu replied nonchalantly. 'The roads between cities and large towns are that, roads. But this seems more like a long gone road, a forgotten path. No one has bothered to clear it for a long time. I wonder if there has even been anyone here in the last couple of months. I don't see any fresh human tracks.'

'So what do we do? We turn back?'

'I think if we follow this track here, and eventually take a turn to the right, we will cross one of the other roads from this area.'

'Sure?'

'Sure,' she answered with a smile.

They walked and walked, focusing intently on the difference between light and dark grass, between sprouts and fully grown plants. Suddenly, Tlana stumbled. Her foot hit something she hadn't seen, despite the fact that she had tried to be extremely observant. She was caught by surprise, and fell forwards, tumbling on the soft forest floor.

'Are you hurt?' Yolulu's voice portrayed a hint of concern.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Tlana replied as she tried to get back on her feet. ‘Aarh!’ she yelped. ‘Okay, perhaps I am.’

Despite the soft terrain, Tlana had managed to seriously injure her foot.

‘Great!, just what we need,’ she muttered under her breath.

‘Take it easy,’ Yolulu said, ‘such things can happen. Your feet were already hurting, right? So it’s not that bad, after all.’

‘Not that bad?’ Tlana said incredulously. She thought about having to continue their journey with an injured foot. This seriously complicated matters. She couldn’t understand why Yolulu took it on so lightly. ‘Not that bad? How do you...?’

‘Dear, deer, dear, what have a here?’ a voice came from close by.

‘Two travelers on their way, lost and astray?’

An extremely short and jovial looking individual, dressed in ropes that seemed to be made from a variety of leafs and branches, approached them.

‘I mean you no harm, just comfort and charm,’ he said with a smile and open arms.

‘Who are you? And what do you want?’ Yolulu asked defensively, her hands clutching her bow more tightly.

‘I live in these grounds, and my hospitality knows no bounds. So I came to welcome you here, and take away all your fear. Potions and lotions is what I make, and I’ll offer you one for your sake. I spotted a lady in distress, so I came to clean up the mess. And offer you dinner, for it is getting late. Fruits and homemade stew, like never you ate.’

‘Great,’ Tlana said in a low voice to Yolulu, ‘he speaks in rhymes.’

‘Now be brave, and just follow me to my cave. It’s not far at all, not far away. In the end, it will make you happy, happy and gay.’

‘Hold on,’ Yolulu said. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Girl please be so kind, to tell me the first word that comes to your mind.’

‘Why would I do that?’

‘Do this for me, and you’ll see!’

Yolulu quickly looked the man up and down. ‘Twig,’ she said firmly.

‘Now then, for you my name is Twig. And for your friend, my name is whatever she might pick. But come now, let us go, have you not noticed, that time is running low?’

Tlana and Yolulu were quite suspicious, but the little jovial

man seemed to have no bad intentions. His smile conveyed only warmth and kindness. Besides, they were both very hungry, and the prospect of rest and dinner was just too welcoming for them not to follow him.

The little man led them through the forest, while he stayed close to them and supported Tlana, who had difficulty walking. Soon they reached an overgrown cave, where a small passage was visible, partly covered by bushes and flowers.

‘This is my home, this is where I reside. It’s so nice to have guests, to have folk by my side. It has been years and years since new people came, to visit me, to give me a name.’

‘Do you trust him?’ Yolulu asked Tlana in a low voice so that the jovial man could not hear. ‘Not that I’m afraid to enter the cave, but something just doesn’t seem right.’

‘I don’t know. But I really need my foot to be fixed. In this condition we can’t continue. Besides, we need shelter and a meal anyway.’

‘Ok then, let’s see what comes of it.’

‘Here, here, here, through this hole, have no fear!’

They followed Twig into the cave, and were immediately stunned by its interior. A hallway ran down, which seemed to have no end. All sides of the corridor were covered with the most amazing and exotic plants and fungi imaginable. Colors radiated and filled the interior, and all around them spores swirled. It was a paradise. The air seemed to be beyond pureness. Both Yolulu and Tlana were instantly calmed, and felt fully revived by the mere beauty and atmosphere of their surroundings.

‘This is the entrance to my dwelling. Follow me further, and I will stop your foot from swelling.’

Tlana felt wonderful. She barely even noticed her injury. The three of them stayed close together as they walked through the narrow, dazzling corridor.

‘In truth, I don’t often get company. But when I do, they never wish to leave me,’ the man said. ‘My home makes them feel so comfortable. Life without it seems painful and dull. In my underground garden I have all you need, apples and sorghum, grapes and beet. And well, a well as well! Clear water to bathe in and to drink. And all the time that you want, to play, to sing, or to think.’

As Tlana listened to the man, she turned around to see if Yolulu

was still with them. She knocked her backpack against the wall, and several of her belongings dropped on the ground. Instead of waiting, Yolulu passed her with some difficulty. Tlana began to pick up her belongings, but bending over hurt her head. She stood up straight, but the pain didn't go away. In fact, it worsened. She grabbed her forehead and stumbled against the wall of the cave, more from the sudden onset of it then from the amount of pain it gave her. Her foot began to hurt as well.

'Wait!' she yelled.

Yolulu and Twig came running back.

'What's wrong,' Yolulu asked.

'I have a headache. But...it appears to have subsided already. Strange, it suddenly came over me. But now it's gone.'

'You see,' Twig said, 'everything is alright, when you're close to me.'

Tlana grabbed Yolulu's arm, increasing the distance between them and Twig with several meters, while they continued walking.

'Something is not right,' she whispered.

'Indeed,' Yolulu said, 'I just started to feel a slight headache as well.'

'Hey you, what's wrong? Why don't you just come along?' Twig said jovially as he walked a few steps towards them, and gestured them to move on.

'Feeling better?' Tlana whispered to Yolulu.

'Yes,' she answered with a puzzled expression on her face. They didn't know what to think of it.

Nevertheless, they continued on their way, propelled by their stomachs and curiosity.

The cave became ever more wide and inviting. Never had they seen such tranquility, beauty and energy combined. Small waterfalls were visible in the distance, their sound reverberating all around the cave. Little animals darted between the flowers, which seemed be just as alive as the animals themselves. In the beginning they could barely stand up straight in the passageway, but by now the ceiling had become as high as some of the trees from Tlana's hometown. The sparse areas of the cave that were not covered with plants and fungi seemed to be made of different kinds of crystals, colorfully filling the interior. Tlana wondered where all the light came from. Nowhere could she see a hole in the cave from which light could enter. Candles and torches were also

lacking. She could not believe that all the light came from the glowing mushrooms, crystals and flowers around her.

Suddenly Tlana bumped into her friend, who had stopped walking. Before she could ask her what the matter was, she saw. Before them some dozen people were going around their business. A man with an enormous hat was circling a woman that was seated on the ground, reading a large, half decayed book. Two men were throwing a ball back and forth. Another one was cleaning an immense closet that seemed to be filled with all kinds of jars and vases. As she observed her surroundings more carefully, she noticed that all around her the walls were covered with shelves, most of them supporting jars in all sizes and shapes.

‘What is this?’ she whispered to Yolulu.

Only after a few seconds of silence she noticed that her friend was already several meters ahead of her. The jovial man jumped up and down, apparently divided between staying with Tlana or following Yolulu.

‘This is where I live, as you can see. And those are my friends, they are living with me. In a while you can meet them, each and every one. But first dinner, look at all the delicacies I’ve spun!’

He led Tlana and Yolulu to a grand table in one of the corners of the cave. On it were placed as many different dishes as you could imagine. Tlana thought she had never seen so much food in her life. And to her surprise, none of it seemed to be made from animals. They sat down and needed little encouragement from Twig to dive into the different meals in front of them.

One by one they tasted the dishes, each and every one different but equally delightful. The restraint they had felt in the beginning had subsided almost instantly. Something that tasted so delicious could not possibly be poisonous. They had both learned that there were plenty of berries and roots that could seriously harm you, but all of them tasted so bitter that you would intuitively spit them out as soon as you ate them. The dishes in front of them displayed nothing of the kind.

Twig had seated himself in front of them. His head barely rose above the table. Whenever Tlana or Yolulu had eaten a few bites from one of the dishes, the little man took a jar from somewhere beneath

him, and placed some of the food inside it. The filled jars he placed at the other end of the table. Tlana wanted to ask why he did such a thing, but she was too caught up in pleasing her neglected stomach that she simply forgot.

After they had both finished, the man went to place all the jars he had filled on one of the shelves that hung from the walls. Yolulu instantly went to explore the large room they were in. Tlana was more cautious, and started off with looking and absorbing the various people and their behavior.

None of them truly appeared to notice her. They weren't ignoring her, but they simply didn't seem interested. They were too preoccupied with their games and other doings. Tlana walked to a small table which contained several books. She picked up a small, brown book and read the title. 'On the interaction between small mammals and their smaller prey, and the crucial role of fungi' she muttered to herself. She flipped through several pages and then put the book back on the table. It didn't seem out of the ordinary. But when she moved away from the table, she noticed that Twig hurried towards it, grabbing the book with both of his hands. He started to rip several pages from the book, crumbling them and putting them in jar he had pulled from out of nowhere. Then he darted off again.

Tlana walked towards one of the walls which was filled with bottles in all sizes and shapes. She looked for a stairway somewhere around her, because she didn't know how else the little man had managed to fill the top shelves. She found none however. She focused again on one of the shelves in front of her. The jars on it were all filled with something indistinct. The contents were clouded, and if you looked very well, you could see some chunks floating inside. Their colors were clearly visible, despite the fogginess that tried to blur them. Bits of food?, she wondered. Or something else? None of the bottles had been labeled. She wanted to pick one up, but hesitated. She looked behind her back and saw that the little man was organizing his newly acquired samples. He seemed to have a system, because he was rearranging them, switching two bottles around, pushing them to the side, or replacing them with some of the other samples. While he was doing this, he was whistling merrily.

Tlana moved her hand forward to grab one of the bottles. It had a bluish glow, and several small, orange looking chunks were vaguely visible. But before she could touch the bottle, Yolulu was beside her and pushed her hand down.

‘I think we’d better go,’ she whispered to Tlana.

‘Why?’

‘Because. I looked around and everything was fine. But when I stepped towards the passageway through which we arrived, I got a pretty awful headache. It subsided when I distanced myself from it. But something’s definitely wrong.’

‘I see,’ Tlana said. ‘My head also hurt back in the passageway. I don’t know what is it, but I had never felt something like that before. It was no normal headache, I tell you. It felt like my brain was suddenly being ripped apart, like part of it just wanted to go somewhere else.’

‘Alright then, let’s leave this place right now. He’s not looking.’

‘What? Why don’t we stay here a little while more, and then leave? He promised to fix my injured foot,’ Tlana objected. ‘In this state I won’t be able to walk very far anyway.’

‘That’s true. But still, I have a feeling we should leave as soon as possible.’

Tlana thought about it. On the one hand she wanted to be as far away from this place as possible, but on the other had she needed rest. And she needed her foot healed. And, perhaps, she was dreading the prospect of experiencing the headache once more.

‘So, how do you suppose we leave?’ Tlana finally asked, having made her decision.

‘Well, back through where we came from is no option I guess.’

‘So, have you spotted another exit then?’

Yolulu didn’t answer. Finally Tlana suggested that perhaps they’d better talk to some of the other people in the cave. To see what their options were. The people here should know something at least, shouldn’t they? Yolulu decided to address the man that was watering some of the flowers. He had carried a small bucket from one of the wells to the wall close to where they were standing. The man then inserted his hand into the bucket, and sprinkled the plants on the wall with the fresh, clear blue water. Tlana, on the other hand, inconspicuously walked towards a woman who was writing something

in a small booklet. She was standing on one leg, occasionally switching the leg that supported her weight.

However, before Tlana got the chance to introduce herself, the woman turned her notebook so that Tlana could see what was written in it. Five large, beautifully formed words filled the page. RUN. ENTRANCE. ONLY CHANCE. NOW. Tlana stared to the page for several seconds. It was clear to her that she couldn't ignore this message. The woman had already walked away. Tlana was afraid to speak up in case it drew the attention of the little man. But she knew they had no time to lose. Both she and Yolulu had had a bad feeling about this cave the moment they had entered it. And she wasn't willing to take the risk. Perhaps this truly was their only chance.

Tlana took a breath and ran as fast as she could towards the entrance, meanwhile shouting a warning to her friend. Yolulu immediately got the message and ran towards the same direction. The little man, who was holding two bottles in his hands, stopped whistling. Tlana didn't look back at him. She registered his voice, but didn't hear the words he was saying.

Once they reached the passageway, the pain began. She had expected it, but still. She grabbed Yolulu's hand, who had arrived just before Tlana did, although she had been further away from the entrance. Together they ran into the tunnel. The pain in her foot was becoming unbearable now. Fortunately it was partly masked by the pain she felt in her head. Someone screamed her lungs out, and Tlana imagined it was her own voice that made the sound. She was grateful that Yolulu dragged her along. After a few seconds, which seemed to last an eternity, the pain became less noticeable, though it was still very much there. The further they got, the less intense it became. Behind her she could hear the little man running after them.

'Don't go, oh no, don't go. You're my guest, my visitor, my invitee. You should not, you cannot, you will not leave without me. No, no, no, you must stay here with Twig. If not, I'm sorry, but you'll be sick! Back at my house, just over there, you will be fine, and I'll treat you with care!'

Tlana ignored him. Which was rather easy, since the pain she was feeling still drowned any other feeling or thought she might have had. She had no sense of direction whatsoever. Then suddenly the pain

ceased completely. They were standing outside. Birds twittered and the wind blew through the trees. Tlana and Yolulu almost instantly fell down beside the nearest tree. The pain in Tlana's foot was back to normal, and they both felt some residual dizziness. But the headache was gone at least. And there was also no trace of the strange man.

For a while they couldn't think straight, until finally Yolulu said that they'd better move on and find shelter somewhere, because night would soon fall. They walked for several minutes, and found some overgrown bushes where they could hide. Yolulu kindled a fire with some dry wood lying around, while Tlana, biting through her pain, gathered more wood from the surrounding dead trees to keep the fire going. They both wanted to talk about what had happened, but neither of them knew what to say. They were still feeling slightly dizzy. As usual, darkness came sooner than expected. Even though they knew it would, it felt like an additional disappointment at the end of a troublesome day. But at least an adventurous one, Tlana thought grudgingly as she closed her eyes and drifted away into a deep, dreamless sleep.

They had been walking for several days since they had escaped from the cave. Tlana's foot was beginning to heal, but their progress was still painstakingly slow. They had found another path, which eventually led them to something that appeared to be a main road. However, again it looked like in the end they had taken some wrong turns, because the road they were walking on was now beginning to blend into the hilly landscape around them. Fortunately, it was obvious that people had passed here recently, and Yolulu could follow their tracks easily.

Their surrounding became ever more desolate, devoid of large trees and bushes, with some lonely plants dotted at irregular intervals. Where previously they had occasionally been distracted by rustling leaves and the sounds of animals darting somewhere behind the trees, now there was only silence. Silence and the sound of wind blowing. Despite their slow progress, Tlana felt good. She thought she had learned a great deal in the last couple of days. She had become wiser and tougher. Not as tough as her companion though. Her cheerful and unconcerned friend, who never saw problems and always did whatever she wanted.

During the last days Tlana had often thought about Yolulu's behavior. Tlana herself always liked to think things over. Or at least, she usually did. She wanted to know what the consequences of her decisions were, and whom they would influence. But her friend seemed not to care in the least. She just did whatever she felt like doing. At least, according to her stories. And the thing was, it would nearly always turn out right. According to the stories. Tlana was slightly jealous of the ease with which she did things, and that she wasn't bothered by anything.

A large part of the time Tlana worried about the progress of their quest, specifically the lack of it. But Yolulu just seemed to enjoy it, not thinking or caring about the troubles and obstacles. But despite the fact that they were both quite different, she felt a strong connection with Yolulu. And there were certainly some things they had in common. Both were not really attached to the people they grew up with. Tlana blamed it on the fact that the people around her were too different from herself to connect with. She figured that Yolulu's reason was more to be found in her personality. Just as she didn't care about

failures or difficulties, she couldn't be bothered with relationships. But that didn't matter. Tlana liked her, and they had plenty to talk about. Tlana just wanted to ask why Yolulu had never before embarked on a journey, when her friend spoke first.

'Look over there,' she said and pointed at the sky.

'What am I supposed to see?'

'You see that bird flying there? That's my companion.'

'What?' Tlana said astonished. 'You have an animal companion? You never told me!'

'I'm telling you now, aren't I?'

'Yes, but...well, that's great, I've always wanted to have an animal companion. Can you communicate well with him?'

'Pretty much. I don't see him often, he's usually flying on his own, discovering new areas and terrains. But I've known him since I was born. I usually know more or less where he is, and I can feel it whenever he tries to tell me something. And vice versa, I guess. He just rarely listens, I think.'

'Is he trying to tell you something now? Will he come to us?'

'I don't know,' Yolulu said while she tried to concentrate. I feel nothing, only his presence. Perhaps he'll join us in a while.'

Tlana couldn't believe it. For years she had wanted to have an animal companion, but she had never had the opportunity. And now her friend just forgot to mention that she had one? It was not fair. For the next hour Tlana walked along silently, thinking about how she would be much more responsible and caring if she would ever have a companion. Unfortunately, the chances of that became slimmer each year. Bonding with an animal took a lot of time and energy, and usually required decades to perfect. Even sensing each other's presence could take more than ten years to develop.

'We're being followed,' Yolulu suddenly whispered.

'What, by your companion?'

'No dummy, by people,' she hissed.

'What? I haven't seen anyone here. And there's nowhere to hide.'

'There is. And the ones following us are trying to stay out of sight.'

'They're doing a good job. I haven't been able to spot them either.'

Seeing Tlana's confused look, she added: 'but my companion has.'

‘Are you sure? Perhaps he tries to communicate something else. Perhaps you’re just not listening good enough.’

‘Run!’ Yolulu suddenly yelled.

As they started to run, dozens of men appeared out of nowhere, and ran after them. Yolulu grabbed her bow and was able to shoot two arrows before she was knocked down by one of the men. Tlana hadn’t even begun to make a grab for her sais before she felt her consciousness leaving her.

‘Wake up,’ Yolulu said while shaking Tlana violently.

‘Come on now, you’ve slept long enough.’

Tlana looked around her. It was dark, and she saw several fires burning, with men and women sitting around them.

‘Where are we? What happened?’

‘Well, we’re somewhere off the road. Those men you see there are the ones that captured us. But somehow we are not their captives.’

Tlana looked at herself and could see no chains or shackles.

‘They are not that bad. Our captors. They just needed to be sure we were no spies. And because I spotted them sooner than they had expected, they panicked and knocked us unconscious.’

‘But still, I managed to disable a man’s shoulder with one of my arrows,’ she added proudly.

‘But..,’ Tlana began. Then she saw that a bearded and muscular man was walking towards them.

‘So, you’re both awake? Sorry again for hitting you, but we couldn’t let you get away,’ he said in a low, rather pleasant voice.

‘There are other ways of doing that, you know,’ Tlana growled at him.

‘I beg your pardon. My name is Uoago. You’re Tlana, I imagine?’

‘Yes,’ she replied, wondering what else Yolulu had already told this man. She looked sideways at her friend, but Yolulu was quietly scanning the tents and storage piles that were placed all around them. She didn’t seem to notice Tlana looking at her.

Uoago sat down beside them and started telling his story. He and his companions were part of a group that tried to free the inhabitants of the island from the grasps of the emperor. The Resistance, or the No-One as they called themselves, consisted of many individuals spread throughout the island, who joined together in secrecy

to discuss how best to overthrow and disrupt the imperial rule. Over the years, more and more people had gotten fed up with the imperial rules and regulations, and had joined the No-One. They were on the verge of causing serious chaos for the Empire, which was a necessary evil before they could finally overthrow them and start a new order, where people could make decisions for themselves, where they themselves could decide what they wanted and what they didn't want to do.

Tlana thought back of Quelto and the group, and figured that they were on their way to join one of the larger resistance groups. Perhaps even this gang. But the imperials had gotten to them first, and ruined for them any further chance of joining the resistance.

'We are on our way to join one of our strongholds in the northern desert,' Uoago said.

'But now, what are you girls doing in this region, travelling all on your own?'

'We are going to the northern district,' Tlana said quickly before Yolulu could answer. 'We are on a quest to find a rare object, and rumors say it's somewhere in the North.' They didn't need to know that they were already carrying one of the objects. Tlana hoped that Yolulu hadn't told them. She quickly looked at her backpack that was lying beside her. At least it didn't seem to have been plundered.

'I see,' Uoago said. 'We also have heard rumors about a mysterious, tube-like object. I image you're talking about the same thing. Only the rumors that I know of don't seem to agree about whether it is located in Nast in the North, somewhere in the Midlands, or in a village near Wolk.'

Tlana gave Yolulu a meaningful glance. The man had no reason to know where they came from and where they had been. Nor did he need to know there was more than one mysterious object, and that they themselves were carrying one of them. Surely her friend would think the same.

'Yes, the rumors are ambiguous. But we chose to try the North first,' Yolulu said.

The man looked at them sadly.

'Wise choice. In the North they will at least be able to give you more information, I think. But I'm afraid that for now you will have to stay

here. Not as our captives, but as our guests,' he added with an apologetic undertone.

Yolulu grunted. 'What's wrong with everyone? Since when is staying somewhere against your will considered to be an act of hospitality? Since when are guests and prisoners the same thing?'

'You must understand,' Uoago said to her in a serious tone. 'We mean you no harm, and we ourselves are the strongest proponents of free will, but this is a necessary precaution. If you, for some reason, fall into the hands of the imperials and tell them, be it under force or not, where we are and where we are going, it could turn into a disaster for all of us. Months of work gone. Dozens of innocent lives lost. You must know how unfair the Empire reacts and how prone they are to dealing out exorbitantly severe punishments.'

As soon as we reach our stronghold and finish executing our plans, you are free to go wherever you want. We will even help you get on your way. But for now you must stay here, until we decide to continue our journey. Then you will travel with us. And if you cause trouble, we will be forced to chain your arms or feet. However, I urge you to treat this place and the people here as your home and family. For now, they are all you will have.

Cheer up now, I will bring you some food,' and he walked towards one of the fires.

'Just great,' Tlana murmured.

'You can say that,' Yolulu agreed. 'We have to get out of here.'

'And how do you suppose we do that? If they are half as good at guarding as they are at hiding, we stand no chance.'

Yolulu nodded slowly and was silent. They were both thinking of what to do. Finally Tlana spoke.

'I think we first need to gain their trust, so that they won't keep such a tight eye on us. Meanwhile, we can figure out a plan. But first try to be as compliant as you can be, and try to show interest in their cause. All right?'

Yolulu nodded. Tlana was glad that her friend could see reason. Fighting their way out would lead them nowhere.

Uoago brought them their stew, and after dinner everyone fell asleep. Even Tlana drowsed away quickly and was unbothered by the worries and thoughts that often kept sleep from settling in on her.

They had spent two days with the No-One. Two agreeable days, much more so than they had expected. Everyone treated them friendly, though some of them were a bit rough around the edges. But Tlana was already getting used to it. They were also extremely fond of criticizing everything the Empire did and stood for. Quelto and the rest would have fit right in, Tlana thought regretfully.

She was sitting beside one of the men, Tzoltzu was his name.

‘If you don’t mind me asking,’ Tlana said to him, ‘why do you name yourselves the No-One?’

‘Isn’t that obvious? Because we are not alone. There is not just one person fighting for our cause, but many. You see? And besides, No-One is hard to detect as a name for rebels, so it won’t rouse the suspicion of the people supporting the Empire. I mean, naming yourself The Rebels or The Justice League Against Imperial Oppression or something like that, would be like throwing yourself into an imperial prison, wouldn’t it? Whereas if someone overheard you saying that you were going to No-One, or that you wanted to join No-One, or that No-One was holding a meeting, that would evoke some strange looks at the most, nothing more.’

‘I understand,’ Tlana replied. ‘Clever.’

She saw that Yolulu was sitting not far away, and that she was talking to the strange woman. The thin, sickly looking woman had caught their attention from the first day they had been in the camp. She seemed to have a high position within the ranks of the group but, on the other hand, she was given little respect. She looked as if she was tired all the time, and as if her thoughts constantly wandered away, taking with them her energy and enthusiasm. But now she seemed cheerful enough, and was talking to Yolulu.

‘Excuse me, I have to ask my friend something,’ and she got up and walked towards the two women sitting on a dead tree trunk not far away.

‘Hi, can I sit here?’

‘Of course.’ When Tlana kept staring her friend in the eyes, giving her an inquisitive look, she finally added: ‘We were just talking about Zeza’s reason for being here. With the No-One.’

'Hold on,' the woman who was apparently called Zeza said with a smile. 'It's not the reason I'm here, it's just my main contribution to the cause. The cause for which we are all here.'

'I don't follow,' Tlana said with a puzzled look.

'Well,' Zeza explained to her, 'I'm what they call a Messenger. Which means that I can sense whatever my twin sister, who is also a Messenger, is experiencing. That way I can help the No-One.'

'Right. Still not following,' Tlana replied, doubting whether she herself was not smart enough to get the meaning, or whether the woman in front of her was just not making sense at all.

'When me and my sister were born, we had an extremely strong bond,' she explained. 'Not that we liked each other that much, but we always knew what the other was thinking and feeling. Instead of subsiding, this grew stronger and stronger over time. So strong, that in my mind I can now hear everything my sister thinks and feels. And the other way around as well. She knows all my thoughts and feelings.'

When we were in our twenties, we learned that this was not unique. There were other people, always twins, that had the same blessing. Or curse, I'm still not sure. They called those people Messengers, and they were in high demand, so to speak. After months of wandering around the island, me and my sister finally wound up with several No-One in the Southeast. And since then we have been travelling with them. My sister is know at a stronghold in the North, the one we are going to.'

'Seriously?' Tlana asked incredulously. 'So if you want to, you can tell us now what your sister is thinking at this very moment?'

'No, no,' she shook her head. 'First of all, it's not a choice I make. I cannot choose when to see my sister's thoughts and when not to. I simply always sense them. If I could decide for myself when to feel them and when not, we would truly have a gift. But now it often feels like a burden. An extremely demanding burden, to have twice as many thoughts and feeling as usual. All at the same time, all intermingling with your own.'

And secondly, my sister is sleeping right now. Dreams are not communicated, so now I finally have some time for myself. But ask me again in a couple of hours, and I can tell you my sister's thoughts, if you wish.'

She smiled amiably. You could see that deep inside her worn out eyes there was still a fire going. Her body was perhaps on the verge of breaking down, but she wouldn't give up easily.

Tlana thought about it for a moment. She still couldn't believe it. But on the other hand, there had been occurring many more things she wouldn't have believed possible just several weeks ago. And then she had an idea.

'It's like the bond between a human and an animal, right? A human and his animal companion can sense each other's presence, and sometimes even intentions and meanings.'

'Yes, it's more or less like that,' the woman replied. 'Only much more elaborate, and not by choice. But I shouldn't complain. It's extremely useful for the rebels to be able to instantly communicate messages, tactics, orders and warnings over hundreds of kilometers. If the commander in the northern stronghold tells something to my sister, I can convey it directly to the people here. And the other way around as well. It has helped us considerably in the past.'

And they always make sure that once in a while one of us sleeps while the other is awake, so we can have at least some tranquility of mind now and again. But now I will leave you, for I have some catching up to do. Nice to meet you.'

She stumbled away, and Tlana and Yolulu were left behind, dazed by the woman's strange story.

They were wandering around the settlement, still contemplating about what Zeza had told them. However, she was not the only one that had interested them. Earlier that day their attention had been caught by a thin, dark figure that was sitting all alone, away from each and everyone. From the distance they could only see his dark hood, under which long strands of dark, curling hair appeared. Yolulu wanted to see his face, so she had started walking towards him.

However, the man instantly rose and entered into one of the tents. They hadn't given it any more thought, but now they saw the man again, sitting near one of the still glowing fires. They decided to walk towards him, but even before they took a step, the tall, dark stranger got up and walked away. They started following him, but suddenly Uoago was there, standing in front of them.

'What..,' Yolulu started to ask.

‘I wouldn’t follow him if I were you. It’s a waste of time.’

‘Why?’ Tlana asked, slightly surprised that he knew their intention.

‘Because if he doesn’t want to talk with you, you won’t talk to him.’

‘You mean he is dangerous?’

‘I have no idea,’ Uoago said seriously. ‘But I am the only one here to whom he has talked. And that was only as brief as he wished it to be.’

‘I don’t get it,’ Yolulu said.

Uoago stood there for a moment, silent. Then he said: ‘you know, there are some people that have a sense of what will happen, an excellent intuition if you will. People that can act instantly when something occurs, because they sensed it coming.’ He looked at them, and continued: ‘well, Gan is an extreme case.’

‘So what,’ Yolulu replied. ‘My reflexes are also very good. You noticed that fact when you ambushed us, didn’t you?’

‘Most of the men here are afraid of him, you know,’ Uoago said, as if giving an answer.

‘Why are they afraid, if you don’t know if he’s dangerous or not,’ Tlana asked.

Once again, Uoago was silent for a while. He stood there in front of them, looking just above their heads, staring into the clear blue sky.

‘All right then,’ he finally sighed. ‘Gan has, what he calls, a developed intuition. He knows what is going to happen, seconds before it happens.’

‘That’s impossible,’ Tlana said, though she now truly realized that her definition of impossible needed some adjusting.

‘Wait till you see him fight,’ Uoago said. ‘He is unbeatable in battles, since he knows each and every outcome of his actions, and can choose the action with the most desirable results. He is never caught off guard, he never misses a blow, and he is never struck.

But the other side of it is that he keeps to himself. He avoids human interaction. Knowing from which side a sword comes is easier to handle than knowing what someone will say, or how someone will react. Human emotions are so diverse and complex that there are just too many possibilities for him, so he just keeps to himself. The others fear him nevertheless, though he has never harmed any of them.

Knowing how he handles his enemies is enough for them to keep out of his way.’

'I see,' Tlana said after a while. She didn't know whether to believe it or not.

'As far as I now, he is unique in this. And invaluable to our cause. So please don't bother him. Even if you wanted to, you couldn't.'

'But why doesn't he just go to the imperial palace and defeat each and every one?' Yolulu asked. 'I mean, if he's as good as you say he is, and if nobody can defeat him in battle.'

Uoago smiled. 'Yes, we thought about that. But you know, he only sees what will happen in the next couple of seconds.'

He paused and, seeing no nods that indicated understanding, continued.

'Imagine you're surrounded not by two, three or four soldier, but by several dozens of them. Then whatever action you take, no matter how well you can see what they result in, may be your last. I mean, there are only so many directions to step in and positions to hold your sword at. And of course, under no circumstance do we want to lose him. It's not worth the risk.'

Then he walked away, leaving Tlana and Yolulu behind. Their minds, still trying to catch up with the previous days' occurrences, puzzled at what Uoago had told them. Tlana tried to put the strange man out of her mind. A futile enterprise, she noticed after a while. She talked to Yolulu, who shared her frustration. On top of that, she seemed quite jealous of the man who was feared by everyone for his skills in battle.

'Well, most of them seem quite nice,' Tlana said when nightfall was upon them.

They were sitting around one of the fireplaces that had just been lit. Small groups of people were seated around the various fires that were placed all along the camp. They were eating their dinner, some of them in silence, others deeply emerged in conversation.

'Well, I don't like them. They keep us here against our will.'

Tlana ate some bites of the stale bread they had been given. The porridge that went with it made the bread slightly more palatable.

'You're right,' she finally said. 'We really have no time to lose. If the Quithers are linked to the span of light during the day, then we really have to hurry.' During the previous days they had spent hours

discussing a name for the objects they were searching for. Finally they had agreed on Quither, a combination between quiver and light, or lighter. It was the most obvious and fitting name they could come up with, and on which they could both agree.

‘The days keep getting shorter and shorter, everyone notices it,’ Tlana continued. ‘Even the people here are complaining that they won’t be able to cover the same distance in a day as they previously could. And that they spend more time gathering wood, since the fires need to burn for a longer period of time.’

‘I had noticed,’ Yolulu replied. ‘And you think that we might be able to stop this by locating all the Quithers?’ She still wasn’t fully accustomed by the word, so she uttered it a bit hesitantly.

‘I truly, truly hope so. At the least it’s worth the risk and effort, don’t you think?’

‘Then I say we wait until nightfall, and then we escape. I’ve noticed how the men guard us, and it seems like they’ve never guarded anyone in their life before. And I’ve carefully studied the route we should take. That way we can try to go in the right direction, without the need of light. It’s more or less a straight line to the East, it shouldn’t give us much trouble.’

Tlana didn’t know what to say for a moment. She was gladly surprised by the amount of thinking her friend had put into the plan. But still, she was not entirely confident the plan would work.

‘Shouldn’t we wait a little more? I’d gather that they are still paying attention to us. And we would have only once chance to pull it off, right?’

‘Perhaps,’ Yolulu said, shrugging her shoulders.

‘Besides,’ Tlana added, ‘tomorrow we might learn more about soothsayer Gan. We could corner him so he has no way to avoid us.’

Yolulu smiled. ‘Deal,’ she said.

They went to bed early that night, still feeling tired from the days before. They slept together with some of their capturers inside a large, simple tent. The beds were austere combinations of grass, dust and some animal hides. Nevertheless, both Tlana and Yolulu drowsed off the moment they touched the prickly, recently cut vegetation.

In the middle of the night Tlana was woken by someone who was violently pulling her by the shoulders. After blinking several times, she saw it was Yolulu sitting beside her.

‘What?’ she asked while trying to rub the sleep from her eyes. ‘We’re under attack. Imperial soldiers I guess’, she said hastily. Tlana jumped from her bed and followed Yolulu, who was already leaving the tent. She had grabbed her bow and had already placed one of the arrows on top of it, ready to fire.

Tlana knew it was around midnight, and she was surprised of how well she could see when she stepped outside the tent. Many fires throughout the camp were lit, giving off enough light to see the figures that were running around. She could hear the clashes of swords, the suppressed grunts of grown men and women, and the occasional agonizing screams that reverberated through the darkness beyond. Already in the distance she could discern the strongly built, yet gracious figure of Yolulu, bow in her hand and quiver on her shoulder.

Tlana darted back into the tent, grabbed the sais from her backpack, and rushed back out. She ran towards the place where her friend had stood. Suddenly she almost bumped into a dark figure. Almost, because the slender man had avoided her smoothly. He was being attacked by three, no four imperial soldiers, their armor reflecting the dancing streaks of light produced by the bonfires.

Then it struck Tlana. She had almost collided with mysterious Gan. She didn’t run away, but followed the battle in front of her intently. He effortlessly moved between his assailants. With the utmost grace he flung his short sword between the men, slicing one after the other. They fell silently to the ground, unable to utter even a final cry of despair. Gan was truly dancing, and it didn’t seem the cost him the slightest amount of effort. Full of confidence he twisted his body, ducked beneath the enemy’s blades, moved along with his opponents’ motions, and glided his weapon along vital body parts, gracefully drenching it in dark, red blood. Tlana was so fixated with the spectacle that she jumped when someone tapped her on the shoulder.

‘This is our chance, we have to move,’ Yolulu whispered firmly in her ear.

Tlana saw Gan hesitating in one of his movements, and then he turned his head towards her. She couldn’t see his face, but she knew he was

looking at her. Just for a moment. Then he turned again and continued with his impressive and terrifying dance, as if he performed it daily and without thinking.

‘All right,’ Tlana said, and she followed Yolulu. They ran to their tents and gathered their belongings. By the light from the fires they started walking eastwards. After a while the little light that reached them had disappeared completely, and they could see just about as much as a blindfolded rock, buried hundreds of meters under the earth. Tlana followed Yolulu, trusting that she had a better sense of direction than she had. Desperately she held on to Yolulu’s backpack. She felt with every step she took that she was falling, as if she were skipping a step on a stairway. And several times she stumbled indeed, pulling her friend down with her.

After trying to find their way through the darkness for a period of time which seemed like several days, they sat down on the ground, feeling exhausted and with no clue as to whether they had been successful or whether they had simply been walking in circles. If only they had some light to check their compass. Opening the quiver was of course out of the question. Not only would that go against the very notion for which they were travelling, but also would it notify each and every thing that was not farther away from them than some ten kilometers.

Despite not knowing where they were or what they were surrounded by, they decided to get some sleep and continue in the morning. They lay down and fell asleep right away.

It was more the light than the feeling of being well rested that awoke them. They were lying in a landscape completely unknown to them. Before now, they had always travelled in regions that were filled with trees and bushes, or areas that had at least some vegetation. But now they found themselves unable to spot a single tree around them. Some grey, half-dead bushes were visible in the distance. The rest was all sand and rocks. In the complete darkness of last night they hadn't even noticed the grass under their feet shifting to sand.

'Where are we?' Tlana wondered out loud.

'Seems like we're in a desert. But I didn't know there were any deserts here. And we can't possibly have walked so far that this is the western desert of Dorka. It must be a smaller, less well known desert. Hopefully somewhere near one of the northern cities. Let's eat something first, and then we can move on.'

They ate in silence, looking over the vast landscape. Tlana checked her compass and looked towards the direction that indicated northeast. They had decided that going northeastwards was the most likely way to reach their destination, if you could call it a destination. Hopefully they'd reach something soon, something that would provide them with a better orientation at least.

As they strolled slowly through the desert, now and again gaining speed as the sand under their feet alternated with solid rock formations, they began to feel extremely isolated. As far as their eyes could see there was nothing. Or more accurately, there was a lot, but it all looked the same to them. Signs of trees and animals were completely missing, let alone humans or buildings. Their eyes only met sand and rocks. Tlana was in the middle of recounting the difficult choice the elders of her village had had to make about where she would live after both her parents had passed away, when Yolulu interrupted her.

'What's that?'

'Where? I don't see anything.'

'Just keep looking.'

After a minute or so, Tlana began to spot several dark dots on the landscape before them. Slowly they became bigger. She counted six in total.

'People,' Yolulu said, more to herself than to anyone else.

'Seriously? Great. What do we do? Our last experiences with meeting other travelers haven't turned out so well, have they?'

'That's true. But what else can we do? This desolate place, devoid of plants and animals, confuses my sense of direction. Better to ask for help, right? Besides, I have my bow with me.'

'Your call,' Tlana said reluctantly.

They continued walking, though with a slower and more careful pace. As if they dreaded to find out the consequences of their decision. After a while the human figures became distinguishable. They all appeared to be women, which reassured them somehow. Slowly the six women strode along, until they came face to face with Tlana and Yolulu.

'Hello,' the woman who was walking in front said to them in a drowsy voice.

'Uhm, hello. My name is Tlana and...'

'Yes. We know,' the woman said slowly and distantly. 'You are Tlana, and you are called Yolulu,' she nodded her head at Yolulu.

Tlana was dumbstruck. 'How could you possibly know that?'

'We know many things,' the woman continued with a soothing voice.

'We know that you, Tlana, come from the icy South. And you, Yolulu, are from the tropical and tempered West. You were both dissatisfied with the lives you were leading. You, Tlana, want more freedom and other people around you, to live your own life without being judged. And you, Yolulu, want to see more of the world, to meet people with other perspectives than your fellow villagers, you want to flee from your invisible and unconscious chains. You have both found something to which you attribute much importance. You want to find more, and therefore you travel to the North. You have already travelled far, past multiple dangers, known and unknown to you, and through various environments and landscapes, providing you with different opportunities and pathways. And now, you are here. Not really lost, but not entirely sure of where to go.'

Tlana looked at her side, and saw that Yolulu was almost just as amazed as she was.

'But how...?'

‘Come, walk with us. We will lead you to your destination. It doesn’t matter. We have nothing else to do. Don’t worry.’ The voice and intonation, combined with the words she spoke, were so soothing they decided to follow her and her entourage. Or actually, it was beyond deciding. They just went along with her, as if there was no choice to be made.

The woman that had spoken, together with the others, turned around and started walking more or less in the direction Tlana and Yolulu had been going in. The two friends followed them. Even the women’s backs radiated with calmness and it seemed as if nothing could disrupt their state of tranquility and balance. The woman had spoken in such a relaxed and untroubled voice, as if she were reading a children’s book, and as if there existed nothing but the words that were slowly flowing from her mouth.

Tlana needed to know more about these women, and why they knew so much about her. Or did they? She wasn’t quite sure anymore. Perhaps it was just her imagination. The desert and the isolation playing tricks on her. Nevertheless, she decided to ask them some questions.

‘Yes Tlana, what is it?’

‘Well, I want to know some things. Who are you? What are you doing here in the desert?’

‘Is it important who I am? Is it important to anyone who anyone is, except to themselves?’ The woman stared in front of her, walking silently through the sand. ‘If I were to tell you who I am, I wouldn’t be able to be anything else. And if I cannot be anything else, what is there to gain for you, knowing who I said I was, while I can’t find myself back in the person I said I was. So, who I am does not matter. Who anyone is, has no meaning.’

Tlana had lost the woman several sentences ago. So she just asked again: ‘but what are you doing here in the desert?’

‘Desert,’ the woman now said slowly, the word neither sounding like a question, nor like an answer.

‘Yes, we’re walking in a desert,’ Tlana said. But what are you doing here?’

‘We are walking in the desert’.

Tlana knew this was no answer, but she accepted it nevertheless, though she wasn’t sure why.

‘But where then are you going? Where are we going?’

‘We will go there, where you want to go. We will always go somewhere, whether you know the way or not. Whether you know the destination, or whether you are still undecided.’

‘But which way are we going now?’ Tlana tried again.

‘That way,’ she said, pointing in the direction they were walking in.

‘Why? Why are we going that way?’

‘Because that’s where you will find what you are looking for.’

Right, Tlana thought. She remembered now that they were searching for something.

After walking next to the woman for several more minutes, Tlana asked her: ‘But what are we searching for?’

‘I don’t know. Are you searching for something?’ the woman asked drowsily.

‘I...I don’t know,’ Tlana replied dubiously. ‘I thought you mentioned something we had to find.’

‘I cannot recall saying that,’ the woman answered, sounding unconcerned.

‘Never mind then,’ Tlana responded after a while.

She looked at her side and saw Yolulu striding along with one of the other women. They didn’t seem to be talking. They just stared in front of them, striding through the sand, almost flowing above it. Their steps consistently well spaced, and their motions balanced and fluid. The other women around Tlana, all clad in white ropes, moved equally graceful. Their bodies radiated peace, their postures serenity, their movements calmness. The more Tlana looked at them, the more she felt herself at ease. The only inquietude she felt was about her former self, and how worried she had been about everything. But that was in the past.

After a while night fell. This triggered something in the back of Tlana’s mind, but she couldn’t figure out what. And she didn’t care, she was all at ease and relaxed. Even though it was completely dark, they kept on walking throughout the night, following the soft sounding steps of their fellow travelers. There was no sense of direction, no goal, just wandering around in the cool, tranquil desert, made even more tranquil by its invisibility in the dark, dark night.

When the daylight was switched on, they kept on walking, without ever missing a step. They slowly shifted their focus from the sound of footsteps to the sight of the feet that produced them.

Tlana looked at the seven barefooted women around her. One of them wore different clothes, and seemed more rugged. She wasn't wearing the white ropes the others had slung around their bodies. She was also the only one whose head was not covered by a white hood. She asked the woman who was walking beside her:

'Why does she wear different ropes?'

'It's because she is new here. Just as you are, Tlana.'

'Tlana?'

'Yes, I believe you told us that was your name.'

'Oh, right. And what is your name then?' Tlana asked.

'I don't remember. But that doesn't matter.'

'Oh.'

They kept walking for hours and hours, which either seemed like several seconds or like half an eternity.

There was silence everywhere. Only the sounds of feet softly pressing on sand, and robes rubbing against each other were audible. The girl who had been told her name was Tlana, noticed how one of the others was straying away from the group. She kept looking, wondering where the woman was going to. She saw a bird flying high in the sky. The woman was walking towards it, with each stride seeming to get more tense and focused, less tranquil. She saw the woman stopping and turning around, gazing intently at the group that the girl named Tlana was part of. The woman started waving, and the girl named Tlana waved back, not knowing what the other woman wanted.

Suddenly the other woman began to run towards them. Faster and faster she approached them. The girl named Tlana wondered vaguely what she ought to do. The woman with the rugged clothes had now reached her and, almost without losing speed, grabbed her by her arm and continued running, dragging her along. The girl named Tlana let it all pass, without struggle. It didn't matter. She was tranquil and couldn't be disturbed. But she did have trouble keeping up with the woman's speed.

'Do you mind slowing down,' the girl named Tlana said.

'We have to get away as far as possible!' the woman yelled back.

'But why?' she asked unconcernedly.

'I'll tell you later!'

They kept running, occasionally looking back at the group that slowly returned to being dark spots in the monotonous, yellow landscape.

'But shouldn't we go to the North?' Tlana asked as her memory began to creep back into her mind.

'Yolulu, stop! We're going in the wrong direction!'

She had barely uttered the words when Yolulu came to a halt, and threw herself on the ground from exhaustion. Tlana sat beside her, breathing heavily.

'Something. Is seriously. Amiss with those people,' Yolulu stammered.

'What happened?'

'I don't know.' Yolulu still breathed audibly. 'I was wandering along with the group, just as you were, when I suddenly felt an attraction. I walked towards the spot I was pulled to, and saw my companion there, flying in the air above me. And suddenly I knew my own name again. And after some more steps, I remembered your name, and what we were doing. And then I realized that somehow, staying among the other women had blocked those memories from my mind. And seeing that you didn't respond to my signs, I decided to get you out of there as fast as possible. So I ran as fast as I could. And it's a good thing I can run very fast, because even before I reached you I had already forgotten my name. But somehow, I was in a flow that kept me moving. And here we are. And now I'm going to sleep.'

And Yolulu did exactly that. Falling asleep as if she hadn't slept for days. Which was rather true. Tlana followed her soon after, not even having time to think about the strange things that had happened.

The tranquility they had felt for days whilst in the grasp of the six strange women, turned into quite the opposite, producing restlessness and anxiety like they had not felt before. Perhaps it was due to the realization that they kept losing valuable time on unfortunate adventures. Perhaps it was because they had days of sleep to catch up to. Perhaps it was because they still had no clue as to where to go, and whether they were going in the right direction or not. According to the compass they were still going northeast, which ought to be the correct

way. But the vast stretches of desert just kept taunting their vision, and there seemed to be no end to it.

Finally, after even Yolulu had become depressed and demotivated by the monotonous and strenuous exercise of crossing an infinite pile of sand, stones, and dying bushes, they came to a path. Or something that seemed to be related to a path. What was clear was that at least a dozen people or so had walked there recently. Following it, they soon encountered something that had considerably more right to call itself a path. Or perhaps even a road. It went westwards, and they decided to follow it. The first people they met on the road they approached extremely carefully, and they made sure they got away from them as quickly as they could. They encountered more and more travelers, however, and finally decided to ask people for directions. To their relief they were more or less going the right way, and according to the fellow travelers a junction would present itself which would lead them to the Midlands, from where they would be able to reach the North easily.

And indeed, shortly after they encountered a crossroad. There even was an accompanying sign indicating the direction of Clestanorima, the capital of the Midlands, with an arrow. Time passed quickly for Tlana and Yolulu, who were all too busy looking at the strange and fascinating people and things they passed. They didn't even pay much attention to the marked change in scenery, the lifeless sands and stones making way again for light green bushes and scrubs. Apart from the regularly placed imperial watchtowers, the road was filled with stands selling all kinds of food, tools and accessories. They had truly returned to society. It looked as if a marketplace had been stretched out for kilometers along the road. However, when they finally reached Clestanorima, they learned what a true marketplace was. Hundreds of stalls were spread over a vast plaza, leaving the remaining space free for the thousands and thousands of people that crawled there.

Tlana and Yolulu agreed to spend some of the little money they carried with them on an inn to pass the night. They agreed that they deserved a good night's rest. After that they would walk through the city, trying to gain more intelligence about the Quithers. Where to find them exactly, and how best to get there. The night, again, fell sooner than they had expected. Through the tiny windows in their

room they could see that it felt more than 1,5 hours earlier than they had been used to all their lives.

They had been striding along the enormous plaza for an entire day now, speaking to different people and gathering quite valuable information. Some had never heard of the objects they described, others had heard rumors similar to what they already knew, but some also brought them interesting news. It appeared that you could see an object, glowing with the most intense light ever observed, somewhere in the countryside, not far away from where they were. However, the people they heard this from all said it was only for the very wealthy, those that could afford servants and other luxuries.

Tlana and Yolulu were advised to visit a man named Gatosch, who was said to be involved in many prestigious enterprises, but who also had a stand at the market and owned a house somewhere in the city. After comparing the diverse descriptions and locations they gathered from the townsfolk, Tlana and Yolulu went to what, hopefully, would turn out to be the house of the entrepreneur named Gatosch.

The small, simple wooden house was not what they had expected, having heard all the stories. Nevertheless, they knocked on the door. And again. And again. And then again, but this time Yolulu put a significant amount of force behind it.

‘Yes, yes,’ a voice coming from the other side said loudly.

The door flung open, and they stood face to face with a man in his forties, with an agreeable appearance and an air of confidence, knowledge and friendliness. However, they had learned not to be fooled by appearances.

‘Ladies, how may I help you?’

‘Are you Gatosch?’ Yolulu asked immediately.

‘Indeed I am. I hope I have not offended you or any of your kin, and I hope your visit is not one made by necessity due to some worrisome or regrettable occurrence,’ the man said apologetically, while he made a small bow.

‘No, no, not at all,’ Tlana quickly replied. We have rather come to ask for your help.’

‘I’ll be happy to help, please come in. I was just preparing some hot chocolate. I would be honored if you drank some with me.’

They entered his cozy home, which consisted of a large living room, filled with a table and chairs and a large desk, overgrown by stacks of paperwork. A door led from the living room to the bedroom. Or they supposed. They couldn't know for sure, since the door was closed.

'Please, sit down,' Gatosch said as he offered each of them a chair. 'Thank you very much,' Tlana said kindly. 'Hold on, I'll pour you some chocolate.'

He disappeared around the corner, where apparently his kitchen was located. They could just spot part of a stove.

'A little strange, isn't it? Being so nice to us and inviting us in, without even knowing who we are or what we want.'

'Tlana, some people are just nice and hospitable. I know we've had some unfortunate encounters, but that doesn't mean that every nice gesture is actually an evil intention.'

'You're right. But just stay on your guard, ok?' she added in a whisper. 'I'm always on my guard,' Yolulu whispered back.

The man whose name was Gatosch came back and gave them their cups, filled with a thick, dark liquid.

'Now, tell me why you have come to see me.'

'Well..,' Tlana began, but her friend interrupted her.

'We are on a search for tube-like objects that eject a bright light when they're opened. We have heard you know more about such an object.'

'You have been told correctly,' he said, and his face suddenly became two shades grimmer.

'Me and my associates are displaying such a marvelous object in a large building, some 20 kilometers from here. Each night the object is opened for several seconds, showing its magnificent light, unlike anything you have ever seen in your life. I must disappoint you, however. All the tickets for this week and the next are already sold out. But if you wish you can make a reservation for a later date.'

'Sir, can you tell us how you acquired the object?' Tlana asked.

'I'm afraid not, my lady.'

'Then can you tell us what the object is for? Why it exists? And where its light comes from?'

'For that I must refer you to one of my associates, who can tell you everything about it'

‘Really?’ Yolulu exclaimed. ‘Where can we find this man?’

‘He lives not far from here, I will draw you a map after we finish our drinks. He can describe to you exactly what the device looks like, and how it works.’

‘What it looks like we know already,’ Yolulu said distractedly.

‘What do you mean?’ Gatosch asked inquisitively.

‘Well, we...’ Yolulu answered while she made a grab for her backpack.

‘We overheard someone describing it,’ Tlana quickly interjected, pushing down her friend’s hand.

‘I see. I imagine there are many people around boasting about the object’s pure golden encasing, engraved with the beautiful godlike creatures.’

‘What?’ Yolulu said incredulously. ‘Yours has engravings on it? And it’s completely gold?’

Tlana hit herself on the forehead. And then she wanted to hit her blabbing friend as well, but thought the better of it.

‘Would you like to tell me what’s really going on? Why are you here?’ Gatosch asked, not unfriendly.

Tlana realized they had no other choice than to tell him the truth. She was sure she couldn’t talk herself out of this, at least not unscathed. And besides, telling their true story would perhaps result helpful in the end. Gatosch seemed like a trustworthy person, though she had learned not to trust her senses where those things were concerned.

Tlana and Yolulu told him everything, complementing each other’s accounts and skipping some irrelevant parts. They told him of how they had found the objects, how they had met each other, and how they had subsequently tried to find other pieces of the puzzle, without any luck so far.

After hearing their story, Gatosch went for a refill without saying anything. When he came back, he had decided for himself to help them.

‘You know, ever since I acquired the object, I have had my doubts. I didn’t trust the thing, and would have preferred not to have been given it at all. Even though my entrepreneurship side knew there was considerable profit to be made out of it, all the rest of me told it was wrong somehow. Nevertheless, I went through with it. But now that I hear that you also have your doubts, and are trying to prevent the light

from fading, I have decided to help you. Even if it will be my downfall.’ Tlana wanted to say something, but Gatosch continued talking.

‘The object is now in the building I told you about. But I can arrange to have it here tomorrow, and then you can do with it whatever you want.’

‘But what will your partners say about that?’

‘They will be extremely angry. Even more so when they find out only afterwards, which I intend for them to do. But I can handle that. After all, I was the one who provided them with the thing in the first place.’

‘I don’t know what to say,’ Tlana finally said.

Yolulu nodded, showing that she in fact was the only one who truly didn’t know what to say.

‘Goodnight?’ Gatosch suggested. ‘Upstairs there are a couple of beds and blankets, so go right ahead. That is, if you don’t already have a place to stay.’

Tlana and Yolulu thanked him and went to bed, feeling joyful and satisfied. Except for their stomachs, which hadn’t received any dinner that night.

The following morning Gatosch left early to visit the building outside of the city. Tlana and Yolulu stayed in his house, so as not to rouse suspicion among Gatosch’s companions. His companions were so content with having the profit-making quiver in their shared possession, that they had become extremely protective of it lately. But Gatosch would take care of it, he told them.

When they were alone in the house, not having anything to do, Tlana decided to move the table that stood in the middle of the living room, hereby creating a space for her to exercise. It had been long since she had used her sais, and she needed to practice. Wielding them made her think back of Quelto. The feeling shouldn’t have hurt her so much, given that she’d only known him for several days before his death, but nevertheless it did. She suppressed the urge to suppress her feelings, knowing that such a thing would only result in more grief afterwards. She took it all out on her sais, and exercised with them until she found the risk to her wellbeing too high. Twice already she had only barely prevented herself from slipping in the pool of sweat which had formed on the floor beneath her.

Yolulu, quickly becoming bored of looking at Tlana’s

exertions, decided to investigate Gatosch's home, especially the second floor. Next to the room they had slept in there was a large storage space which, as she discovered, was filled with stuff, most of which she had never seen before. Searching through the many strange things, from bottles filled with a golden liquid to stacks of books that seemed to never have been opened, she lost track of time. When she heard a door open downstairs, she suddenly realized what a mess she had made.

'Yolulu!' she heard her friend call.

'Yes?'

'Quickly, come here!'

She ran down the stairs as fast as she could.

'What's wrong?'

Gatosch, out of breath, was the one that answered.

'Trouble. And not the kind I had expected. It turns out that the imperials have gotten word as well, and are now interested in obtaining the object. Or, in other words, they will seize it whenever they get the chance. I arrived at the building just in time. My companion was showing a couple of guards where the object was located. I managed to stall time by sending them in another direction so I could grab the object and run back home. But they will find out we're here. And believe me, we won't talk our way out of this. They won't be forgiving, certainly not after having been deceived the first time.'

'So, what do we do?' Yolulu asked.

'We can go to the other side of the city, and stay there with some friends of mine. Or stay at an inn, perhaps that's even safer. We will need to gather some stuff to bring with us. Tlana, you take this thing,' he handed her the object, wrapped in blankets, 'and I will gather some personal belongings of mine. Yolulu, can you go upstairs and search for a small, wooden chest? It has engravings on it, and some obsidian ornaments. It's about the size of your backpack. And can you also...?' A large bang came from the door.

'Oh dear, they're already here. No time to lose. You ladies go through the backdoor, it's beyond the kitchen.'

Tlana and Yolulu had quickly grabbed their bags and were already in the kitchen when they realized Gatosch wasn't coming.

'Come on!' Tlana yelled at him.

‘No worries, I’ll be safe in my own house. You go ahead, and I will slow them down. Leave the city instantly, and go North,’ he whispered through the silence that alternated with the loud bangs on the door.

‘Thank you, and goodbye.’

He bowed, and shut the kitchen door.

Walking towards the banging that was now so loud it surprised Gatosch the door hadn’t already given in, he felt himself at peace. He had truly done a good deed. Finally he had the feeling that he had helped a good cause, that his life had been worthy. He only hoped that the two girls would succeed in whatever they were planning to do.

The knight that lived inside Gatosch mustered up the last bit of energy he had left, as he saw the demon, now more than twice his own size, running towards him. The knight was content. He had defended the realm as best as he could, and had even played his part in trying to save the entire kingdom. But his time had come now. While he was heaving up his enormous broadsword for one last swing, he already knew it was in vain. The demon had become so fast and agile, it tore open his chest in one single movement, dodging the sword as the knight swung it down with its last breath.

At least they don’t know they’re travelling North, Gatosch thought as the pain of the sword that ran through his chest began to subside, and he felt himself slipping away into perhaps another realm, where less persistent demons dwelled.

They had left through the backdoor as soon as they heard the imperial soldiers come in. Tlana knew, somewhere in the back of her head, that Gatosch was not alright. That either he had sacrificed himself so they could be safe, or that he had betrayed them. Either way, they had to leave the city as fast as they could. They had no time to think about what had happened. Tlana did, however, check if the wrapping she had received did indeed contain another of the objects. It did. And for now, that was all that mattered.

Together they walked at a quick pace, following the signs that indicated which direction the imperial palace was in. How ironic, Tlana thought, fleeing from imperial soldiers to the place where the most guards would be gathered. But as long as they didn't attract attention there and didn't talk about what they brought with them, they had nothing to worry about.

That most of the soldiers were stationed in and near the imperial city, soon became unquestionably obvious. The road that led from Clestanorima to Noc, the capital of the North where the emperor lived, was filled with convoys. Besides the usual traffic of caravans, carts from local merchants, and small groups of travelers, soldiers walked everywhere, occasionally checking merchant's goods and breaking up quarrels. It also seemed that the towers along the road were more frequently spaced, though each was still only managed by two soldiers by the look of it.

Surprisingly, they reached the city without problems whatsoever. The large, imperial city was walled for as far as the eye could see. A great part of the wall in front of them was carved in by all kinds of strange names, all slightly differently colored. They slowly walked past it, reading some of the names. When they entered the city, quite opposite feelings struck the two friends. Yolulu knew from the moment she saw what lay beyond the walls, that she didn't like it. Tlana, however, seemed to be pleased. The city was extremely well ordered, with straight streets and corners, well spaced illumination, and shops that were arranged according to their type and size. And all around were clear signs indicating how and where to reach specific parts of the city.

In par with the orderly layout of the city, the majority of the people in it seemed to have been modeled accordingly. Men with fancy and pompous clothes, and by who the straightness of their own walking sticks seemed to continue naturally into their body postures, all the way up to their personalities, were accompanied by women whose dresses seemed to bypass the color range, size and shape most people were familiar with, and whose air seemed to push everything else out of its way, nearly forcing the people around them to bow or at least to stay away as far as they could from them. However, since most of the people in the city were of a similar caliber, this portrayal of refinement seemed only to produce presumptuous competition and unspoken rivalry with no end.

Both Tlana and Yolulu were reluctant to ask these people anything, so they decided to walk around the city, and simply listen. Many of the conversations they were unable to follow, despite their loudness and their theatrical presentation. The content of the talks seemed either extremely empty, or so specifically addressed to certain groups, people or events, that Tlana had no clue where they were about. Yolulu didn't even want to try to understand them. However, after a while they started figuring out that a large part of the conversations were centered around one of the imperial princes, Mestavo, and his upcoming wedding. And it seemed that he still had to choose a wife.

Apparently this position, as it was often described, was a great honor, and many of the women were trying to come into the prince's favor. Neither Tlana nor Yolulu could identify with these women in the least. They continued walking and tried to catch any word that could lead them closer to their goal.

Finally, Tlana came to a realization.

'Remember that Gatosch said the imperials were searching for the quiver?'

'Of course.'

'Well, if they were searching for that one, then it's likely they are searching for all of the objects, right? And where better to start for them than here, in this city? If we have heard the rumors of one being located here, then the imperials must have heard it as well. And with all the soldiers walking around here, it shouldn't be difficult for them to

find the thing. And if they've found it, they would have brought it to the palace, I imagine.'

'Yes...so what are you saying? It would only mean that perhaps we're too late, and that the imperials already have it in their possession.

Which would make our quest even more difficult, wouldn't it?'

'That's right,' Tlana said. 'But at least we know where best to search.'

She tried not to think about what they would have to do if indeed the imperial army possessed one or more of the Quithers. Even Yolulu was realistic enough not to take on more than two fully armored imperial guards. Let alone a whole army.

While they started to walk towards the imperial palace, the firepits that were placed all around the city were being ignited. Not soon after, night fell. Tlana calculated how long the day had been. Little more than seven hours. Well, at least in this city the nights were not so dark. Though she wondered how many of the trees from her hometown's forest were still standing, with all these fires being burned all around the city. Illuminating such a large city for hours and hours each day would require tons on wood. There were many trees on the island, but cutting them down was a much, much faster act than letting them grow back. She tried not to think about any further consequences the increasing darkness would bring. And would have brought already.

The imperial palace was even grander than they had expected, gathering from the stories they had heard. Tlana guessed that within it there could live more people than in her entire village. Yolulu guessed that all the people that lived there were worth less together than one hunter from her village. They started walking around the palace, careful not to arouse the guards' suspicion. Strangely enough, the front of the building did not seem to be the entrance to the palace. The doors were permanently fixed, and few soldiers were guarding the immense metal doors. Above the doors, about midway up the building, was an incredible balcony, almost the size of a normal house. Tlana guessed this was where the imperial addresses to the people were held every now and again.

They walked around the building, and noticed that the actual entrance was located at the back. Flocks of soldiers were walking on the large plaza, surrounded by men and women with the same appearance as most of the city's inhabitants. At least it was so crowded that they

wouldn't easily be noticed wandering around. However, gaining little more knowledge from this exercise, they finally decided to address one of the people that was standing alone somewhere at the side of the plaza.

'Excuse me, can you tell us what's going on here?' Tlana asked him, trying to sound as respectful as possible.

'Just the usual,' the man said with an air of disdain, which most likely always accompanied his speech.

When Tlana and Yolulu didn't answer back, the man continued. 'As the third prince is bound to choose a wife within these next eight months, women from all over the city are trying to win his favor. Which is of course rather difficult, given the sheer quantity of the contestants.

Though this is nothing compared to when the second son of the emperor chose his wife a couple of years ago. Or when the firstborn had its pick, almost a decade ago now.'

'So how do they do it? How are they trying to win the prince's favor?' Yolulu asked.

'By gifts, of course. All women who aspire to be the wife of the prince give him gifts so that he might notice them enough to give them an audition. And when they are admitted to the audition, they have to come up with an even more fitting present. And then, when the prince has decided on a small group who he has deemed fit to be his wife, he will spend a day with each of them, before making his final decision.'

'That seems...well, never mind,' Tlana said. 'But what then are they doing here?'

'Didn't I just tell you? They need to find the best gifts for the prince. That's why they are walking around here, trying to buy or otherwise extract information which might make their present more suitable. The prince is not an open book to everyone, you know.'

'I see. And what are you doing here, if I may ask?'

'Me? Well, all but one of the women here will become the prince's wife. The others then clearly still have an unfulfilled desire to marry. And that's where I might come in,' he said with a wry smile on his smooth face.

'Alright,' Tlana said, slightly disgusted. 'And what sort of gifts do the women give to the prince?'

‘The most valuable ones of course. From the most beautiful jewels to the most brilliantly made weapons. Ropes made from the finest material, collected from all over the island. Ancient artifacts dug up from the ground, some even pertaining to Pre-Shift times. I even heard that the prince has received a light emitting object, unlike anything known to mankind. Though others say that one similar is on portrayal somewhere in the Midlands. And of course all kinds of lotions,’ he continued, ‘made from the most valuable materials found only in specific caves. And magnets, the strongest the earth has ever produced. And...’

‘Thank you,’ Tlana said quickly. ‘Thank you very much. And how might women, say, join in the contest?’

‘Participating is the easiest part. You just knock twice on the door behind you, and present your gift together with your name and age.’

‘That’s all?’

‘Yes, of course that’s all. Every night one name will be announced at the other side of the palace. And then you are given an invitation to see the prince and to present him with another gift. But you want my advice?’

‘Uhm..,’ Tlana stuttered.

‘Save yourself the trouble. With your chances of winning, it’s simply not worth spending a precious gift on the prince.’

‘Thank you,’ Tlana said slowly and dubiously.

‘No bother,’ the man replied, already looking away.

‘Ok then. Goodbye.’ And they both walked off quickly.

‘What was that all about?’ Yolulu asked. ‘Shouldn’t we focus on finding another quiver?’

‘Well, do you have a better plan? We can’t just infiltrate the palace and sneak into the prince’s chambers to steal the thing, can we now?’

‘We wouldn’t have much chance, I think.’

‘We would have no chance at all,’ Tlana replied fully convinced.

‘So, what do you suggest?’ Yolulu inquired.

‘If we somehow manage to get an audition with the prince, we can tell him our story and convince him that he should give us the Quither.

That he must give it to us. Or at least help us figure out what is going on.’

‘But we can only see him if we get an audition. And where do you suppose we find a gift that gets us one?’ Yolulu asked skeptically.

Tlana waited for several seconds, marveling at the fact that she was now the one proposing rash and risky actions, while her friend appeared to be the skeptical one.

‘Aaah,’ Yolulu exclaimed. ‘I see. Brilliant. But this could go horribly wrong, you know.’

‘Yes, yes I know,’ Tlana said in frustration. ‘But this is the only possibility I can think of. And we don’t have time to find something else that is so valuable it will get us the audition.’

‘Alright. Let’s do this right now then. The less time we lose, the better.’

They walked to a spot where no onlookers were able to see them. Neither of them wanted to give the thing up they had been travelling with for so long, so the choice was easily made. They took the object, wrapped in blankets, they had received from Gatosch, and stared at it for a moment. It looked identical to the one they had. Tlana wrote her name and age on a piece of paper and carefully placed it between the blankets and the object so it wouldn’t fall out. They walked to the door, and Yolulu knocked twice. The loudness of the knocks startled them both. They were aware of the fact that many people were looking at them, and trying to spot what it was they were going to give to the prince.

A man that seemed to be exactly half imperial official, half soldier, opened the door and immediately grabbed the parcel Tlana was holding, exchanging it for a piece of paper with some letters and numbers on it.

‘Thank you,’ Tlana said, while in between her words the door was slammed shut in their faces.

‘And now we wait, I guess.’

And they did. The first night, when a name was announced from the balcony, Tlana and Yolulu felt devastated. But then they comforted themselves with the fact that no one had said that the names corresponded to the day the presents were received. So they continued waiting. After a while, the little money they had brought with them became so little, it had become practically nonexistent. They were forced to sleep somewhere in a dark corner of the city, hoping no guards would come by and arrest them. They ate only the cheap and

nutritious ackla berries. And they spent their days waiting, trying not to attract the guards' suspicion, and hoping every night that Tlana's name would be called from the balcony. And when that finally was the case, Tlana needed several seconds to realize it was her name that the pompous man standing at the balcony had uttered. But surely, it was.

The following morning they went on audition. The guards gave them some trouble, since they were together, and only one had been invited. After some discussion, Yolulu finally managed to convince the guards to let her walk all the way up to the chamber where the audition was held. However, under no condition was she allowed inside. Reluctantly, Yolulu agreed with the compromise.

They were nervous, especially Tlana. But exited as well, and with good hopes. The prince had to hear their story, and he would then certainly decide to help them.

Tlana entered the chamber. Yolulu tried to take a step inside as well, but was thrown back by the gazes of the dozens of soldiers and guards that were present inside.

Grudgingly, but with candid encouragement, she wished Tlana good luck.

Tlana now stood alone in the large chamber, which felt rather small because of the many people situated inside. In front of her, raised on a platform, she saw the prince. Or who she supposed was the prince, guarded on each side by an extremely broad and ferocious looking bodyguard. At least she had been entirely right in supposing that it would have been impossible to reach the prince without an invitation.

In a loud voice, which would have seemed to come from every corner of the room, were the round chamber to have had any corners, a man announced Tlana to the prince and his entourage.

'What have you to offer to prince Mestavo, in words and in gifts?' the voice asked solemnly.

'I have brought no new gift,' Tlana said nervously, 'but I would like to tell the prince the story that goes with my previous gift.'

She suddenly spotted and recognized the object standing next to the prince's chair, and quickly pointed at the thing, to give her words more meaning.

'But why do you bring no new gift? Are you unaware of the procedure?' the voice said severely.

'I bring the gift of words. I bring a story,' Tlana improvised.

'I just want to tell the prince something important. I mean, I'm not even interested in marrying him.'

The already silent room became completely soundless for several seconds, which made Tlana realize she had done something quite unfortunate.

'I mean..,' she tried to say, but she was already too late.

The prince stood up from his chair, and silence fell again, slightly more menacing this time.

'How dare you enter this room on false pretenses,' he said softly but in a stern voice. 'You know the rules, and you cannot just deviate from them because it pleases you. You know very well that I am open to auditions that are unrelated to my upcoming marriage, and that those auditions will take place next month, before the second selection round commences.'

'But..,' Tlana protested.

'Silence!' Mestavo said. 'I should behead you for insulting our rules and tradition. But since you have provided me with a rather pleasant gift, though not unique in its kind, I will spare you.'

'Thank you, my prince, but...'

'Guards, throw her in the dungeon!'

Two strong men grabbed Tlana's arms even before Mestavo had finished pronouncing the words that commanded them.

'No! If you want to stop the darkness from spreading, you have to listen to me! I have another one!', Tlana screamed.

But it was of no use. Mestavo stood erect, watching how Tlana was dragged out of the door. When she saw what was happening, Yolulu tried to fight one of the guards, but she was immediately knocked unconscious by another guard, and dragged along the hall together with Tlana. Towards the dungeons.

Not even the rats were tempted to visit the prisoners in the dungeon. Occasionally you could see them creeping on the floor, but the filth, the lack of food crumbs, and the eagerness with which the prisoners were trying to catch them, scared most of them away.

Not all was bad however. Tlana and Yolulu had, for some reason, been placed together in a cell, out of the reach of other prisoners. And the ceilings even had small holes in them, allowing light from outside to enter. They also had no risk of starving, since they were given sufficient amounts of ackla berries and water to drink. Nevertheless, they were not happy. Far from it.

Tlana spent the first hours answering Yolulu's questions, and thinking about how she should have handled the situation differently. She felt astonished by the fact that Mestavo had not even allowed her to talk. He obviously was interested in the gift he had received from her, so why didn't he even want to listen?

After the first couple of days in prison, they began to feel truly depressed. Yolulu became extremely restless for not having her bow and arrows to practice with, or anything else for that matter. She needed to walk, to run through the forest, to hunt. But now she didn't even have a purposeful journey to compensate it with.

Tlana on the other hand, felt depressed for quite different reasons. Not only did she blame herself for failing so miserably, but she was also confronted daily with the phenomenon they had so eagerly tried to figure out and stop from happening. Though their hourglasses had been taken from them, they could see the light through the holes in the ceiling diminishing daily.

Their ritualistic counting of the seconds of daylight that was still visible, became ever more inadequate to pass the time in the underground dungeon. In her head, Tlana made mental notes of their counting. It seemed that the rate at which the light disappeared, was increasing considerably. Which made them feel even more miserable and hopeless. It was her fault that the Empire was now in possession of not one, but three Quithers. And perhaps even more. Whatever the case, the light was disappearing at an astonishing rate, and there was nothing they could do.

They wondered about what was happening outside. They doubted that many people were able to produce the quota of whatever they needed to provide. Yolulu knew for sure that having just an hour or so of hunting time would not be enough. You had to be either lucky or very skilled to kill more than one animal an hour. Let alone the required six.

Tlana also doubted if torches were sufficiently adequate to provide the woodcutters with enough light to safely cut down the trees. And their job seemed all the more essential, given the need for illumination, and thus wood. Furthermore, Tlana knew that most trees needed light to grow. And she guessed an hour or less was not sufficient by far.

In truth, they had lost all hope. Which was a bit strange, since hope was one of the few things they could still possess, sitting in their empty cells, half naked and without any tools, chances or possibilities.

After spending days and days in their cell, something unexpected suddenly happened. In the middle of the night, though that didn't say much since everything seemed to be the middle of the night, a man came down the stairs, and walked towards their cell. The light from his torch woke up several of the other prisoners, who knew better than to address him. The man stood still however, and turned around, back towards the small room where the guards were seated. He entered and not soon after came back with two of the guards. They opened the doors of Tlana and Yolulu's cell, and beckoned them to keep silent. They grabbed a hold of both women, and navigated them through the dungeon, towards a desolate area, where one single room was located with several chairs inside.

Tlana couldn't figure out whether this strange excursion was something positive or negative. Or what its reason or goal was, if any it had. In fact, she didn't really care. But the diversion was nice, at least.

Tlana and Yolulu were sat down in one of the chairs, and the hooded man seated himself in front of them. He seemed to think for several seconds, and then whispered something to the guards, who immediately began to chain Tlana and Yolulu to their chairs. After they were finished, they left the room, closing the door behind them.

'What is this?' Yolulu asked defiantly.

'This,' the man said while he took off his cap, 'is me wanting answers.'

They stared incredulously at the face of Mestavo, the one who had placed them in this godforsaken dungeon.

‘What?’ was all that Tlana could utter.

‘You filthy bastard, you...’ Yolulu yelled angrily, fruitlessly trying to break loose from her chains.

‘Quiet down. That will save you trouble, and it will save all of us time. Though,’ he added, sounding perhaps slightly ashamed, ‘time is all you have here.’

Yolulu looked sideways and Tlana indicated to her that it was perhaps better to listen to the prince. Showing the anger they felt towards him would give them no advantage, of that they were sure.

‘I stand by my decision,’ Mestavo continued. ‘I will not tolerate people mocking me by misusing my invitations. Nor do I tolerate deceitful attempts at gaining my attention.’

‘So why have you come then?’ Yolulu asked, still angrily.

‘Because the situation has become unbearable,’ he answered. ‘The light is disappearing rapidly and we have tried everything we could think of to stop it. We have even prayed to several ancient deities. Imagine,’ and he paused for a moment before continuing. ‘There is just no stopping it. And since you mentioned you knew more about the problem, I decided to take the chance and visit you. So, what do you have to tell me? I am listening.’

‘We have nothing to tell you,’ Yolulu said. ‘You completely squandered your chances when you threw us in here.’

‘I see,’ Mestavo said. ‘Still, I want to know what you know. And believe me, in the end I will. In the end I will walk away from here with everything I wanted to know, whereas you won’t even be able to utter the words to describe the pain and sorrow you will be experiencing. Let alone move any part of your body for the next couple of years.’

Both women became significantly whiter at hearing the prince’s menacing tone, though this was not clearly visible because of the dirt that covered their faces. Yolulu, who was still several shades less white than her friend, was the first to open her mouth. But before she could say something, Mestavo tranquilly continued.

‘However, I don’t want to do that. And besides, I think there are very good reasons for both of us to share the knowledge. You care about your family, right? You care about your village. You care about

the entire island. And so do I. But the way things are going now, we soon won't have anything to care for. Last day, only 36 minutes of light came through, and it's diminishing rapidly.

Food sources are becoming scarce because staples have insufficient time to develop, and farmers have not enough time to harvest. The stock of wood we thought would last several years were the supplies to be cut off, is already exhausted. Everything, humans, animals and plants, are negatively influenced by the lack of rhythm. They are becoming sick because they receive so little light. Not to mention the increasing amount of insurgent groups that are attacking the imperial order. Everything is going downhill. We need a solution if we want to survive, and if we want the world to survive. So, if you have one, please tell me about it and I can see if there is reason in it.'

'All right then,' Tlana finally said.

And they told him the entire story. From how they both had found the objects, until when they had decided to use one of the objects as bait to get a chance to tell him their story, to try to prevent a disaster.'

Mestavo listened attentively. 'But do you have any clue as to how to use the things? Do you know how to stop the darkness from spreading?'

'Well, no,' Tlana said. 'But we know that each time one of them is opened, there is less daylight.'

'Yes,' Mestavo slowly said while he looked away. 'That explains why during the last weeks the process has accelerated.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, since there was so little light and the wood resources were diminishing, we have used the objects for illumination. Much more frequently than before. After all, we need light, and those things provide it amply.'

Tlana mentally slapped her forehead. 'So it has become a vicious circle. The less light there is, the more the objects are used, and the sooner the light depletes, so the more the objects' light is in demand, and so forth. That is, until the end.'

'I'm afraid so,' Mestavo admitted.

'Well then do something about it!' Yolulu cried out.

'May I remind you I'm not the emperor, nor the first or even the second born. I have no such decision making powers.'

'But the things are yours, right? I mean, at least the ones that are given to you. I don't know what happened to those your soldiers confiscated from us.'

'They belong to the Empire now,' Mestavo answered.

'So why don't you let us go and claim the objects back, and we can figure out a solution together?' Tlana proposed.

'I'm afraid it's not that easy. Firstly, we're not in possession of all the objects. Rumors are that one has been found in the southwestern mountains. And that the rebels have confiscated it from the mining confederation. They have many strongholds in the area, and our forces will need time to attack them all. Especially when so little light is available. So we don't know when we will get a hold on that object. Let alone other specimens that have not yet been found. And controlling only part of the existing pieces doesn't really give us much influence I imagine. Besides, I cannot simply let you go. You have offended the Empire, and must pay for that. It's the law. It's justice.'

'But..,' Yolulu started to protest.

'But!' Mestavo trumpeted, 'I will at least try to keep closed the objects we do have. For as long as I can. And perhaps I can get you out of here sooner than you ought.'

Thank you for talking to me. I hope this will help us all to survive. You will now be escorted back to your cells.

He put back his cap, made a short bow, and walked quickly out of the door, where almost immediately the two soldiers entered through to remove the chains, and to bring Tlana and Yolulu back to their filthy cell.

All was lost. Tlana couldn't even be angry. All their efforts were resulting into nothing. They had even missed one of the things, one she had practically walked by it when she travelled from her hometown to the North. And Mestavo was right. Who knew how many more there were hidden on the island? It was impossible to prevent all from being opened.

As the days passed, they noticed that at least things went more slowly. Instead of each day being many minutes shorter, they now decreased with less than a minute a day. But still. Half an hour became 20 minutes. 20 minutes became 10. And they sat in their desolate cell, feeling utterly useless, guilty, and angry at the world. It was almost as if

they were counting the days before their execution. But instead of days, it were seconds. And instead of an execution, it was a world without light. A world with only torches and candles, and even they wouldn't last for long.

One day, or night, they didn't know how to count or classify days and nights anymore, something had apparently happened. The little light that was left did not decrease with a minute, as it had done during the last weeks, but only with several seconds. Perhaps, Tlana thought, they had managed to get a hold on the object located in the mountains. She hoped so. And she began to get her hopes up.

But the next day there were again several seconds less of daylight. Tlana counted 42 seconds of light. She wished Mestavo would come by and tell them what was going on. The next day they counted 33 seconds. Then 24. They dreaded the inevitable moment that was upon them. They knew it wouldn't change much. After all, the difference between several seconds of light and none seemed not important. But still, they lived towards the moment. Or rather, they tried to live away from it, but failed utterly.

16 seconds. Tlana spend the time lying on the filthy floor, gazing at the holes in the ceiling, straining her eyes, anxiously counting the seconds as soon as she saw light. 11 seconds. The next day it were six seconds. And then two seconds. And then nine.

Johteng felt himself rather fortunate, despite the recent developments in the world he was living in. Ever since he had encountered the strange, light emitting object, things had changed. It used to be that he could enjoy a few minutes of morning light before he had to go into the mines, and sometimes when he returned early, the light was still there.

But not anymore. The days were shrinking. Perhaps they were already gone completely, he didn't know. All he knew was that the darkness was eating the light, just as it had eaten the light deep down in the mines, millennia ago. In the outside world this caused all sorts of problems. Hunger, riots, and many groggy faces. But Johteng felt just fine. He was used to the darkness, used to the fact that light only came from torches. He missed the morning light, but he could cope with its absence.

He was one of the few people in the world who could continue doing what he always did, and he felt fortunate for that. The only annoying thing was that torches became rarer, and they were put on a restriction of one torch per person per day. This made that they had to share torches to be able to have at least some light during their working day. It was bothersome. And more dangerous. But still, it was way better than nothing.

Yesterday they had discovered another cavity. Again, Johteng was assigned the job of determining what types of rock were located where. Today they had started walking around the edges, straining their eyes to recognize types of rock by the faint light of the only torch they had left. The flickering light illuminated the walls, occasionally being reflected in the surfaces of crystals and rough gems. As they hadn't spotted any stones worth extracting for a while, Johteng began looking around.

The torch cast large shadows that danced on the cave's floor. Johteng looked at the shadows, captivated by their unexpected, jerking movements. And then suddenly his eye was caught by a reflection. Which was odd, since cave floors usually didn't contain any crystals or gems. And he was sure no one had been here before. The cavity had just been discovered. He asked Lesno for the torch, and walked towards where he had spotted the reflection. As he moved closer, torch

clutched in his hand, he began to recognize the thing that was lying in front of him. He recognized it, though he had never seen it before.

There was no doubt, however, that it strongly resembled the object they had discovered months ago. Excitedly he crouched down and picked it up. Holding the torch close to it, he could distinguish the dark, red color he remembered. The red color was alternated with utter darkness. The kind he knew only from certain types of minerals and rocks. The intense red and black alternated fluently, producing a captivating sight. Johteng couldn't resist the temptation of opening the object. Not this time, he couldn't. He had of course heard the rumors. There were found several of the objects all over the island. And apparently they produced a dazzling light when opened.

He called Lesno and told him to bring his tools. They sat down, torch placed into the ground, and finally managed to wreck the object's sealing off. Covering his eyes, afraid of the intense light it was said to contain, Johteng opened the lid. He was blinded. Blinded by the darkness, as his torch seemed to have been quenched abruptly.

Having let go of the object because of the sudden complete lack of light, he had to stumble with his hands to find it again and to place the lid back on. When he did, the torch beside him ignited just as suddenly as it had been extinguished just moments before. The light that had barely illuminated the cave walls when they had entered, now felt like the brightest they had ever seen. Johteng thought about it for a while, still holding the objects firmly between both hands. But he didn't understand. He decided he would just give the thing to his superiors, and hope they would know what to do with it. But what? Something that created even more darkness didn't seem very useful to him.

THE END