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A tale of the
morning of human history

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Engibil, and to that god's human
deputies. But like his fellows in Gibil,
Sharur is less interested in gods than in
progress in invention and trade. Then,
on a routine trading expedition, he
learns that the gods of the other cities,
resentful of Engibil's relaxed attitude
toward his people, are uniting to punish
Gibil and squelch the growing power of
human creativity, epitomized by the
city-state's easygoing ways. Now only
Sharur's wits can save the city from the

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BETWEEN THE RIVERS

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

A Tor Book
Published by Tom Doherty Associates, Inc.
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

Tor Books on the World Wide Web:
<http://www.tor.com>

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Design by Basha Durand

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Turtledove, Harry.
Between the rivers / Harry Turtledove. -1st ed.
P. cm.
"A Tom Doherty Associates book."
ISBN 0,312-86202-4
1. Title.
PS3570.U76B48 1998
813'.54-dc21

First Edition: March 1998

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

97-29844
CIP

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Sharur was walking back toward his family's shop and home on the Street of Smiths when a fever demon that had been basking on a broken mud brick soaking up heat sprang at him, its batlike wings

glistening in the sun. He leaped back so it could not breathe sickness into his mouth and pulled out an amulet marked with the eyes of

Engibil, patron god of the city of Gibil.

"Begone, foul thing! " he exclaimed, and made the left-hand gesture every child in the land of Kudurru learned by the age of three-every child, at any rate, that lived to the age of three. He thrust out the amulet as if it were a spear. "Greater powers than you protect me."

Screeching in dismay, the nasty little demon fled. Shatur strode on, his back straight now with pride. He returned the amulet to its proper loop on his belt. The belt, which also bore a couple of other amulets, a bronze dagger, and a stylus, held up a knee-length linen kilt that was all he wore between stout leather sandals and a straw hat shaped like a short, broad cone. Slaves-and some freemen of a class poorer than Sharur's-dispensed with shoes and sometimes with kilt as well. No one went without a hat, not in the land between the

Yarmuk and the Divala.

The streets of Gibil were narrow and winding. Sharur's sandals scuffed up dust and squelched in muck. A farmer coming at him leading a donkey with baskets of beans tied to its back made him

squeeze up against the front wall of one of the two-story mud-brick homes lining both sides of the street: a prosperous home, because that front wall was whitewashed. The shiny white coating did not make the sun-baked mud any less rough on the bare skin of his back. Farmer and donkey plodded on, equally oblivious to having annoyed

him.

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His grandfather's ghost spoke in his ear: "You should follow that fellow and break a board on his head for the bother he caused you."

"It's all right, father to my father. He's on the way to the market square; he had to get by me," Sharur answered resignedly. His grandfather had been quarrelsome while he was alive, and was even more bad-tempered now that no one could break a board over his head.

"If only that fellow had known me in the flesh, I'd have hit him myself," the ghost grumbled. "He deserved it."

"It's all right, father to my father," Sharur repeated, and kept walking.

His grandfather's ghost sniffed. "All right, he says. It's not all right, not even close. Young people these days are soft-soft, I tell you."

"Yes, father to my father," Sharur said. The ghost, he knew, would keep on haranguing him and trying to meddle in his affairs as long as he lived. He consoled himself by remembering that it would have no power over his children, whenever they might be born, for they would not have known his grandfather alive. And when I'm a ghost myself, he thought, I hope I don't plague the people who recall me.

He turned a last comer and stepped onto the Street of Smiths. It was probably the noisiest street in all Gibil, but he found the racket familiar, even restful, having lived with it all his life. Smiths banged and tapped and hammered and rasped and filed. Fires crackled. Molten metal hissed as it was poured into molds of wet sand.

Behind the racket, power hovered. Smithery was a new thing in the land of Kudurru, and thus in the whole world, however big the world might be. In the days of Sharur's grandfather's grandfather, no one had known how to free copper and tin from their ores, much less how to mix them to make a metal stronger than either. These days, smiths stood on an equal footing with carpenters and bakers and potters and those who followed the other old, established trades.

But smiths were different. The other trades all had their old, established tutelary gods, from Shruppinak who helped carpenters pound pegs straight to Lisin who got spots out of laundry. Smithery, though, smithery was too new for its great power to have coalesced into deities or even demons. Maybe it would, in time. Maybe, too, the smiths would keep the power in their own merely human hands.

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Whenever that thought crossed Sharur's mind, it frightened him. If Engibil saw it there, or, worse, if one of the greater deities-sun god, storm or river goddesses; the ugly, sexless demon that squatted underground and caused earthquakes with its quiverings; many more-did so, what would they do with the smiths, to the smiths, for seeking to gain power thus? Sharur neither knew nor wanted to

find out.

At the same time, though, knowing himself to be a worm in the

eyes of the gods, he longed to be a strong worm. His eyes traveled down the Street of Smiths to the lugal's palace at the end of it, the only building in the city that came close to Engibil's temple in size and grandeur. Kimash the lugal gave Engibil rich presents, of course, but he ruled Gibil in his own right as had his father and grandfather

before him.

One or two other cities in the land of Kudurru had lords who were but men. The rest were about evenly divided between towns where ensis-high priests-transmitted the local god's will to the people and those where the gods ruled directly. Sharur was glad he did not live in one of those towns. Everyone who did struck him as a step

slow.

Thinking of power, he almost walked right past Ningal without seeing her "Well " she called as he went by. "Don't sav hello."

"Hello," he said, and felt very foolish.

Ningal set down the basket of eggs she was carrying back to her father's smithy: had she kept holding it, she couldn't have set both hands on her hips to look properly annoyed. "Sometimes," she said, "I think you live too much of your life inside your head instead of in

the world out here."

"Not when I look at you," Sharur said. Ningal's smile said he'd gone partway toward redeeming himself. Like other well-to-do women of Gibil, she wore a linen tunic that covered her from the neck almost to the knee, but it clung to her in the heat and did little

to hide her shapely figure. Her eyes sparkled; all her teeth were white; her hair fell to her shoulders in midnight curls. Sharur went on, "With the profit I make from my next trip to the mountains, I'll have enough to pay bride-price to your father."

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"How do you know I'll want you to, when you don't even notice I'm here?" she asked with a toss of her head that sent those curls flying.

Sharur felt his cheeks heat, though he doubted Ningal could see him blush. Like her, like everyone in the land between the rivers, he was swarthy, with dark hair and eyes. In Laravanglal, the distant southeastern land whence tin came, the people were the color of dark bread, and men grew beards scanty rather than luxuriant. A few of the mountaineers of Alashkurru had eyes of green or even gray, and hair that might be brown or even, rarely, the color of copper instead of black. More, though, looked like Sharur and his countrymen.

He said, "Well, if you don't, you can always tell your father."

"Do you think he would listen to me? I don't. He's set on marrying me to you, to join our houses together." Ningal's smile showed a dimple in her cheek. "And so I guess I won't bother telling him that."

"Fair enough." Sharur tried hard not to show how relieved he was. He very much wanted the marriage to go forward. As in every other marriage in Gibil, the partners would join at their families' instance, not their own. But Ningal and he had known each other since they were toddlers playing in the dust of the Street of Smiths. They'd always got on well, even as children. And ever since he'd thought of marrying anyone, hers was the face he saw in his mind.

"Fair enough?" she mimicked, exasperated at him again. "Is that the best you can do?"

He knew she wished he were more demonstrative. He took off his hat, then stooped, picked up a handful of dust, and let it fall down into his hair, a gesture of mourning and contrition. "O gracious lady, please forgive your slave," he wailed, his voice cracking convincingly.

Ningal made as if to throw an egg at him. Laughing, she said, "I may-eventually." She carried the basket into her father's smithery. Sharur watched her hips work under the clinging linen.

Once she was out of sight, he went on to his own house. His father, Ereshguna, was counting leather sacks of ore. "Seventy-two, seventy-three ... Oh, hello, son." He got to his feet and bowed to Sharur.

The two of them looked much alike, though his face was more

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strongly carved by the years and gray flecked his hair and elaborately curled beard.

Sharur's younger brother, Tupsharru, also bowed. He held a tablet of damp clay in his left hand, a stylus in his right. "Do you want to finish this lot now, Father, or shall we set it aside for a while?"

"It will keep," Ereshguna answered. "That tablet's not going to dry up if you set it on the table. You'll still be able to write on it after we all have a cup of beer." The jar of beer and several earthenware cups sat on a small table made of golden, fine-grained wood brought down from the mountains of Alashkurru. Only palms and poplars grew in Kudurru. Their lumber, while cheap, was neither lovely nor particularly strong.

Ereshguna poured three cups full. He and his sons murmured thanks to Ikribu, god of barley, and Ikribabu, goddess of brewing, before they drank. The sour beer washed some of the dust from Sharur's mouth. "That's good," he said, and praised the god and goddess again.

"Here, give me a cup, too, his grandfather's ghost said.

"Yes, my father." Ereshguna held the jar over an empty cup and tilted it, not far enough to let more than a couple of drops of actual beer come out. Symbolically, though, it was full. Ghosts dwelt more in the symbolic world than the material one in any case. The efforts of Sharur's grandfather's ghost to drink the actual beer made the cup quiver on the table, but that was all.

"It is good beer," the ghost said, judging by the essence, "but I remember a jar I drank when I was a young man. It-

Ereshguna rolled his eyes. He'd heard that story more often than Sharur and Tupsharru put together. It had been boring when his father was alive. It was deadly dull now. At last, the ghost finished and fell silent.

Trying not to show how relieved he was, Ereshguna turned to Sharur and asked, "What do the harness makers say?"

"They will have the new straps ready when we need them, at the price on which we already agreed. I can lead the donkey train to Alashkurru when the goddess Nusku carries the boat of the moon a couple of days past full, as we had planned."

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"Good. That's good," Ereshguna said. "We don't want to run low on ore." He and his family brought more copper and tin into Gith than anyone else, along with whatever other interesting things they found along the way. When Sharur laughed and pointed to the sack he'd been inventorying with Tupsharru, he shook his head. "That will go soon enough, my son. Almost all of them are already spoken for. We need more. We always need more."

He pointed toward the clay tablet and stylus Tupsharru had put down. His younger son picked them up again and said, "The last one you counted was number seventy-three."

"Yes, that's right. Seventy-three. It was this one right here. That's what Sharur came in." Ereshguna pointed to the next sack and resumed his count: "Seventy-four, seventy-five. . . ." Tupsharru made frequent tally marks in the damp clay.

Sharur listened to the reckoning with half an ear. Inventory was necessary, but not exciting. He was about to go upstairs when a customer came in and gave him something to do. Bowing, he said, "May I serve you, honored Irmitti?"

Irmitti was a plump man who looked as if his stomach pained him. "I've come to give you another payment on those dozen fancy lances and the perfumed oil that goes with them you sold me," he said, tossed Sharur a gold ring. "It should be the last."

Sharur caught it out of the air, hefted it, bit it, and nodded. "It's good gold." He walked over to a small balance and set it in one pan. In the other, he set weights that he took from a cedarwood box. "The weights are one keshlu, and a quarter part, and a half of a quarter part. Let me examine your contract, honored Irmitti. If it is too much, I shall repay to you whatever the excess weight may be."

He rummaged through a basket of clay tablets till he found the one he needed. Syllable by syllable, he sounded out the words written there. The polite smile faded from his face, to be replaced by a polite frown.

"I am sorry, honored Irmitti, but the amount you still owe me is three keshluts of gold. The writing is very clear. That means you have left to pay"-he worked out the answer on his fingers-"one keshlu weight of gold, and a half part, and a half of a quarter part. When you have it, I will give you the tablet, and you may break it."

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"I wilt give you the rest of the gold when I have it," Irmitti said. "One keshlu, and a half part, and a half of a quarter part." He repeated the amount several times so he would remember it. Having done that, he went on, "Truly I thought I owed you only this smaller amount.)"

"Memories can slip," said Sharux, who thought Irmitti was probably telling the truth. He added, "Mine often does," which was not true but was calculated to console the customer. He hefted the clay tablet. "The writing here, though, is the same as it always was. It does not forget. It cannot forget."

As he spoke, he wondered whether writing might not prove an even greater creator of power than smithery. Prayers, invocations, spells ... all centered on words. And writing pinned them down. It made them stay as they had always been. And it let a man command more of them than he could hope to do with even the capacious and accurate memory Sharur enjoyed. If that wasn't the raw stuff of power, what was?

1~., Irmitti's thoughts had run along different lines. A discontented

his face, he said, "My great-grandmother's ghost tells me that, in her time and the time of her father, only a few priests scratched marks on clay. A man's unaided memory was enough to take him through his whole life, and a tablet did not strike like a snake and make him out to be a liar."

"Honored Irmitti, I do not take you for a liar, only for a man who forgot," Sharur said. "We have more things to remember than they did in your great-grandmother's time."

"Life was simpler then," Irmitti said. "Life was better then, I think. I mean no offense to you and your family, but are we better for having so much bronze in the city? The smiths make it into knives and swords, and we kill each other with them. A wood sickle edged with polished stone was good enough for my great-grandfather. Why would anyone need a bronze tool now, when you metal merchants have to travel to the ends of the world to find the stuff the smiths use to make it?"

"You may be right," Sharur said with a small bow. Never insulting a customer was a merchant's first rule. But he did not believe what he was saying, not for a moment. Where new things seemed to

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frighten Irmitti, they excited him. He could hardly hold still, he much wanted to point out all the interesting, useful, beautiful things that were easy to accomplish with metal but slow and difficult if not impossible with stone.

After grumbling a little longer, Irmitti left. Ereshguna looked at him from his counting and said, "You did well there, son. The worst sort of fool is a man who does not know he is a fool."

"Irmitti could be worse, Sharur said. "Some forget they owe anything, not how much they owe us. Then the lugal's men have remind them."

"Oh, yes, I know that, and you are right," Ereshguna said. "But when he talks about sickles edged with stone, from where does I think the stone came? It did not come from the land of Kudurr. Here between the rivers we have water and mud and the things that grow from them, not much else. Merchants brought the stone here, as we bring in ores today. But he does not want to think of that, and so he does not."

"If he wishes for things to be as they were in the time of his great grandmother..." Tupsharru let that hang, for what he meant was, unquestionably something like, He would wish Engibil ruled the city in his own right once more. Saying such things aloud was dangerous. The god might be listening. If he was, he might choose to punish the speaker in any number of unpleasant ways. Or he might even decide to overthrow the line of lugal's and resume his direct rule. That was the last thing Sharur and his family wanted; they had gained too much from the changes over the past couple of generations.

Engibil might also be listening to Tupsharru's thoughts. If the god chose to do so, he could go through a man's mind as Sharur had gone through the basket of tablets looking for what he wanted. Engibil had no particular reason to be listening to Tupsharru's thoughts, but that did not mean he wasn't.

Sharur took from his belt the amulet with which he'd routed the fever demon. He covered Engibil's eyes with his own two thumbs for a moment, symbolically masking from the god what was passing in this house. His father and brother imitated the gesture. Each of them looked nervous. They did not know for certain whether the charm

bound the god, or merely distracted him, or in fact did nothing to restrain him. They did not want to find out.

Ereshguna said, "Sometimes I feel like an ant in a line of ants crawling up a wall inside a house. We think we are doing something fine and grand. But one day the kitchen slave will notice us crawling there and smash us with her hand or sweep us away with a broom."

"We are ants who know copper and tin," Sharur said. As his brother had before, he spoke with great care. One of the things for which metal was better than stone was making weapons. But he had not spoken of fighting the gods, nor even come close. "We are ants who write down the way to the dates in the larder. Even if the kitchen slave smashes us, our brothers will know where they are."

"We are still ants," Ereshguna said. "We would do well to remember it."

For the late meal, Sharur, a hungry ant, ate locusts. The cook, a slave woman captured from the nearby city of Imhursag, had roasted them with coriander and garlic and now served them up on wooden skewers along with thin sheets of barley bread, onions, melons, and dates preserved in sesame oil.

Sharur's mother, Betsilim, was not in a good mood as the kitchen slave brought in another tray loaded with sliced onions and melons and set it on a stool. "We should have had beans, too," she grumbled. "I told her three different times to put them in the pot, but she forgot."

"I'll whip her, if you like," Ereshguna said. "Will that make her remember?"

"If I thought it would, I would tell you to do it," Betsilim answered.

"But I do not think she is lazy. I think she is stupid."

"Remember, Mother, she is without the voice of her god in her ear, too," Sharur said. "Enimhursag rules his city himself. He has no lugal, he has no ensi. He watches over all his people all the time."

"He can't do that in Gibil!" said Nanadirat, Sharur's younger sister.

"No, he can't, and he never will," Sharur said. Now, instead of trying to conceal his thoughts from Engibil, he wanted the god to

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know he was glad Engibil still protected Gibil even if he no longer directly ruled it. Gibil and Imhursag were neighbors and rivals in Kudurru. Engibil and Enimhursag were also rivals. Each god wanted more land and more worshipers. Over the years, Engibil had succeeded at Enimhursag's expense. Sharur knew how jealous the other town's god had to be, and how angry.

Ereshguna said, "Imhursag would be more dangerous to us if the town god let his people be freer. They would soon think of ways to fill our canals with sand."

"Yes, but Enimhursag fears they would think of ways to fill his canal with sand, too," Tupsharru said.

Giving his brother a reproachful look, Sharur took out his amulet again and covered Engibil's eyes. Ereshguna did the same. A moment later, so did Tupsharru himself. He put on a shamefaced expression. If Enimhursag's people might trouble him on being given more freedom, what of Engibil's people, who had gained more? Would they now trouble their god as a result? Those were not the sort of thoughts any man who valued such freedom as he possessed wanted the city god having.

"Let us drink some wine," Betsilim said hastily, and clapped his hands. "Slave, bring us the wine and cups and a strainer."

The kitchen slave—she had no name, not in Gibil; it was left behind in Imhursag—carried in the jar and the cups and the bronze strainer. "Ha!" Tupsharru said, pointing to it. "I'd like to see Irmitt make a strainer out of stone."

"What did they used to be before they were made of metal?" Ereshguna asked the air. No family ghosts answered. They were all occupied doing something else. That gave supper an unusual feeling of privacy.

Timidly, the slave said, "In Imhursag, the strainers are made of clay and baked like pots and dishes."

"Ah. Well, there you are," Ereshguna said. The slave poured the thick fermented juice of dates through the strainer into the cups. Twice she had to rinse the strainer in a bowl of water to clear the sticky dregs from it.

Like anyone well enough off not to have to make do with water, Sharur drank beer with almost every meal. Date wine was for more special occasions. After pouring out a small libation to Putishu god

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of dates and to Ikribabu's cousin Aglibabu, who made the dates into wine, Sharur sipped. The wine was very sweet and strong, and made

his heart merry.

He and his family drank the jar dry. The kitchen slave cleared

away the bowls and pots in which supper had been served. As she carried them out of the dining room, she hummed a little hymn to Enimhursag. Sharur did not think she even knew she was doing it; no doubt she had been doing it all her life. It would not help her, not in this city where the people worshiped Engibil. Hum, speak,

scream: her god would not hear her prayer.

"When will you be leading the trade caravan to the mountains?"

Nanadirat asked Sharur.

"A few more days," he answered. "I was seeing about donkeys today, before I came home and saw Irmitti. Why? Do you want me to bring you back something special?"

"A ring or a bracelet with the blue stones they have there," his sister said at once. "They're pretty. I like them."

"I'll see what I can do," Sharur told her. "They know we like those stones, and they want a lot for them."

Betsilim said, "I'm going up on the roof

"I'll come with you," Ereshguna said. Nanadirat nodded and got to her feet, too. After supper, most families in Gibil, as in the other cities between the Yarmuk and the Diyala, went onto their roofs to escape the heat that lingered indoors. Most of them slept up there, too. Sharur's blanket was there waiting for him. He would lie on it, not under it.

He and Tupsharru rose at about the same time. Sharur was about to follow his parents and sister when Tupsharru touched him on the arm. Sharur stopped and lifted one eyebrow, a gesture he shared with his father. Tupsharru asked, "Were you going to have the kitchen

slave tonight?"

"Ah." As the older brother Sharur could take her ahead of Tun,

just as Ereshguna, if he felt like putting up with Betsilim's

complaints, could take her ahead of him. "No-go ahead if you want to," Sharur said. "I've taken her once or twice, but I don't think she'

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"I don't think she's anything special, either, Tupsharru. said

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she's here and I feel like it, and this way I don't have to go out and find a harlot and pay her something. So if you're not going to, I will.

With purposeful stride, he headed off toward the kitchen. Sharur went up the stairs and onto the roof. Twilight was fading. As he watched, more and more stars appeared in the darkening bowl of the sky. He murmured prayers of greeting to the tiny gods who peered out through them. Most of those gods were content to stay in one place in the sky day after day, year after year, accepting the absent-minded reverence people gave them.

A handful, more enterprising, moved through the heavens, some quickly, some more slowly. They were tricksters, and had to be propitiated. Sharur, who was going to move over the land, reminded himself to offer to them before he set out.

Ereshguna had carried a lamp up with him, and used it to light a couple of torches. More torches and lamps and thin, guttering tapers burned on other roofs in Gibil, making an earthly field of stars a counterpoint to that up in the heavens. Somewhere not far away, a man was playing a harp and singing a song in praise of Engibil. Sharur nodded. The god, who was vain, would like that.

Catching himself in a yawn, Sharur shook out his blanket to make sure he would not be sharing it with any spiders or scorpions. He took off his sandals, shifted his kilt so he could piss in the old pot the family kept up there for that purpose, and lay down.

He was just about asleep when Tupsharru came up onto the roof. His brother whistled a happy tune. As Sharur had done, he shook out his blanket, eased himself, and lay down, a man happy with the world and with his place in it.

Down below, in her sweltering little cubicle, the kitchen slave, like the rest of the slaves Ereshguna owned, would also be going to sleep. What she thought, what she felt, never entered Sharur's mind as he began to snore.

A line of donkeys, each but the leader roped to the one in front of it, stood braying in the Street of Smiths. Sharur went methodically down the line, checking the packs and jars tied to the animals' backs against the list written on two clay tablets he held in his hand.

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"Linen cloth dyed red, four bolts," he muttered to himself He counted the bolts. "One, two, three, four ... very good." He used a stylus to draw a little star by the item on the list. The clay was dry but not baked, so he could incise the mark if he bore down a little. "Wool cloth dyed blue with woad, seven bolts." He counted, then

frowned. "Harharu! I see oniv five bolts here."

If a donkeymaster was a good one, he knew where everything in

the caravan was stored. Harharu, a stocky, middle-aged man, was the best donkeymaster in Gibil; Ereshguna would have settled for no one less. He said, "You're talking about the wool dyed blue, master merchant's son? The other two bolts are on this beast three farther back."

And so they were. "I thank you, Harharu," Sharur said, bowing. He set the star beside the item. On he went, making sure he was in fact taking all the date wine, all the fine pots, all the little flasks of the rock-oil that seeped out of the ground near Gibil, all the medicines and perfumes, all the knives and swords and axes and spear-

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swords."

"Always strikes me funny, taking metal things up to the mountains

when that's where we get our copper from," Harharu remarked.

"The Alashkurrut have plenty of copper," Sharur said, "but they have no tin. Our bronze is harder and tougher than any metal they can make for themselves, so they are happy to get it. They give five times the weight of conner or fifteen times the weight of ore for good

Harharu grunted. "And sometimes, when they feel like it, they use their good swords to take whatever a caravan brings, and they give

nothing for it but death or wounds."

"We are not going by ourselves, you and P' Sitting in the shade of a wall, talking or dozing while they waited for the caravan to get moving, were a dozen stalwart young men who had proved themselves with spear and sword and bow in the latest war with Imhursag. Along with trade goods for the men of the mountains of Alashkurru

the donkeys carried their weapons, their shields of wickerwork and leather, and their linen helmets with bronze plates sewn in. When

the caravan left the land of Kudurru, the guards would carry their gear themselves.
Seeing Sharur's eyes on him, the leader of the guard contingent

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asked, "How much longer, master merchant's son?" Mushezib might have been carved from stone, so sharply chiseled were the muscles rippling under his skin. The scar on his cheek above the line of beard and the bigger scar that furrowed the right side of his cheek might have been slips of the sculptor's tools.

"It will be soon now," Sharur answered. His bow and spear were packed on a donkey, too. He had never yet had to fight up in Alakurru, but that he never had did not mean he never would.

When he'd satisfied himself nothing was missing from the caravan he nodded to Mushezib. The chief guard growled something to the men. They got to their feet and swaggered over to take their places on either side of the donkeys. There were caravans where the guards ended up running the show, they being both armed and used to fighting. That had never happened to any caravan Sharur led. He determined it wouldn't happen this time, either.

"All right, let's go," he said. "May Engibil give us a profitable journey." Several of the guards took out their amulets to help ensure that the city god heard and heeded the prayer. So did Harharu and a couple of the assistant donkey handlers.

Sharur gave Harharu the lead rope for the first donkey, committing the caravan into the donkeymaster's hands. But before Harharu could take the first step, ram's-horn trumpets rang out on the Street of Smiths. In a great voice, a herald cried, "Behold! Forth comes the valiant, beloved of Engibil his patron! Forth comes Kimash, the powerful, the valiant, beloved of Engibil his patron! Forth comes Kimash, the valiant, beloved of Engibil his patron! Behold!"

The trumpets blared again. Drums thundered. Surrounding the caravan were warriors who made the men Sharur had hired seem stripling beside them. Even Mushezib looked less formidable when set against their thick-thewed bulk.

Sharur's grandfather's ghost spoke in his ear: "All this folderol of a mere man is a pack of nonsense, if anybody wants to know. The valiant in my day, Kimash's grandfather Igigi, didn't put on half so much show, and the ensi before him didn't put on any at all, to speak of it." "Yes, father to my father," Sharur answered, wishing the garrulous spirit would shut up. His grandfather's ghost often started chattering at the most inconvenient times.

Besides, the ghost wasn't so smart as it thought it was. The ensis who had ruled Gibil before Igigi had had no need for fancy displays of power, not with Engibil speaking directly through them. The lugal, on the other hand, were faced with the problem of getting people to obey them even though they spoke for no one but themselves. No wonder they made themselves as awesome as they could.

Sharur bowed low as Kimash's retinue came past the caravan. He was not altogether surprised when the procession stopped. Kimash favored smiths and merchants and scribes. They brought new powers into Gibil, powers that might be manipulated against Engibil's long-entrenched strength.

Kimash's guards stood aside to let the lugal advance. He was a man in his early forties, not far from Ereshguna's age, still vigorous even though gray was beginning to frost his hair and beard. He wore gold earrings, and bound his hair in a bun at the back of his neck with gold wire rather than a simple ribbon. The hilt of his dagger was wrapped in gold wire, too, and gold buckles sparkled on his belt and sandals.

"You may look on me," he told Sharur, who obediently straightened. The merchant reached out and set his hand on Kimash's thigh for a moment in token of submission. The lugal covered it with his OIAM hand, then released it. He said, "May Engibil and the other gods, the great gods, favor your journey to the mountains, Sharur son of Ereshguna."

"I thank the lugal, the lord of Gibil," Sharur replied.

"May you be fortunate in bringing back ingots of shining copper; may your donkeys' panniers be laden with heavy sacks of ore," Kimash said.

"May it be so indeed," Sharur said.

Abruptly, Kimash abandoned the formal diction he used when speaking as lugal—the diction handed down for rulers since the days when the lords of Gibil were ensis through whom Engibil spoke—and addressed Sharur as one man to another: "I want that copper. We cannot have too much of it. Imhursag is stirring against us once more, and some of the towns with gods on top of them may send men and weapons to help in the next war."

"If I can get it for you, lord, I will," Sharur said. "I wouldn't be

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heading off to the Alashkurrut if I didn't think they would trade it to me."

I know. I understand, the lugal answered. For all his power, for all his vigor, he was a worried man. "Bring back curiosities, too, things never seen in the land of Kudurru. Let me lay them on the altar in Engibil's temple to amuse the god and give him enjoyment."

"Lord, I will do as you say," Sharur promised. "The god of the city deserves the rich presents you lavish upon him."

He and Kimash looked at each other in mutual understanding. Neither of them smiled, in case the god was keeping an eye on Kimash. But they both knew how venal Engibil was. Igigi had been the first to discover that, if he heaped enough offerings on Engibil's altar, the god would let him act as he thought best, not merely as Engibil's mouthpiece. Kimash followed the same principle as had his grand, father. The god remained vastly stronger than the lugal, but Engibil was distracted and Kimash was not.

I shall have Engibil's priests pray that you enjoy a safe and successful journey," Kimash said. Sharur bowed. Some of the priests, no doubt, resented the lugal for ruling, but, with the god content to suffer it, what could they do? And some, the younger men, served Engibil, aye, but served Kimash, too. The lugal said, "My prayers will go with theirs."

Sharur bowed again. I thank the lugal, the lord of Gibil."

"One thing more," Kimash said with sudden abruptness. "Whatever word of Enimhursag's doings you hear in the wider world, bring it back to me and to Engibil. That god hates this city, for we beat Imhursag and we prosper though men rule us."

I shall do as you say, lord," Sharur promised once more.

Kimash nodded, turned, and went back to his place among the palace guards, who fell in around him. His retinue started down the Street of Smiths once again, the trumpeters blowing great blasts of sound from their ram's horns, the herald announcing Kimash's presence to everyone nearby as if the lugal were equal to Engibil when the god (or, these past couple of generations, a statue of him) paraded through the city on his great feast day.

Harharu and Mushezib, the assistant donkey handlers and the guards, all looked at Sharur with new respect. Harharu had surely

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known Kimash favored Ereshguna's clan. Mushezib probably had known it, too. The others also might well have known it. But know-
,,Cg it and being reminded of it were not one and the same. Everyone in Gibil knew the lugal's power. When he walked with guards and

trumpeters and herald, he reminded people of it.

"Do you see, father to my father?" Sharur murmured.

He'd really been talking to himself, but his grandfather's ghost heard. "Oh, I see," it answered. "That doesn't mean I like it." The ghost left. He could feel it go. He smiled to himself. His grandfather b-J,, 't I ed much as an old man and liked even less now that he

was dead.

Sharur didn't suppose he could blame his grandfather's ghost. When the last person who remembered him alive died, the ghost would no longer be able to stay on earth, but would go down to the underworld and dwell in shadows forever. No wonder he reckoned

any and all chanQe for the worse.

One day, Sharur thought, that fate would be his, too. But he was young. Strength flowed through him. He hadn't yet married Ningal, and had no children, let alone grandchildren. Life stretched ahead, looking long and good. He did not intend to become a ghost for

many, many years.

"Let's go!" he said. Harharu, as he had been on the point of doing when Kimash came over to Sharur, pulled on the lead donkey's line. The donkey stared at him with large, astonished liquid eyes: the idea of actually going anywhere had long since vanished from its mind. Harharu pulled again. The donkey's long ears twitched. It brayed

indignantly.

"Give it a good kick," Mushezib suggested.

"Patience." Harharu's voice was mild. He tugged on the lead line again. The donkey started forward. That took up the slack on the

line connecting it to the next beast which brayed out its own protest before reluctantly following. The hideous clamor ran down the line. Here and there, a donkey balked. The handlers encouraged the animals to go, sometimes gently, sometimes by methods akin to Mush-

ezib's. At last the whole caravan was moving.

Dimgalabzu the smith, Ningal's father, came out of his house as Sbornir led the caravan past it: a tough-looking, wide-shouldered man

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whose bare belly bulged above the belt upholding his kilt. He was carrying a big wicker basket full of rubbish, which he flung into the street. "Going off to get more copper for us, are you, Ereshguna' son?" he called.

"Just so, father to my intended bride," Sharur answered. "And when I return, we shall talk about payment of the price for you daughter."

"You think so, do you?" Dimgalabzu said, not as a true threat but because he enjoyed making his prospective son-in-law squirm. "Well we shall see, we shall see." He waved to Sharur, winked, and went back inside.

Mushezib chuckled. "I hope for your sake, lad, the girl takes after her mother."

"In looks, you mean? She does," Sharur answered. Ningal also had a good deal of her father's bluff, sometimes disconcerting sense of humor. Sharur said nothing about that. His fiancée's intimate personal characteristics were not the concern of a caravan guard.

He had turned off the Street of Smiths and was well on his way to the western gate when he led the caravan past a family who were knocking down their house. That happened every so often in Gibil. The sun-dried mud brick of which almost everything in the city save Engibil's temple and the lugal's palace was built was hardly the strongest stuff. Sometimes a wall would collapse under the growing weight of the roof as one season's mud chinking went on top of another's. Sometimes a wall would collapse at what seemed nothing more than the whim of a god or demon. Sometimes a whole house would fall down. When that happened, people often died.

No one seemed to have been hurt here, not by the cheerful way in which the family and a couple of slaves were biting chunks out of the one wall still standing with hoes and mattocks, and spreading and pounding the crushed mud bricks to make a floor for the new house they'd soon build on the site of the old one. They'd carefully saved their poplarwood roof beams and set them in the street next to the stacks of bricks from which the new house would arise.

The street had been narrow to begin with. Wood and brick slimmed it further. And, of course, a crowd of people had gathered

to watch the work and offer suggestions. "After you're done with your house, why don't you knock down mine?" somebody called.

"Knock down your own house, Melshippak," the man of the la-
-Oring family answered, in tones suggesting that Melshippak was a close friend or a relative. "Me, I'm going to enjoy being on a level with the street for a change, instead of taking a big step up every time I want to go out my own front door. This is the first time we've had to build in more than twenty years."

Over twenty years, a lot of people had, like Dimgalabzu, pitched their trash into the street. No wonder its level had risen in that stretch of time.

Sharur, however, did not care how high the street was, only how wide, or rather, how narrow. "Please move aside," he called to Melshippak and the other spectators. When they didn't move, he shouted, "Make way!" That shifted a few of them, but not enough. He nodded to the caravan guards. They swaggered forward. Even without any weapons but fists and knives, they were large, impressive men. With them at his back, Sharur shouted, "Clear out, curse you! Stop clogging this canal!"

People stared at him as if they hadn't had the slightest idea he or the donkeys or the guards were anywhere nearby. Slowly, grudgingly, they gave way. One after another, the donkeys squeezed past the bottleneck. As soon as they had gone by, the crowd flowed back.

Like the god's temple, like the lugal's palace, the city wall was built of baked brick far more costly than the sun-dried variety but far harder and more nearly permanent. In the Alashkurru Mountains, they made houses and walls out of stone, but in Kudurru that would have been even more expensive than baked brick.

"Engibil's goodwill and all good fortune attend you, son of Eresh-guna," one of the gate guards said. They were Kimash's followers to a man, and so well inclined toward traders and smiths.

Sharur led the caravan down the low hill atop which Gibil sat and onto the flood plain at the base of that hill. He had descended the hill countless times, never once thinking about it. Now he looked back and seemed to see it with new eyes. Had it always been there, a knob sticking up from the flatland all around? Or had Gibil-that-

t watch the work and offer suggestions. "After you're done with your house, why don't you knock down mine?" somebody called. "Knock down your own house, Melshippak," the man of the latter family answered, in tones suggesting that Melshippak was a close friend or a relative. "Me, I'm going to enjoy being on a level with the street for a change, instead of taking a big step up every time I want to go out my own front door. This is the first time we've had to build in more than twenty years."

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was started out on the flood plain and slowly risen, one basketful of trash, one knocked-down house, at a time, till now it stood some distance above the plain all around? If that went on for another thousand years, or two, or three, would Gibil end up sitting atop a mountain? Maybe it would, but not with him here to see it, nor even his ghost.

The road that ran west toward the Yarmuk River—a beaten tract in the mud-passed any number of small farming villages. A few of the better houses in them would be made of sun-dried brick, like those of Gibil. Most, though, were built of the reeds that grew along riverbanks and, where untended, choked canals to death. Those but resembled nothing so much as enormous baskets turned upside down. "I wouldn't want to live like that," Sharur said, pointing toward one such hut in front of which a couple of naked children played. "You couldn't go up to the roof to sleep without falling off on your head."

Mushezib's laugh bared a fine set of strong, yellow teeth. "I grew up in a village like this one, but, after I'd gone into Gibil a few times to trade, I knew that was where I wanted to live out my days."

Harharu nodded. "My story is the same. So many people, though, are happy to stay in the fields all their lives." His wave over the landscape encompassed farmers weeding the growing wheat and barley, their wives tending garden plots of beans and onions and cabbages and melons and cucumbers, a couple of men digging mud from the bank of a canal and plopping it into square frames to make bricks, a woman spanking a child that had been naughty, and a fellow spearfishing out of a stream with a sharpened reed.

Sharur would have bet all those people would stay in their villages till they died. He was lucky enough to have been born in Gibil, in a city that traded to east and west, north and south, and that boasted whole streets not only of smiths but also of potters and dyers and basketmakers and other artisans. Had he not been born there, he knew he too would have found a way to make it his home. -

Then he thought again of Gibil—that was, the town he imagined down on the valley floor rather than standing tall on its hill. In the time of his grandfather's grandfather's grandfather, would it not have

been a village much like any of these others? He wondered what had made it grow while they stayed as they always were.

Engibil, he thought. The god had always dwelt there. People who came to petition him would have stopped to trade and simply to gossip with one another. That alone might have been enough to push Gibil ahead of the neighboring villages. Sharur smiled nervously. He, a modern man, tried to stay out of the god's shadow and stand in his own light as much as he could. Strange to think he might have been enabled to become a modern man because Engibil caused a city to come into being.

That night, the caravan camped by a village still in the territory ruled by Gibil. One of the donkeys carried trinkets to trade for supplies along the way. A few necklaces strung with pottery beads, brightly colored stones, and small seashells from the Sea of Rabia (into which the Yarmuk and Diyala flowed) got Sharur enough bread and beer and sun-dried fish to feed his men. He unrolled his blanket on the ground and slept till sunup.

"Come on," he said as he splashed water on his face from a canal to help wake himself up. Several of the donkey handlers and guards knelt by the edge of the water with him, doing the same. Others, a little farther downstream, pissed away the beer they'd drunk the night before. Still yawning, Sharur went on, "This was the last night we'll be able to rest without posting sentries. By tonight, we'll be in the lands that belong to the city of Zuabu. Nobody with any sense will trust the Zuabut: they're thieves."

"That's Enzuabu's fault," Harharu said. "They used to have another god there, a long time ago, but Enzuabu stole the city from him and chased him out into the desert. Of course the people take after their god."

"I heard it the other way round: that the city god takes after the people, I mean," Sharur said. "I heard they were such thieves that they raised a power of thievery in their land, and that was how Enzuabu got to be stronger than the god they used to have."

"It may be so," the donkeymaster answered with a shrug. "It's not the tale I'd heard, but it may be so. Whether it is or it isn't, though, you're right-they steal."

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The caravan came to the border between Gibil's lands and Zuabu not long after noon. The two towns, the two gods, were at peace. 1~ guards patrolled the frontier, as they did between Gibil and Imhum to the north. A bridge of date, palm logs stretched across a can, Once over it, Sharur went on down the road to the west throul Zuabu's land.

Before long, Zuabut, curious as crows, came flocking to the c-, avan. They were as full of questions as they were of gossip, whi, was very full indeed. As they chattered away, they eyed the do keys-and the bundles on the beasts' backs-with bright, aN eyes. Mushezib and the rest of the guards all did their best to to fierce and vigilant. Sharur was mournfully certain something wol turn up missing; he hoped it wouldn't be anything too valuable important.

You never could tell how much attention you ought to pay anything the Zuabut said. Sharur listened to the story of Nurili, i ensi of Zuabu, impregnating all fourteen of his wives on the sa night with the amount of incredulity he thought it deserved. "I god spoke through him," insisted the man of Zuabu telling the u "The god poked through him, you say?" Sharur returned, pretei ing to misunderstand the hissing Zuabi dialect. His own men laughb After a moment, when they realized Enzuabu wasn't offended (of least, hadn't noticed), the Zuabut laughed, too. Sharur went "That's what it would have taken, I think."

But not all the tales were tall ones. Another man of Zuabu s "Three days ago, a caravan from Imhursag came through our lo also heading west. If you meet on the road, I hope you do not fig] Zuabu was at peace with Gibil. But Zuabu was also at peace N Imhursag. Sharur said, "We will not be the first to fight. But if Imhursagut quarrel with us, we will not be the first to leave off fil ing, either." I

"That is good. That is as it should be," the Zuabi said, nodd "It may be, too, that you and the Imhursagut will not meet."

"Yes, it may be," Sharur agreed. "Whither are they bound?"

"To the mountains of Alashkurru, even as you are," the ma

Zuabu replied. "Still, it may be that you and they will not meet. Three days is much time for travelers to make up on the road."

"This is also true," Sharur said. He did not believe it, though, not down in his heart. Had he had a three days' lead on the men of Imhursag, he would have been sure they could never catch him up. Being three days behind them, he reckoned it likely he would pass them on the road. People from towns where gods ruled directly never seemed to move quite so fast as those who did all their own thinking, all their own planning, for themselves.

The Zuabi pointed. "Look there in the sky!" he said, his voice rising in excitement. "It is a mountain eagle, flying to the west. This is bound to be a good omen for your caravan."

For a moment, Sharur's eyes did go to the sky. Then they swung back to the man of Zuabu, who was stepping rapidly toward the closest donkey. In his hand he had a little knife of chipped flint, the sort of knife everyone had used in the days before bronze. Sharur reached out and grabbed his wrist. "I do not think you would be wise to cut any bundles open. I think you would be wise to go away from this caravan and never let us see your face again."

"This is how you pay me back for warning you of your enemies?" the man said indignantly.

"No. This is how I pay you back for lying to me about the omen and for trying to steal my goods." Sharur spoke without heat. The people of Zuabu were given to thievery, and that was all there was to it. "Put away your little stone knife and go in peace. That is how I pay you back for warning me."

"Very well," the man of Zuabu said. "You should have been fooled."

"I have been through Zuabu and the lands it rules before," Sharur answered. "I know some of your tricks-not all of them, but some."

The donkeys plodded on. Toward evening, they approached the city of Zuabu. Only one building was tall enough for its upper portions to be seen over the top of the city wall: the temple to Enzuabu. Sharur knew the ensi's residence was only a small annex to the temple, not a palace in its own right, as Kimash the lugal enjoyed back in Gibil.

"Shall we go up into the city for the night, master merchant's son?" Harharu asked.

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Sharur shook his head. "I see no need to pay for lodgings, not when the weather is fine and we can sleep on our blankets. We have not been traveling so long that we stand in need of special comforts. On the way home, maybe we shall bed down in Zuabu, to remind ourselves of what lies just ahead."

That satisfied the donkeymaster. It also satisfied Mushezib, who from everything Sharur had seen, liked going out on the road better than living soft in a city, anyhow. If the assistant donkey handler and ordinary guards had different opinions, no one bothered to find out what they were.

Some time in the middle of the night, one of the guards, a burly fellow named Agum, shook Sharur awake. The moon had risen not long before, spilling soft yellow light over the land between the river. Sharur murmured a prayer of greeting to Nusku, then said, "What's wrong?"

Agum pointed toward the walls of Zuabu. "Master merchant's son, I'm glad we're not in that city tonight. Look-Enzuabu walks."

A chill went through Sharur. As gods went in the land of Kudurn, Engibil was a placid sort. Had it been otherwise, he should never have allowed merely human rulers to rule Gibil these past three generations. He was content, even eager, to accept the offerings that rulers gave him, and to stay in his temple to receive them. He had not gone abroad in his city since Sharur was a boy.

But, as Engibil had once done, other gods played more active roles in the lives of their cities. And so, his eyes wide with awe, Sharur saw Enzuabu's moonlight-washed figure, twice as tall as the walls of Zuabu, go striding through the streets. The god's eyes would have glowed whether the moon was in the sky or not; looking at them put Sharur in mind of the yellow-hot fires the smiths used to melt bronze for casting.

Across a couple of furlongs, those eyes met Sharur's. To the merchant's horror, Enzuabu paused in his peregrinations. He stared out toward the caravan as if contemplating paying it a visit. If he did, Sharur did not judge from the way his great form tensed that the visit would be a pleasant one.

Sharur's hand closed over the amulet he wore on his belt. "Engil

is my lord," he said rapidly. "Engibil has no quarrel with the lord of Zuabu."

For a moment, he thought Enzuabu would ignore that invocation and reminder. But then the god lowered his burning gaze so that it fell within the city once more. He reached down onto, or perhaps through, the roof of one of the houses there. When he straightened, the hand with which he had reached was closed-on what or whom, Sharur could not see. He thought that just as well.

Agum's voice was a bare thread of whisper: "If we'd been in there, he might have grabbed us like that."

He might have grabbed me like that, Sharur thought. For whatever reason, Enzuabu had taken him for an enemy, although, as he'd said, Enzuabu and Engibil were at peace, no less than their cities were. Sharur scratched his head in bewilderment. He'd come through Zuabu and its hinterland several times, going to and from the Alash, kurru Mountains. Never once had the god of Zuabu taken the least notice of him.

A thought much like that must have crossed Agum's mind, for the guard asked, "Did you somehow anger Enzuabu, master merchant's son?"

"Not in any way I know," Sharur answered. "Come the morning, though, I will make a forgiveness-offering even so."

"It is good," Agum said. "I do not want a god angry at us."

"No, nor I" Sharur watched Enzuabu until the god shrank down to accommodate himself to his temple once more. Only then did the merchant think it safe to lie down and go back to sleep.

He greeted the rise of Shumukin, the lord of the sun, with a prayer set to the same music as that for Nusku the night before. Shumukin was, without a doubt, the most reliable god the folk of Kudurru knew. His one failing was that he sometimes did not know his own strength.

After telling Harharu and Mushezib what Agum and he had seen in the night, Sharur said, "I will buy two birds for the forgiveness-offering," and started back toward the village closest to Zuabu.

"Why not go into the city?" Mushezib asked. "It's right here before us."

Sharur shook his head. "I do not wish to enter the stronghold of

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Enzuabu on earth before offering to the god, not when I do not know how badly I may have offended him." Mushezib ran a hand through his thick, elaborately curled beard before finally nodding.

Having traded jewelry for a pair of trussed doves, Sharur carried them to the caravan. He laid them in a fine bowl, one for which he had intended to gain a high price from the men of Alashkurru. I help for it: an offering of his worst would have inflamed Enzuabu against him had the god not been angry before.

He held the bowl with the two doves out toward the walls of Zuab and humbled himself before the city god. "Lord Enzuabu, if I have enraged thee-forgive, I beg! Lord Enzuabu, if I have affronted thee-forgive, I beg! Lord Enzuabu, if I have insulted thee-forgive, I beg! Lord Enzuabu, if I have offended thee-forgive, I beg! Lord Enzuabu, if I have slighted thee-forgive, I beg!"

After running through a long litany of the ways in which he might have incurred Enzuabu's displeasure, he twisted off the doves' heads and let their blood fill the bowl. Then, using only the first two fingers of his right hand, he sprinkled the blood on his chest and his hands. He beckoned first Harharu and then Mushezib forward, and did the same with them. Last of all, he sprinkled the lead donkey with doves' blood. The donkey snorted and twitched its big ears. It did not like the smell of blood.

"Lord Enzuabu-forgive, I beg!" Sharur cried. "May thy wrath shatter like this bowl I give to thee!" With all his might, he dashed the thin, lovely bowl against the hard ground. It smashed into a hundred pieces. The doves' blood made a red star on the dirt.

"It is accomplished," Harharu intoned, almost as if he had expected it would not be. "Now let us continue."

"Now let us continue, Sharur echoed. Harharu pulled on the reins to get the lead donkey moving. But, as the caravan passed Zuab he got no sense that Enzuabu had in fact forgiven him. True, the god did not rise up in fury, as he might have done, but he yielded nothing either. He simply bided his time.

West and north of the lands Zuab ruled was a barren, unirrigated stretch of land no city or god claimed. Little dust demons swirled

around the caravan, now nervously running away from the men and donkeys, now skittering up close to see if they might cause some mischief. When one of them got under his feet and tried to trip him, Sharur took from his belt the eyed amulet of Engibil. "Begone!" he cried, and, with little frightened gasps, the dust demons fled from the power of the god.

Wild donkeys fled from the caravan, too; the power of man sufficed to put them in fear. Their hooves kicked up more dust than all the dust demons in the world could have raised. Sharur sent Agurn and one of the assistant donkey handlers, a wide-shouldered man named Rukagina, after them with bows. The hunters returned later in the day with a gutted carcass slung from a pole.

Sharur led the cheers for them. "Tonight we feast!" he cried. Wild donkey might not be so flavorsome as mutton or beef, but everyone would be able to gorge himself on meat.

The caravan crew were not the only hunters on the plain. Not long after Agurn and Rukagina came back with the donkey, a lion roared nearby. That fierce, thunderous cough made Sharur's hand fly to the hilt of his knife before he realized it had done so. It also made the donkeys of the caravan, which had been restive at the sight and smell of one of their kind slain, suddenly become docile as lambs.

Harharu chuckled. "They depend on us to protect them from the wild beasts, and they know it," he said to Sharur.

Off in the distance, the wild donkeys threw up a great cloud of dust. The roar sounded again, and several more after it in quick succession. Vultures spiraled down out of the sky, as they had done when Agurn and Rukagina killed. Then the birds could feast on the offal the men had left behind. Now they would have to wait until the lions were done before taking their share.

Sharur set his hand on the neck of the lead donkey. "We will give them what they expect, then," he said. The donkey snapped at him. He jerked his hand away in a hurry. Harharu laughed out loud.

That evening, the guards and donkey handlers gathered brush and dry donkey dung for a couple of cookfires by a tiny stream. They and held gobbets of donkey meat over the flames on sticks, roast-

Sharur
ing them till they were charred black on the outside but still red and

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juicy within. Sharur burned his fingers, burned his lips, burned his tongue. He did not care. His belly would be full.

Rukagina's eyes glowed in the firelight. For a moment, Sharur, see,

ing that, simply accepted it. Then he knew something was amiss. The eyes of dogs and foxes, wild cats and lions, gave back the fire that way he had watched the beasts prowling round the edges of many camps. Men's eyes did not normally reflect the light in the same way.

Demons' eyes did, though. "Rukagina!" Sharur said sharply.

Rukagina stared at him. The donkey handler's eyes glowed bright still, as if the fire were behind them, not in front. "Rukagina, yes," he said, as if he did not recognize his own name. Then he laughed a hideous cry that made all his companions exclaim in alarm. "Rukagina is eaten, eaten!" he roared.

"A pestilence!" Harharu said. "A demon of this desert has seized him."

"Yes, Sharur said, and brandished Engibil's eyed amulet, as 17. had at the little dust demons on the road.

This one was made of sterner stuff. Its laugh came again through Rukagina's mouth. "I am the spirit of this desolation," it declared. "Your god is far from home, and lazy even in his own city. He has no power over me here. The desert is my city. Here I am a god. May I with this man I shall cause a true city to rise here. Then I shall be true god, a great god, greater than your god."

Maybe the demon could do that. Maybe Engibil had been just such a wandering desert spirit once. But Sharur did not intend to let the demon aggrandize itself at the expense of one of his men. "Seize him!" he shouted, and the caravan guards piled onto Rukagina.

With the demon in him, the donkey handler fought back with more than human strength. But he was not stronger than all the guards together. They held him down, two men on each arm, two on each leg. He howled like a fox. He hissed like a serpent. He snarled like a lion, and tried to bite like one. And ever and always, he kept seeking to throw the guards off him. I

Mushezib drew his bronze knife from its sheath. "Maybe I should yank up his beard and cut his throat like a sheep's," the guard captain said. "That would make the demon flee."

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"Yes, but whom would it seize next?" Sharur asked. "You, perhaps?"

"Avert the omen!" Mushezib exclaimed, and spat to his left side.

Shatur walked over to the packs the men had taken from the donkeys' backs when they stopped for the night. Had he paid less attention to the way the beasts were loaded, he might have searched till sunrise without finding what he sought. As things were, he ran it to earth like a cheetah bringing down a gazelle gone lame: a small, plain pot, its stopper sealed with pitch.

"What have you got there?" Mushezib asked.

"Essence of the marigold," Sharur answered. "The Alashkurrut esteem it highly, and every caravan sells many jars to them. It's sovereign against scorpion stings-of which they have many-snake-bite, jaundice, toothache, stomach trouble, difficult breathing, diseases of the privates ... and possession by a demon."

"Strong stuff!" the guard captain said admiringly.

"Engibil grant it be strong enough." Sharur used the point of his own knife to scrape away the pitch and pry up the lid to the pot. He was used to being glad Engibil took less part in human affairs than a god like Enzuabu or, worse, Enimhursag. But when a desert demon mocked his deity, he wondered if he should have second thoughts.

A sweet, spicy odor rose from the pot when he opened it. Beckoning for Mushezib to come with him, he walked over to demon-possessed Rukagina and squatted beside him. Seeing-and perhaps smelling-what he bore, the spirit made the donkey handler clench his jaws tight, like a two-year-old who refused to eat his mashed parsnips.

Mushezib seized Rukagina's beard and pulled with all his formidable strength. Altogether against the demon's will, the donkey handler's mouth came open. Sharur poured half a potful of essence of marigold down him. Rukagina was trying to cry out at that moment, which meant the medicine all but drowned him. Instead of being able to spit it out, he coughed and choked ... and swallowed.

He let out a cry that frightened into silence the small crawling and creeping, piping and cheeping creatures around the caravan's campfires. His entire body convulsed, so violently that the men holding

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him were flung from his limbs. Something dark came forth from his mouth and nose, from his eyes and ears, and was gone before Shari could be sure he had seen it.

Rukagina sat up and looked around. A hand went to his chin. "Who's been pulling my beard?" he demanded. Had Mushezib yanked on Sharur's whiskers like that, his chin would have been sore, too. "Look at the fire," he told the donkey handler. When Rukagina did, Sharur studied his eyes. They did not flash as they had before. "The gods he praised: we have driven the demon from you."

"Demon?" Rukagina said. "What demon? I was sitting by the fire eating a slice of the donkey's liver, and, and. . ." His voice trailed away. "I do not remember what happened after that."

"As well that you do not," Sharur said, to which the rest of the caravan crew nodded in unison, as if a single will controlled them. "Tell me!" Rukagina said. His companions were happy enough to oblige him.

Thoughtfully, Sharur replaced the stopper in the pot of marigold essence. Among the supplies the caravan carried was a small pot of pitch: no telling when someone might need to stick something to something else. As he used a twig to daub it on and reseal the stopper, so what was left of the medicine would not spill, Mushezib came

"Yes, it is," Sharur agreed. "Now that I can tell the Alashkurn saw with my own eyes how it routed a strong demon, I can cha

"True enough," the guard captain said. Eyeing the pot, he went on in musing tones: "If it works as well for diseases of the private part for driving out demons, it is a very strong medicine indeed."

"Ah." Sharur looked down at the pot he held in his hands. He hefted it. "Do you know," he said, "I very much doubt the At-kurrut would want a pot that has already had half the medicine drained from it. Why don't you take it, Mushezib? You can dispose of it

"The master merchant's son is kind." Mushezib made sure he

Past the haunted desert, three cities lay between Gibil and the Yarmuk River. In neither of the first two, both ruled by ensis, did the caravan encounter any difficulty with men or gods. Sharur still wondered why Enzuabu had seemed so hostile. Even the demon of the desolation had mocked Engibil. The omen struck Sharur as worrisome. "I wonder if the demon troubled the caravan out of Imhursag," he said to Harharu.

"I doubt it," the donkeymaster answered. "The Imhursagut have their heads so full of their god, there's no room in them for anything else."

"In that case, I am glad to be emptyheaded," Sharur said, and Harharu laughed. So did Sharur, though a moment later he wondered what was funny. If Enimhursag protected his people and Engibil did not protect his, which was the stronger god?

But a city's strength, as Sharur well knew, depended on more than the strength of its god. It was the strengths of god and men together. Engibil might be weaker than some, but Gibil, as the metal merchant knew, was by no means to be despised. Where gods were weak, the strength of men could grow, as could their ability to act for themselves. He cherished what freedom he had: cherished it and wanted

Instead of going through the territory of Aggasher, the city that controlled the usual crossing point for the Yarmuk, Sharur swung the caravan north through the debatable land just to the east of it. Eniaggasher, the city's goddess, ruled it in her own right. He found dealing with men who were hardly more than mouthpieces for their tedious at any time. Now he also feared they would try

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to delay him or, worse, to help the cause of the caravan from Imhursag, whose men remained similarly in the hands of their god.

"I know what you're doing," Harhant said when Sharur ordered the turn. "This wouldn't work in springtime, you know."

"We're not in springtime," Sharur said with a smile. "The sun is high, and the river is low."

A couple of herdsmen and a couple of peasants stared as the caravan came down to the Yarmuk. They were folk of Aggasher. One day, Eniaggasher would chance to look through their eyes when

caravan from Gibil used this ford to avoid crossing by the city. There might be trouble. But it had not happened yet. Eniaggas paid little attention to these outliers under her control, in the same way that a man, under most circumstances, paid little attention to his toenails.

A goddess dwelt in the Yarmuk, too, of course. Before venturing into the river, Sharur walked up to the bank, a gleaming bronze bracelet inset with polished jet in his hands. "For thee, Eniyarmuk to adorn thyself and made thyself more beautiful, he said, he dropped the bracelet into the muddy water.

The sacrifice made, he took off his sandals, pulled down his hair and stepped naked into the Yarmuk to test the ford. The sand and mud of the river bottom squelched up between his toes. Little fish nibbled at his legs. The cool water seemed to caress his body as he advanced. He took that for a sign the river goddess had accepted his offering.

Up to his knees he went, up to his thighs, up to his waist and beyond. If the water got much deeper, the donkeys would have trouble crossing. "Let us be able to ford in safety, Eniyarmuk, and I will give thee another bracelet, like unto the first, when we reach the farther bank," he said, and pressed on across the river.

Before long, his navel, and then his privates, too, came out of the water. He kept on until, wet and dripping, he emerged on the west bank of the Yarmuk. From there, he waved back at the rest of the caravan. Guards and donkey handlers got out of their clothes. Kagina thoughtfully picked up Sharur's kilt and sandals and carried them above his head along with his own gear. The men led the donkeys into the river.

As Sharur had prayed they would, they made the crossing without incident: almost without incident, at any rate, for a couple of men and a couple of donkeys came out of the water with leeches clinging to their legs. They had to start a fire there by the riverbank, and use burning twigs to make the worms' heads let go. The guards cried out in disgust. One of the donkey handlers cried out, too, when a donkey kicked him. Despite the leeches, Sharur gave Eniyarmuk the second bracelet.

He went up and down the length of the caravan to see if the trip through the ford had damaged anything. A couple of bolts of red-dyed linen were soaked, but everything else seemed all right. He sighed. "Well, we're not going to get much for those, not with the color running and stained with mud," he said.

"For a fording, we did well," Harharu said.

I know that," Sharur answered. "And we saved ourselves trouble from Eniaggasher, unless I miss my guess. But even so-" He scowled. He did not like anything to go wrong, and was still young enough to be easily aggrieved when perfection eluded him. He also begrudged the time spent going down small paths back to the main road.

West of the river, as far as canals took its waters and those of a couple of small tributaries, the land might as well have been part of Kudurru. The people were of the same stock. They spoke the same language, although with a rather singsong intonation. They worshiped the same great gods and lived in the same sort of reed-hut farming villages.

But they had no cities, and no city gods. None of the demons dwelling in this part of the world had been strong enough to consolidate any great number of people under his control. Like the spirit that haunted the waste west of Zuabul the demons west of the Yarmuk might have had ambitions, but as yet lacked the power to make those ambitions real.

West of the Yarmuk, too, more and more stretches of ground were bare, dry wasteland: country that might have been fertile if water reached it, but that was too far from any stream or rose too high to be irrigated. The mountains of Alashkurru rose higher above the horizon here. Back in Gibil, they were visible only on the clearest days: a deep, mysterious smudge denting the edge of

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the sky. Not here. West of the Yarmuk, Sharur felt them lookin~
down on him.

Two days after the caravan forded the river, irrigated land becam
the exception, dry, scrubby country the rule. There was enough forag,
for the donkeys; Sharur bartered some of the water-damaged linel
for a couple of sheep from a herder driving his flock not far from th
road. That night, he and the donkey handlers and guards ate roa.,,
mutton with wild garlic.

The next morning, they caught up with the caravan from Imhu
sag.

Sharur had known they were gaining on the Imhursagut. Had he n
taken the detour, they would have caught them sooner ... so loi
as everything went well at the main river crossing by Aggasher. I
doubted that would have happened.

When the donkeys of the other caravan went from being ho(
prints on the road to shapes in front of him, Sharur ordered the gual
to don their helmets and carry weapons and shields. "You just ca
tell what the Imhursagut will do, he told Mushezib. "If Enimhur
wants them to attack us, they will, even if we should outnum.])
them. A god does what he thinks best for himself first, and won
about his people only afterwards."

"I've seen that myself, in the wars we've fought against Imhurs~
the guard captain said. "The Imhursagut would throw themsel
away for no purpose anybody with even a bare keshlu of sense cc
see. But they think we're crazy, because each one of us acts for hirn
instead of as a piece of our god's plan. Goes to show, you ask m(
Goes to show what? Sharur wondered. Instead of asking, he n:
finger along the edge of his bronze spearhead, then tapped the pc
He nodded to himself. It was as sharp as he could make it.

Up ahead, the Imhursagut were also arming themselves. Sh
saw shields, spears, swords, bows. The other caravan looked al
the same size as his own. If the two crews came to blows, they,

"It will be as I said in the land ruled by Zuabu, Sharur decl
"We shall not begin the fight here. But if the Imhursagut begi

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let our cry be, 'Engibil and no quarter!'" The guards nodded. Some of them looked eager to fight. Some did not. All of them looked

readv.

Closer and closer the caravan drew to that from Imhursa Soon they were within easy bowshot of the rearmost donkeys from the rival city. Almost all the Imhursagut had dropped back to the rear to

defend the beasts against the men of Gibil

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Sharur strode out ahead of his lead donkey. "Gibil and Imhursag are not at war now!" he shouted. That was true. It was also the most

that could be said for relations between the two cities.

One of the Imhursagut walked back toward him and held up hand, not in peace but in warning. "Come no farther, Gibli!" he cried. "Halt your donkeys. Do not approach us until you have made

known your desires to Enimhursag, the mighty god."

"You also halt your donkeys, then," Sharur said. "We will parley, you and U'ie suppressed a sigh. They would parley: Sharur and the man of Imhursag and Enimhursag himself. It was liable to take a while, for the god would have only a tiny part of his attention di-

rected toward the caravan

Sure enough, the Imhursaggi stood as if waiting for orders for several breaths before nodding jerkily and saying, "It shall be as you propose." He turned back to the rest of the Imhursagut and ordered them to halt. Sharur waved for his followers to come no closer. Then the man from Imhursag demanded, "Why are you pursuing us? The god told us some time ago that you were following in our wake."

"We are not pursuing you," Sharur answered. "We are going our own way, down the same road as you are using, and we happen to be moving rather faster. Let us go by without fighting. You will breathe our dust for a little while, but then it shall be as if we never were."

"It could be so," the man of Imhursag said. But then, while he

seemed on the point of adding something more, he suddenly shook his head. " o. Enimhursag does not believe you. You seek to get ahead of us to disrupt our trade with the Alashkurrut."

Only the certain knowledge that laughing in a god's face was dangerous made Sharur hold his mouth closed. The city gods of Kudurru were a provincial lot, Enimhursag more than most. Though his power touched his followers far beyond the land he ruled, he had no true

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conception of the size of the world and its constituent parts. "Alashkurru is a wide land," Sharur said soberly. "We can trade in one part of it and you in another. Even if we get there first, it will not matter

"It could be so," the Imhursaggi said again.

"If you are a merchant, you will have made the journey to the mountains of Alashkurru yourself," Sharur said, speaking to the fellow as one man to another: always an uncertain proposition when dealing with folk from a god-ruled city. "You will know for yourself how wide the mountain country is—more like Kudurru as a whole than any one city within the land between the rivers. Your caravan and mine can both trade there."

"It could be so," the man of Imhursag repeated. Sharur started to be angry at him for his stupid obstinacy, but checked himself. He realized the Imhursaggi did not dare—or perhaps simply could not come straight out and disagree with his god. That did not rouse anger in Sharur, but pity and fear.

"Let us pass you without fighting," he said gently. "In Engibil's name, I swear my men will start no quarrel with yours as we go by." "How can you swear in your god's name?" the Imhursaggi—or was it Enimhursag himself?—asked. "Engibil does not speak through me, Giblut. We have seen this, to our cost. The words of the men of your city have only their own wind behind them, not the truth of the gods."

For the first time, Sharur realized deep in his belly that he and the rest of the folk of Gibil were as strange and frightening to the Imhursaggi as they were to him. "I speak only for myself," he admitted, "but Engibil is still my god. If I lie in his name, he will punish me."

"That has not always been so," the man of Imhursag replied. He then, abruptly, his whole tone changed. He threw back his head, laughed. When he looked at Sharur, he seemed to look straight through him: Enimhursag was looking out through his eyes. Sharur shivered and reached for Engibil's amulet. No assault came, though neither against his body nor against his spirit. "Go on," the Imhursaggi said, in a voice not quite his own. "Go on! Alashkurru is wide as you say. See if it is wide enough for you." He laughed again, even less pleasantly than before.

As quickly as Enimhursag had taken full possession of him,

god released him once more. He staggered a little, then caught himself. Sharur wondered if he would remember what the god had said through him. He proved he did, turning to his own caravan crew and ordering them to move their donkeys to the side of the road to let Sharur and his companions pass. Men of Gibil would have argued. The Imhursagut, feeling the will of their god press on them, obeyed without a word.

To Sharur, the Imhursaggi spoke as himself once more: "Go ahead. You Giblut are always so eager to go ahead, so eager to sniff out a keshlu's weight of silver in the middle of a dungheap. Go ahead, and see what it profits you now."

"What did your god tell you?" Sharur asked. "Why did he change his mind like that?"

"I do not know why," the man of Imhursag answered. "I do not want to know why. I do not need to know why. It is not my place to know why." He spoke with pride, where Sharur would have been furious at being kept in the dark. "As for what he told me, he told me no more than I told you."

Was that true? Sharur wondered. But the Imhursaggi was less naive than some men from god-ruled cities with whom he'd dealt, and so he could not be sure. Muttering under his breath, Sharur went back to his own caravan. "Forward!" he told the guards and donkey handlers, adding, "I have sworn in Engibil's name that we shall not be the first to start any fight. Be ready for trouble, but begin none yourselves, lest you leave me forsworn."

"Do you hear that, you lugs?" Mushezib growled to the guards. He set down his spear for a moment so he could thump his chest with a big, hard fist. "Anybody who gets frisky when he shouldn't have answers to me afterwards."

Warily, Sharur led his caravan past the one from Imhursag. The Imhursagut did not attack his men. He had not thought they would, not when Enimhursag, speaking through their leader, had agreed to let him by. They did jeer and hoot and make horrible faces: they obeyed their god, but their manner declared what they would have done had he given them leave.

Perhaps they were trying to make the Giblut lose their tempers begin the fight. Wanting to prevent that, Sharur pointed to the

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Imhursagut and said, "See the trained monkeys? Aren't they funny Why don't you throw them a few dates, if you're carrying any in you belt pouches to munch on as we walk?"

As he'd hoped, the guards and donkey handlers laughed. A coup] of them did toss dates to the Imhursagut. Their rivals plainly did n(know whether to be glad of the food or angry at the way they receive it- Enimhursag did not know, and had not told them. They were sti waiting for their god to respond by the time the last of Sharur's dot keys and the last of his men had passed them by.

Harharu. said, "That was well done, master merchant's son. Wh(men from a god-ruled city act in ways they have acted before, th, are as quick and clever as we. Give them something new to chew o even if it be, only a date"-he and Sharur smiled at each other- 6(and they wave their legs in the air like a beetle on its back un their god decides what they should do."

"I was hoping that would happen," Sharur agreed. He raised I voice: "Well done, men. Now the Imhursagut will be breathing c dust and stepping in our donkey droppings all the way to Alashkur Let's step it up for the rest of the day, so we can camp well ap, from them."

His followers cheered. They complained not at all about mov~ faster. The donkeys complained, but then the donkeys always cc plained.

Sharur picked his campsite that evening with great care. He wo not be satisfied until he found a small rise the caravan crew could (ily defend against an attack in the night and from which he could a long way in all directions. "The Imhursagut won't trouble us he Mushezib said, nodding vigorous approval. "They'll be able to we'd give them lumps if they tried it. That's the best way to someone from bothering you."

"My thought exactly." Sharur looked toward the east. Fle sl what had to be the Imhursaggi camp, fires twinkling like medi bright stars, a surprising distance away. "We did walk them into ground this afternoon."

worth much. You tell me if that isn't so."

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"Of course we did." Mushezib's massive chest inflated further.
'~'Master merchant's son, if we can't outdo the Imhursagut, we aren't

"Well, of course it is." Sharur had as much pride in his comrades, the men of his city, as did the guard captain. Walking back to the rest of the guards and the donkey handlers, he asked, "Does anyone have a ghost traveling with him?" He had never thought he would wish his bad-tempered grandfather had joined him on the caravan

instead of staying back in Gibil, but he did now.

Agum the guard looked up from his supper of dried fish and dates.
"I do, master merchant's son. Uncle Buriash guarded a couple of

cRrovans himself. so he lil-ps trpvelina this rond_ "

"That is good. That is very good," Sharur said. He had never known Agum's uncle, who therefore might as well not have existed as far as his senses were concerned. "I want him to go back to the camp of the Imhursagut and listen to their talk for a while, to see if he can spy out why their leader-why their god-changed his mind and decided to let us pass. He should also see if he can learn why their leader mocked our chances for good trading in Alashkurru."

Agum cocked his head to one side, listening to the dead man's voice only he could hear. "He says he'll be glad to do that, master merchant's son. He doesn't like the Imhursagut any better than we do. In one of the wars we fought with them-1 don't quite know

which-they stole all his sheep."

"Thank you, Buriash, uncle to Agum," Sharur said. Even if he

could not hear the ghost, the ghost could hear him.

"He says he is leaving now," Agum reported. "He says he will

return with the word you need."

Sharur was just sitting down to his own supper when Harharu came wandering over to him. The donkeymaster spat out a date pit, then said, "Sending the ghost out is well done, master merchant's son. Not many would have thought of it, and it may bring us much profit." He grimaced and chuckled wryly. "My own ghosts, I'm just as well

pleased they're back in the city far away "

"I was thinking the same thing about my grandfather," Sharur
answered.

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Harharu nodded. Because Sharur outranked him, he chose to conform to what he had in mind by easy stages. "Would we not be wiser to wonder whether what we do, others might do as well?"

"Ah," Sharur said around a mouthful of salt fish. He saw where Harharu was heading. "You may speak frankly with me, donkeymaster. I shall not be offended, I promise."

"Many people say that. A few even mean it." Harharu studied him. "Yes you may be one of those few. Very well, then: if the Imhursaggi think to send a ghost to spy on us, can we trap it?"

"I suppose we can try," Sharur answered. "After tonight, it will not matter, for we shall be too far ahead of them for one of the ghosts to catch us up. And now it will be hard for us to tell the Imhursaggi ghost from a curious ghost of the countryside, just as Btash may well seem such a ghost to them."

"What you say is true, master merchant's son," Harharu agreed. "And yet—"

"And yet," Sharur echoed. He tugged at his beard. "It might be done. A ghost from Imhursaggi will bear the scent, so to speak, Enimhursaggi, where a ghost of the countryside will not."

"It is so," Harharu said. "If you can use this difference without offending the ghosts and demons and gods who make this land their home—"

"I shall take great care, donkeymaster—believe me in that regard," Sharur said, and tugged at his beard again. "I think it can be done. You are right. I do not want to offend the unseen things here. I shall make a point of letting them know we do not claim this country forever, only for a night."

"Ah, very good," Harharu said. "Any man would know you by your father's son by your resourcefulness."

"You are kind to a young man." Sharur inclined his head in polite gratitude.

Setting a small pot on the ground out where the light from the fires grew dim, he walked around the encampment, chanting, "Night, let the land in this circle belong to the men who follow Engibil. Until the rising of the sun, let the land in this circle belong to the men who follow Engibil. Tonight, let Engibil protect the land in this circle. Until the rising of the sun, let Engibil protect the land in this circle."

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circle. Tonight, let Engibil ward off and drive away Enimhursag and the things of Enimhursag from the land in this circle. Until the rising of the sun, let Engibil ward off and drive away Enimhursag and the things of Enimhursag from the land in this circle."

On he went, slowly, ceremoniously: "Before we, the men who follow Engibil, encamped here, the land in this circle belonged to the unseen things that dwell here always. After we, the men who follow Engibil, depart hence with the rising of the sun, the land in this circle shall again belong to the unseen things that dwell here always. We, the men who follow Engibil, seek only our god's protection this one night for the land in this circle."

He repeated his prayer and his promise the prayer was for the night only over and over again, until he approached the spot from which he had begun the circle. Continuing to chant, he peered around and finally spied the pot he had used to mark his beginning point. With a sigh of relief, he stepped over it and walked on for a few more paces, making certain the circle was complete.

"That is a good magic, master merchant's son," Mushezib said when Sharur walked back to the fires. "May we have much profit from it."

"May it be so," Sharur said. His own prayer was that the magic would prove altogether unnecessary, that the Imhursagut would never think to send a ghostly spy to his camp. He would not know one way or the other, for he could hardly hope to sense the spirit of a man or woman with whom he had not been acquainted in life.

He turned to Agum. "Has the ghost of your Uncle Buriash returned from the Imhursaggi camp?"

"No, master merchant's son," the guard replied. "But he wouldn't be back yet anyhow. He has to go there from here, and then here from there, and he'll want to listen a good long while in between times. I don't expect him till after I go to sleep." He grinned at Sharur. "He'll yell in my ear then, never fear."

Sharur nodded. "He sounds like my grandfather. Good enough. When he does come back, you wake me. I shall want to know what he says as soon as he says it. Why did Enimhursag change his caravan leader's mind?"

"I obey you like a father," Agum promised.

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But Sharur woke only with morning twilight the next day. Angri he huffed over to Agum. The guard was already up and about, with a worried expression on his face. "I would have wakened you, merchant's son, of course I would, he said. "But Uncle Buriash never came back. I finally went to sleep myself, sure he'd wake me when he returned, but he never did."

"Where is he, then? Where can he be?" Sharur uneasily too eastward, back toward the camp of the Imhursagut.

"I thought you were hoping the circle you made last night might have kept him away," Agum said.

Sharur frowned. "I don't see why it should have. Your uncle's grandfather is no enemy to Engibil, no friend to Enimhursag."

"No, of course not," Agum said. "Still, I did not want to go beyond the circle and maybe break it to find out if he was waiting there he is, I'll hear about it soon enough." His chuckle sounded nervous. "First time in a while I'll be glad to have the old vulture yelling at me, let me tell you."

"I know what you mean." Sharur slapped the guard on the back. "The circle will break of itself when Shumukin brings the sun into the sky. Then Buriash can harangue you to his heart's content. The sun rose. The caravan headed off toward the west once more. But Uncle Buriash did not return to Agum when the circle of magic was broken. Agum never heard Uncle Buriash's voice again. All that day, and for days to come, Sharur kept looking back in the direction of the caravan from Imhursagut. What he felt was something uncommonly like fear.

The land rose and, rising, grew rough. Streams dwindled. Near them a few farmers scratched out a meager living. The land a little farther from them could have been brought under the plow, too, had any dug canals out to it. Not enough people lived along the stream to make the work worthwhile.

Instead, herders drove large flocks of cattle and sheep—larger than any in crowded Kudurru—through the grass and brush that grew without irrigation. Lean, rough-looking men, they watched the caravan with hungry eyes. Guards and donkey handlers and Sharur h

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self always went armed. Thanks to Mushezib, the guards acted as tough and swaggering as the herdsmen, and so had no trouble with them.

"You can't let them think you're afraid of 'em," Mushezib said to Sharur one evening. "If they get that idea into their heads, they'll jump on you like a lion on a lame donkey."

"Yes, I've seen that," Sharur said. "The Alashkurrut are the same way." His eyes went to the west. This country blended almost seamlessly with the foothills of the Alashkurru Mountains. He sighed.

"Another few days of traveling and only a few folk, the folk who make a habit of trading with us, will speak our language. The rest will use the words of the Alashkurrut."

Mushezib used a word of the Alashkurrut, a rude word. He laughed a loud, booming laugh. "A guard doesn't need to know much more. 'Beer. 'Woman. 'Bread,' maybe. 'How much?' 'No, too much.' Those do the job."

"I suppose so." Almost, Sharur wished he could live a life as simple as Mushezib's. When all went well, the guard captain had little more to do than walk all day and, when evening came, have someone give him food and beer and silver besides, so he could buy a woman's company for the night or whatever else he happened to want. To a peasant living in drudgery the whole year through, that would seem a fine life indeed. It had seemed so to Mushezib, who had made it real for himself, just as at the beginning of days the great gods had made the world real from the thought in their minds.

For Sharur, though, the reality Mushezib had made from his thought was not enough. The guard captain cared about no one past himself, about nothing more than getting through one day after another. When he died, his ghost would not remain long upon the earth, for who would remember him well enough for the spirit's voice to linger in his ears?

Sharur walked down to the edge of the little nameless stream (nameless to him, anyhow; whatever god or goddess dwelt in it had never drawn his notice) and scooped up a handful of muddy clay. Mushezib followed, saying, "What are you doing, master merchant's son? Oh, I see-making a tablet. What have you found here that you need to write?"

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"I'm practicing, that's all," Sharur answered. "I practice with spear, I practice with the sword, and I practice with the stylus, to So speaking, he took the stylus from his belt and incised on the s clay the three complex squiggles that made up Mushezib's name. guard captain, who could neither read nor write, watched with comprehension.

Hear me, all gods and demons of this land, Sharur thought. I m no harm to the man whose name I erase. He crumbled the tablet in hands, then washed them clean of mud in the running water.

"Didn't the writing come out the way you wanted it?" Mushe asked.

"It was not everything it could have been, Sharur replied. Mu ezib's life was like that: a tablet that would crumble and weather a be gone all too soon after writing covered its surface. Sharur wan the tablet of his life to go through the fire after it was done, to dese to be baked hard as kiln-dried brick and so to have the writing o preserved forever in the memories of Gibil and the Giblut.

Mushezib had his own ideas about that, though. Laughing aga he said, "What is everything it could be?" Sharur, to his own e barrasment, found no good reply for the guard captain.

The demon sprawled in the roadway. It looked like a large wild with wings. Its eyes glowed with green fire. It lashed its tail, as if suggest it had a sting there like a scorpion's.

At the sight of it, Harharu had halted the caravan. He did nothi more. Doing more was not his responsibility but Sharur's. Sha approached until he was almost-but, he made sure, not quite within reach of that lashing tail. Bowing, he spoke in the langua of the mountains: "You are not a demon of the land of Kudurru. Y are not a demon of the land between the rivers. You are a demon Alashkurru. You are a demon of the high country. I know you, dem of the high country."

"I am a demon of the high country." The demon sprang into t air and turned a backwards somersault, for all the world like a pla kitten. "You are one of the new people, the people from afar,

people who travel, the people who bring strange things to Alash

"I am one of those people," Sharur agreed. Men from Kudurru had been trading with the Alashkurrut for generations. To the demon, though they were the new people. They would likely be the new people

five hundred years hence as well. The demon showed no sign of moving aside. It lolled in the sunlight, stretching bonelessly. "Why do you block our path?" Sharur asked. "Why do you not let us travel? Why do you not let us bring our new things"-he would not cat

"You are the new people," the demon repeated. It cocked its head to one side and studied Sharur. "You are one of the new people even among the new people. You listen to your own voice. You do not

"That is not true," Sharur replied. "Engibil is my god. Engibi is my city's god. All in Gibit worship Engibil and set fine offerings in

"You play with words." The demon's tail sprang out, like a snake. Sharur was glad he had kept his distance from it. "Your own self is in the front of your spirit. Your god's voice is in the back of your spirit. You are one of the new people even among the new people.' By its tone, the demon might have accused him of lying with his

"I do not understand all you say." Sharur was lying. He knew he was lying. The demon laid the same charge against him and his fellow Gibluts as Enimhursag had done. He took a deep breath, then went on, "It does not matter. We come to Alashkurru to trade. We come in peace. We have always come in peace. The wanakes, the chief-

chiefs, of Alashkurru profit by our coming. Let us pass."

Lash, lash, lash went the demon's tail. "You trade more than you

know, man of the new people even among the new people. When you talk with the wanakes the chieftains of Alashkurru, you infect them with your new ways, as an unclean whore infects a man with

a disease of the private parts. There are wanakes, chieftains, of Alashkurru who have spoke with great wickedness, saying, 'Let us put our own selves in the front of our spirits. Let us put our gods' voices in

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the back of our spirits.' The gods of Alashkurru grow angry at hearing such talk, at hearing such thoughts."

"I trade metal. I trade cloth. I trade medicine. I trade wine," Shan said stolidly. Under the hot sun, the sweat that ran from his armpits and down his back was cold as the snow atop the highest mountain of Alashkurru. "If I speak of Engibil to the wanakes, the chieftain of Alashkurru, it is only to praise his greatness. Let us pass."

"It shall not be," the demon said. "The gods of Alashkurru are angry. The men of Alashkurru are angry. Go back, man of the north, people even among the new people. You shall do nothing here. You shall gain nothing here. Go back. Go back. Go back."

Sharur licked his lips. "I will not hear these words from a demon in the road. I will hear them from the lips of the wanakes, the chieftains, of Alashkurru." The demon sprang into the air again, this time with a screech of rage. Sharur spoke quickly: "I will not hear these words from a demon in the road. I know you, demon of the high country. Illuyankas, I know your name." He hated to try to combat a foreign spirit, but saw no other choice.

The demon Illuyankas let out another screech, this one a bubbling cry of dismay. Off it flew, as fast as its wings could take it. Knowing its name, Sharur could have worked great harm on it.

The donkey handlers and caravan guards clapped their hands and shouted in delight at the way their leader had routed the demon. "Well done, master merchant's son," Mushezib said. "That ugly thing will trouble us no more."

"No, I suppose not," Sharur said absently. He noticed that Harb seemed less jubilant than the rest of the caravan crew, and as he turned to him, "Donkeymaster, do you not speak the language of the Akkadians?"

"I do, master merchant's son," Harharu said. "I do not speak as elegantly as your distinguished self, but I understand and make myself understood."

"Then you understood what the demon Illuyankas, the demon of ill omen, and I had to say to each other," Sharur persisted. At the donkeymaster's nod, he went on, "The demon's warning comes close to what the men of Imhursag told us." Harharu nodded once lightly.

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even less happily than he had the first time. Sharur said, "If the men and gods of Alashkurru will not treat with us, what shall we do?"

"Here I have no answer, master merchant's son," Harharu said. "I have never heard of the Alashkurrut refusing trade~ This I will tell you: they have never refused trade before, not in all the years Gibil has sent caravans to their country."

"I have not heard of their doing so, either," Sharur said. "Perhaps it is a ploy to force us to lower our prices."

"Perhaps it is," Harharu said. Neither of them sounded as if he believed it.

Tuwanas was the first Alashkurri mining center to which the caravan came. By that time, Sharur's spirits had revived. The peasants on the road to Tuwanas had been friendly enough. None of them had refused to trade bread or pork-it was a good swine-raising country-or beer to him and his men. Their gods, whose little outdoor wooden shrines were nothing like the great brick temples of the gods of Kudurru, had not cried out in protest. Sharur took that as a good omen.

He led the caravan up to Tuwanas in the midst of a rainstorm. The guards who were making their first journey into the Alashkurru Mountains looked up into the heavens with fearful eyes, muttering to themselves at what seemed the unnatural spectacle of rain in sum-

Shatur reassured them, saying, "I have seen this before. It is the way of the gods in this part of the world. See-even though Tuwanas lies by a stream, the folk here have dug but few canals to bring water from the stream to the fields. They know they will get rain to keep their crops alive."

"Rain in summertime." Agum shook his head, which made some of the summertime rain fly out from his beard, as if from a wet dog's coat, and more drip off the end of his nose. "No stranger than anything else around these parts, I suppose." He pointed ahead to Tuwanas, "If this isn't the funniest-looking place I've ever seen, I don't know what is."

There Sharur was inclined to agree with him. By the standards of

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Kudurru, it was neither a village nor a proper city. The best word fit it, Sharur supposed, was "fortress." He would not have wanted to take the place, not when its wall was built of great gray blocks (stone so huge, he wondered if they had been set in place by god not men.

Sighing, Harharu. said, "The Alashkurrut are lucky to have much fine stone with which to build. Mud brick would be nothii but mud in this climate."

"I see," Agum. said. "Even the peasants live in stone houses her Does the straw they put on the roofs really keep out the rain?"

"Better than you'd think," Sharur told him. "The peasants and d potters and the leatherworkers and the smiths and such live outsi~ the walls, as you see. They take shelter inside when the other Alas kurrut raid Tuwanas."

"The smiths," Harharu murmured.

"Yes," Sharur said. No matter what Enimhursag and the dem, Illuyankas had told him, he had hope for the smiths. In Alashkui no less than in Kudurru, they were men of the new, full of t power control over metal gave them, a power so raw it was not divine.

"Who lives inside the walls of Tuwanas, then?" Agum. asked.

"The Alashkurri gods, of'course," Sharur answered, and the ca van guard nodded. "A few merchants have their houses in there, t(But most of the space the gods don't use goes to Huzziyas the war. and his soldiers."

"Wanax." Agum. shaped the foreign word, then laughed. "It ho funny sound."

"It has a funny meaning, too," Sharur said. "There is no word our speech that means just the same thing. It's halfway betw(4 ensi'-because the Alashkurri gods do speak through the wanake! and 'bandit chief.' A wanax will use his soldiers to rob his nei~ bors-"

"-And his own peasants," Harharu. put in.

"Yes, and his own peasants, Sharur agreed. "He'll use his soldi as I say, to make himself rich. Sometimes I think a wanax wc sooner steal one keshlu's weight of gold than put the same amo of trouble into getting two by honest work."

Agum clutched his spear more tightly. "I see why you have guards Jim along, master merchant's son."

"Huzziyas has more soldiers than you could fight," Sharur said. "So does every other wanax. Sometimes, though, when the wanakes aren't robbing one another, a band of soldiers will get bored and start robbing on their own. That is why I have guards in the Alashkurru Mountains."

As they talked, they squelched up the narrow track between thatch-roofed stone huts toward the one gate in Tuwanas' frowning wall. Most of the men were out in the fields-rain made weeding easy-but women and children stood in doorways and stared at the newcomers, as did artisans who labored inside their homes.

In looks, they were most of them not far removed from the folk of Kudurru. Men here, though, did not curl their beards, but let them grow long and unkempt. Men and women put on more clothes than they would have done in Kudurru, men wearing knee-length tunics of wool or leather and the women draping themselves in lengths of cloth that reminded Sharur of nothing so much as oversized blankets.

And, now and again, more than clothes and hair styles reminded the caravan crew they were in a foreign land. Sharur heard one of the donkey handlers wonder aloud if a striking woman with coppery hair was truly a woman or a demon. "Don't say that in a language she can understand, the caravanmaster remarked, "or you're liable to find out."

The guards at the gateway leading into the fortress of Tuwanas

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stood under the overhang to stay out of the rain. But for their wild, shaggy beards, they would have fit in well enough among Kimash the lugal's guardsmen. Sharur recognized a couple who spoke the language of Kudurru. One of those guards recognized him at about the same time. "It is Sharur son of Ereshguna, from the city between the

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"It is," Sharur agreed. "It is Nenassas son of Nerikkas, of Tuwanas. I greet you, Nenassas son of Nerikkas." Nenassas hadn't greeted him, merely acknowledged his existence. He did not take that as a good sign.

Nenassas still did not greet him, but asked, "VAat do you bring to Tuwanas, Sharur son of Ereshguna?"

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I bring swords and knives and spearheads of finest bronze," Sh said, pointedly adding, "such have always delighted the heart of ziyas son of Wamnas, the mighty wanax of Tuwanas. I bring wine of dates, to delight the heart of Huzziyas in a different strong medicines"-he gestured toward Rukagina-"and many o fine things."

Nenassas and the other guards put their heads together and ta in low voices in their own language. Sharur caught only a coup phrases, enough to understand they were trying to figure out wh do with him, and with the caravan. Their attitude alone would told him that much. He kept his face an impassive mask. Behin he worried. They should have been delighted to greet a caravan Kudurru.

He got the idea they would have been delighted to greet caravans from Kudurru. A caravan from Gibil, however ...

At last, Nenassas said, "What you tell me is true, Sharur so Ereshguna. Your wares have delighted the heart of mighty Huzz Still, that was in the days before our gods spoke to us of the between the rivers called Gibil."

I do not seek to trade my swords and knives and spearheads the gods of Tuwanas," Sharur replied. I seek to trade them with mighty wanax of Tuwanas, and with his clever merchants."

"See!" one of the other Alashkurri guards exclaimed in his language. "This is what the gods warned us against. He cares no for them."

"That is not so," Sharur said in the same tongue. I respect gods of Tuwanas, the gods of Alashkurru. But, Was son of L they are not my gods. My god is Engibil, and after him the other of Kudurru."

Udas seemed disconcerted at being understood. The guard their heads together again. Sharur heard one phrase that pleased very much: "Those swords do delight the heart of the wanax." argument followed. A couple of times, the guards hefted the s they were carrying, as if about to use them on one another. Fi Nenassas said, "You and your caravan may pass into Tuwanas, S son of Ereshguna. This matter is too great for us to decide. Let in the hands of the mighty wanax and the gods."

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"For this I thank you, Nenassas son of Nerikkas, though it grieves me to enter this place without your greeting," Sharur replied. But he got no greeting from Nenassas, only a brusque wave ahead. Scowling, Sharur led his men and donkeys into Tuwanas.

"See what I have here." Sharur set out a row of swords on top of a wooden table. In the torchlight, the polished bronze gleamed almost as red as blood. "These are all of fine, hard metal, made strong with the tin we of Gibil bring in at great risk and great expense. They will cut notches in the blade of a copper sword until it is better used as a saw than as a weapon. Alashkurru is a land of warriors, a land of heroes. No one will want to be without such fine swords. Is it not so, Sitawandas son of Anawandas, my friend, my colleague?"

Sitawandas put Sharur in mind of an Alashkurri version of his own father—a large, solid man who knew his own mind and who was intent on wringing the most he could from any deal. He picked up one of the swords Sharur had taken from their woolen wrappings. His grip, his stance, showed he knew how to handle it.

"This is a fine blade to hold, Sharur son of Ereshguna," he said. "I would have looked for nothing less from you." Gently, he set down the sword and took from his wrist a copper bracelet. "May I test the hardness of the metal, to be certain it is as you say?"

Sharur bowed again. "I am your slave. If the buyer is not pleased and satisfied in all regards, how can there be a sale?"

Sitawandas took up the sword once more, using the edge against the bracelet as if he were slicing bread. He stared at the groove he had cut in the copper and said, "Yes, man of Gibil, this bronze is as fine as any I have ever seen.

"Many warriors will want swords like these," Sharur said. "They will give you silver and gold for them. Do I ask silver and gold for them? No—only copper and copper ore, as you well know."

"I know the terms on which we have dealt, yes." Sitawandas put down the sword again, as carefully as he had before. "And you speak truly, Sharur son of Ereshguna: a warrior of Alashkurru would be proud to carry such a blade in his sheath." He let out a long, deep sigh. Sharur thought he saw tears in his eyes. "Truly I am sorry, man

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of Gibil. It is as you say. I could gain gold and silver for such swords. I have copper and copper ore in plenty in my storehouse, to the man who could give such swords to me. But it shall not can not be."

Sharur's heart sank. "I understand the words you say, Sitawanda son of Anawandas, but not the meaning concealed within them. He did not, he would not, let the Alashkurri merchant see his desire. "For myself, I would like to gain these swords," Sitawanda said. "I am forbidden from trading with you, however. I am forbidden from trading with any man of Gibil."

"Who forbids you? Is it Huzziyas, the mighty wanax of Tuwanas?" Sharur set a finger by the side of his nose and winked. "Let one or two blades, three blades come into the hands of Huzziyas for no silver, and surely you shall be able to do as you please with the rest of them."

Sitawandas sighed again. "Huzziyas the mighty wanax would be proud to have such blades. This cannot be denied." The gates of Tuwanas had said the same thing. Sitawandas wept. "But, Sharur son of Ereshguna, Huzziyas the mighty wanax is more forbidden than I from trading with you. I pray I shall not be punished even for speaking to you as I do, though that has never been forbidden for us."

"Once a sword is set in the hands of a warrior, he will not care whence it first came," Sharur said. "Once a knife is set in a scabbard on the belt of a warrior, he will not care whence it first came. When a spearhead is mounted on a shaft, he will not care whence it came. If you have these things, Sitawanda son of Anawandas, you can trade them to your countrymen at a profit. No one will care whether this is a blade of Gibil, Sitawanda, or is this a blade of Imhursag. The only question you will hear is, 'Will this blade help me slay my enemies, Sitawanda?' "

The Alashkurri merchant licked his lips. "You tempt me, Gibil, as a honeycomb lying forgotten on a table tempts a man who is hungry and wants something sweet. But what happens to a small boy when he snatches up that honeycomb?"

"Nothing, often enough," Sharur answered with a grin. "Do not ever steal honeycomb when you were a boy?"

"As often as I thought I could get away with it," Sitawandas said, also smiling. "But sometimes my father was watching, or my grandfather, or a family ghost, though I knew it not. And when that was S05 1 ate no honeycomb, but got a beating instead, or ate of it and got a beating afterwards. And sometimes the honeycomb lay on the table and I spied my father or my grandfather standing close by, or a family ghost spoke to me of some other thing. And when that befell, I stole no honeycomb that day, for fear of the beating I would surely earn.

"I do not understand," Sharur said, though he did, only too well.

Sitawandas said, "You are not a fool, Sharur son of Ereshguna. You are not a blind man." Sharur said nothing. Sitawandas sighed. "Very well. Let it be as you wish. I shall explain for you. Huzziyas the mighty wanax stands here for my father. If I gain these blades from you, he will chastise me. The gods of Alashkurru stand here for my grandfather, or for a family ghost. If I gain these blades from you, they may see without my knowing, and they will chastise me."

There it was. Sharur could not fail to understand that, no matter much he might wish to do so. "Why does the wanax, mighty hate me?" he cried. "Why do the gods of Alashkurru hate 77,tyas, me?"

Sitawandas set a hand on his thigh. "I do not think mighty Huzziyas the wanax hates you, Sharur son of Ereshguna. I think he would have these things of you, if only he could. But, just as a father chastises a small boy, so also may a grandfather chastise a father."

"You say the gods of Alashkurru will chastise Huzziyas, the mighty wanax, if he gains the swords and spearheads with which to defeat his enemies?" Sharur asked. "Do your gods then hate Huzziyas?"

"Never let that be said," Sitawandas exclaimed, and made a sign the Alashkurrut used when a man of Kudurru would have covered the eyes of his god's amulet to keep the deity from seeing. "But the gods fear the wanax will walk the path you men of Gibil have taken. When the gods declare a thing shall not be, the man who stands against them will not stand long."

That was true. Sharur knew it was true. Kimash the lugal ruled in Gibil not by opposing Engibil but by appeasing him, by bribing him to look the other way and flattering him so he thought his

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power was as great as it had ever been. No man could directly pose a god.

Indirectly, though- "Suppose-merely suppose, mind-I we lose some of these swords at such-and-such a place: suppose a do handler were careless, for instance, so they fell off the beast. suppose again, a few days later, that you were careless enough to some ingots of copper at some other place. If I chanced to find there, I do not think I would ever tell you about it."

"No, eh?" Sitawandas licked his lips. He knew what Sharu saying, sure enough. Sharur made himself stand calm, stand ea if, since they were discussing things that might not be, those t were unimportant. Sweat sprang out on Sitawandas's forehead was tempted to do business by not seeming to do business; S could see as much. But at last, convulsively, the Alashkurri merc shook his head. "I cannot do this thing, Sharur son of Ereshgu dare not do this thing. Should my gods take notice of the doi No." He shook his head again.

"However you like." Sharur spoke carelessly. "If you do not what might be found in out-of-the-way places-"

"I do not care?" Sitawandas broke in. "Never let that be either." He let out a long, shuddering sigh. "Treating with you man of Gibil, I understand better and better why the gods o people have come to fear you so."

"Is it so?" Sharur shrugged, outwardly careless still. "Men ar ways wise to fear gods. I cannot see how gods, with their power wise to fear men."

"There-do you see? You can speak well, when you care to. when you care to, you can also speak in ways that frighten men gods alike." Sitawandas brushed the sweat from his face with a forearm. "Most frightening of all is that you have no notion frightening you are."

"Now you speak in riddles, Sitawandas son of Anawandas." S made as if to start rewrapping the weapons he had displayed, paused one last time. "Are you sure you will not trade with me

"It is not that I will not." Sitawandas paced back and forth a the stone-enclosed chamber. "It is that I dare not."

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"Then who may?" Sharur demanded. "Has Huzziyas, mighty wanax of Tuwanas, the power to do with me as his people and mine have done with each other in peace and for common profit for genera-

tions?"

Sitawandas said, "Sharur son of Ereshguna, I do not know."

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Even being allowed to go into Huzziyas's palace and see the wanax took longer and cost more than Sharur had expected. The longer he stayed in Tuwanas doing no real business, the more he begrudged every bangle, every broken bit of silver he paid out for nothing better than living from day to day. Paying to gain access to a man who should have been elad to see him-who had been glad to see him

the year before-galled him even more.

In the end, with patience and bribery, he did obtain an audience with Huzziyas. As he strode up to the massive doorway to the palace, he reflected that that was not the ideal name for the building. just

as Tuwanas was more nearly fortress than city, so the wanax's residence was more nearly citadel than palace. The stone walls were strong and thick, the only windows slits better suited to archery than vision, the roof sheathed with slates on which fire would not catch.

Many of Huzziyas's guardsmen carried bronze swords Sharur knew

they had got from him. They wore copper greaves and breastplates

and caps, and had their shields faced with copper, too. Copper was softer than bronze, but easily available here in Alashkurru. Huzziyas's men used armor far more lavishly than did Sharur's, or even Kimash's

guards back in Gibil

Some of the guardsmen greeted Sharur like an old friend, remembering the fine weapons he and his family had brought to Tuwanas over the years. Some would not speak to him at all, remembering the admonitions of their gods. Two of the silent ones led him through the narrow halls of the palace and up to the high seat of the wanax.

thought he would have been likelier to meet Huzziyas in a

ide ambushade than as wanax of Tuwanas. Tuwanas' ruler below

the gods was a tough fifty-five, gray thatching his hair and shaggy beard but his arms and chest still thick with muscle. Scars seamed

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those arms, and the bits of leg showing between tunic hem and top, and his rugged, big-nosed face. One of them barely missed his left eye.

After the bows and the polite phrases required of him were done, Sharur spoke as bluntly as he dared: "Mighty wanax, what have you done to offend, that you and yours will not buy what I have even when buying it works more to your advantage than mine?" "Understand, Sharur son of Ereshguna, you have not offended personally," Huzziyas replied. They both used the tongue of Kullu in which the wanax was fluent. "Had you offended me personally, you would not be treating with me now. You would be lying in a ditch, the dogs and the kites and the ravens quarreling over my bones." He sounded more like a bandit chieftain than the ruler of a city, too.

"Do I understand you rightly, mighty wanax?" Sharur asked. "You say I have not offended? If I have not offended, what keeps you from trading for the fine wares I have brought from the land between the rivers?"

Huzziyas's eyes glinted, "I did not say you had not offended me, you had not offended me. Were I the only one who spoke to you, we would trade, you and I. But you and your city have not." He paused, looking for the right words.

"Angered your gods?" Sharur suggested bitterly.

"No." The wanax shook his head. "You and your city have frightened the gods of the land, the gods of Alashkurru. Unless my ears mistake me, you and your city have frightened the gods of Kudurru, the gods of the land between the Yarmuk and the Diyala."

"The gods of my country are no concern to you, mighty wanax," Sharur said. "And I, mortal worm that I am, I should be of no concern to the gods of Tuwanas, the gods of Alashkurru. Neither my city nor your city is a foe to Tuwanas, to Alashkurru. I want only to trade in the land and to return in peace to my city."

Huzziyas looked now this way, now that. Sharur could not see anything looking this way and that, too. He saw nothing. He wondered what Huzziyas saw, or what he looked to see. The wanax said, "For

I am fain to believe you. My gods still fear you lie. They fear I will become like you, a liar before the gods."

He glanced around again. Now Sharur understood what he was doing: he was trying to find out whether his gods were paying close attention to him at this particular moment. Sharur smiled. If Huzziyas had not yet become what the gods of Alashkurru feared, he was on the edge of it. He wanted the swords and spearheads and knives Sharur could trade to him. Unless Sharur misread him as if he were an unfamiliar sign pressed into clay, he would not be overfussy about how he got them, either.

"I am not a liar before the gods," Sharur declared, as he had to do. As he had so often on this journey, he declared his loyalty to Engibil. The more emphatic his declarations got, the less truth they seemed to hold.

"As I say, I am fain to believe you," Huzziyas answered. "But if my gods will not believe, what can I do? My hands are tied." His mouth twisted. His gods still held him in the palm of their hands. He wanted to slip free, but had not found a way. So Igigi's father must have felt-he had been ensi to Engibil, but had not managed to become lugal, to rule in his own right.

Casually, as if it had just occurred to him, Sharur proposed to Huzziyas what he had proposed to Sitawandas: trading as if by accident. The wanax of Tuwanas sucked in his breath. Sharur watched the torchlight sparkle in his eyes. Sitawandas had lacked the nerve to thwart the will of the gods of Alashkurru. Huzziyas, now ...

Huzziyas twitched on the high seat. He looked surprised, then grimaced, and then, as if he had given up resisting whatever new force filled him, his face went blank and still. Only his lips moved: "Man of Gibil, what you say cannot be. Man of Gibil, what you say shall not be. The gods of Tuwanas, the gods of Alashkurru have declared the men of Tuwanas, the men of Alashkurru shall not trade with you. The men of Tuwanas, the men of Alashkurru shall heed what their gods have declared. 1, Huzziyas, mighty wanax of Tuwanas, have spoken."

But it was not Huzziyas who had spoken, or not altogether Huzziyas, The hair on Sharur's arms and at the back of his neck prickled up in awe. The wanax had been wise to wonder whether his gods

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were watching him. They were, and had kept him from breaking of their will. Back in Gibil, Engibil had been content to let Igi his son and grandson rule for themselves alone. The gods had tended to stay unchallenged lords of this land.

"I am sorry, mighty wanax," Sharur said softly.

Little by little, Huzziyas came back to himself. "It cannot be, Sharur son of Ereshguna," he said, echoing the words that had been spoken through him. "You see why it cannot be." The gesture he began might have been one of apology. If it was, he never finished it. He looked angry: the gods were still watching what he did he said. He sighed. He was not a lugal, free-even if only na free-to chart his own course. With the gods of his country so full, he would never be a lugal.

Sharur did not care about that, not for its own sake. He was about trading. "Mighty wanax, will your gods hearken to me if I come to them face to face, to show them my wares and to show them that I am not dangerous to them?"

Huzziyas cocked his head to one side, listening to the gods of the wanas, to the gods of the Alashkurru Mountains. Sharur felt the power in the chamber, pressing down on him as if with great weight. Then it lifted. The wanax said, "They think you brave. They think you a fool. They will heat you." After a moment, he seemed to speak for himself rather than the gods: "They will not listen to you."

Like the wanax, the gods of Tuwanas, the gods of Alashkurru in what was to Sharur's eyes a citadel: a formidable tower of stone. He had visited that temple on his previous journeys to the wanas, to offer the gods incense in thanks for successful trading. He had had no success for which to thank them now, and did not know how to offer to gain one.

Huzziyas accompanied him to the temple. The wanax looked thoughtful. True, the gods spoke to him and through him. But, the gods knew he pined for the freedom Sharur and the rest of the men of Gibil enjoyed. The priests who served the temple and the temple alone looked at Huzziyas from the corners of their eyes. What did the gods say of him to them? By those glances, nothing good.

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Tuwanas had no single tutelary deity who ruled its territory as his own, as did the cities of the land between the rivers. All the Alashkurri gods were present here, though one of them, Tarsiyas, spoke with the loudest voice. His stone statue was armored in copper and held a bronze sword, making him look as much like a bandit as any

of the humans who revered him

Sharur bowed before that clumsy but fierce-looking image. "Tarsiyas, great god of this town, great god of this land, hear the words of Sharur son of Ereshguna, a foreigner, a man who has traveled long to come to Tuwanas, a man who wishes the folk of this land and the

gods of this land only good."

The stone lips of the statue moved. "Say what you will, Sharur son of Ereshguna. We have said we will hear you." The words resounded inside Sharur's head. He did not think he was hearing them with his ears, but directly with his mind, as if the god had set them there.

He said, "You are generous, great god." Had Tarsiyas truly been

generous, Sharur would not have had to beseech him so. But Sharur assumed the god was, like most gods of his acquaintance, vain. Like all gods, Tarsiyas was powerful. That was what made him a god. He had to be handled more carefully than a poisonous serpent, for he was more deadly. Sharur pointed to the sword in Tarsiyas's right hand. "Is that not a fine blade, great god of this town, great god of

"It is a fine blade," Tarsiyas agreed. "It is better than the blade bore before. Huzziyas the wanax gave it to me." The stone eyes of the statue fixed Huzziyas with a stare Sharur was glad to see aimed

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"I delight in giving the gods rich presents, Huzziyas said. Sharur almost burst out laughing. The wanax sounded like Kimash the lugal and no doubt wished his hypocrisy were as successful as Kimash's. "Tarsiyas, great god of this town, great god of this land, do you

"I do not, nor care," the god replied. "Huzziyas gained it; Huzziyas

Again, Sharur fought to keep his face straight. Tarsiyas and the other gods of the Alashkurru Mountains might work to keep the men of Alashkurru under their rule, but they were no less greedy about

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receiving presents from those men than was Engibil, back in the
between the rivers. Sharur said, "Great god of this town, great
of this land, the sword with which you are well pleased, with
I am glad you are well pleased, is a sword the smiths of the city
Gibil have made, a sword the men of Gibil traded to Huzziy
mighty wanax. And now you say-"

He got no further than that. His head filled with a roar a
thousand wild beasts of a hundred different kinds all bellowing
once. The din in Huzziyas's head must have been worse; he growled
and clapped his hands to his ears. At last, the god's cry of rage tumbled
back down to words the two mortals could understand: "Wretched
Fool! You gave me a gift from the hands of men who set their
at naught?"

"We do not set our gods at naught," Sharur insisted stubbornly.
And Huzziyas added, "Tarsiyas, great god of this town, great
of this land, my master, when I gave you this sword, you had no
you did not want such work. No other god said he did not want
work. No other goddess said she did not want such work. The
being proper for giving, I gave with both hands. I did not stint. I
of the finest I had."

Tarsiyas's voice swelled to an unintelligible shout of fury
more. The god clasped the sword in both stone hands and, in
motion too quick for Sharur's eyes to follow, broke it over his
knee. He hurled both pieces of the blade away from him; they clattered
off stone with bell-like notes.

"I reject this!" he cried, as those clatterings drew priests who stood
in wonder and terror at his unwonted activity. "I reject all gifts
Gibil. Let them be taken from my treasury. Let those of metal
melted. Let those not of metal be broken. I have spoken. As I
spoken, it shall be. For a god, will it."

This was worse than anything Sharur had imagined. He wished
had never come to the temple. "Tarsiyas, great god of this town,
god of this land, may I speak?" he asked.

"Speak," the god said, an earthquake rumble of doom in his voice.
"Tell your lies."

"I tell no lies, great god of this town, great god of this land," S
said. "The gift Huzziyas the mighty wanax set in your hand please

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you. If the gift be good, how can the giver who gave it with both hands, who gave it with open heart, be wicked? How can the smiths who made it with clever eye, with skilled fingers, be wicked?"

"They made it of themselves, with no thought for the gods," Tar-

siVas replied.

"Smithery has no god, not yet; it is too young," Sharur said. "This

is so in Kudurru, and it is so here."

Huzziyas gave him a horrible took. After a moment, he understood why: the gods of Alashkurru were liable to try to forbid their men from working in metal at all. But that did not seem to be Tarsiyas's most urgent concern. The god said, "You take no thought for the

gods your land does have."

"That is not so," Sharur insisted. "The weavers of fine cloth reverence the goddess of the loom and the god of dyeing. The wine-makers worship Aglibabu, who makes dates become a brew to

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"They are the small gods," Tarsiyas said. Scorn filled the divine voice. "Even here, they have let themselves become men's servants as much as men's masters. But you men of Gibil would reduce your great gods to small gods, your small gods to demons, your demons to ghosts that chitter and flitter and are in a generation forgotten. The riches you gain in this world tempt you to forget the other world. You shall lead no one here astray. You shall lead no one here away from the path of the gods. As I have spoken, it shall be. 1, a god, will

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"But-" Sharur began

Huzziyas took him by the arm and pulled him away from Tarsiyas's image. "Come," the wanax said. "You have made trouble enough already." Trouble for himself, his glare said he meant. With his gods watching him so closely, how could he escape them, as the men of

Gibil had begun to do? But Sharur had troubles of his own. Without the profits from this caravan, how was he to pay Ningal's bride-price?

Donkeys brayed and complained. They'd got used to the soft life of the stables of Tuwanas, with nothing to do but eat and sleep. Now they had packs on their backs once more, and handlers making them 90 paces. The world seemed as unjust to them as it did to Sharur.

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"We go on, he insisted. Bowing to his will, the caravan headed west along the narrow, winding path toward the next fortresslike town of Alashkurru.

Harharu coughed. "Master merchant's son, what you do now is brave. What you do now is bold. What you do now-is it not also

listif You have said the god of this place told you that you would get nothing in Alashkurru. The god of this place told you that we would get nothing in Alashkurru. Would you openly fight the god?"

"Donkeymaster, I would not," Sharur said. "I am not a fool: if all the gods of this place oppose us, we have no hope of profit here." And I have scant hope of making Ningal my wife. But that was not Harharu's concern. Aloud, Sharur continued, "The hand of every town in Alashkurru, though, is raised against every other. If it were not so, they would not build as they do here. Where the men are in discord, will the gods agree?"

"Ah," Harharu said, and bowed. "Now I see what is in your mind. You think that, while we gain nothing in Tuwanas, while Huzziyas will not treat with us, while Tarsiyas speaks harshly against us, some other town, some other wanax, some other god may prove more hospitable?"

"That is what is in my mind, yes," Sharur agreed.

"Truly you are your father's son," Harharu said, and now Sharur bowed to him.

As they made their slow way up to the top of the hills separating

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the valley Tuwanas dominated from the next one deeper into mountain country, they met a party of eight or ten Alashkurrut coming the other way. The men of Alashkurru were armed and armored like Huzziyas's guards. They led a few donkeys themselves, all animals far more heavily burdened than those of Sharur's caravan. At Mushezib's sharp orders, the caravan guards rushed forward to show the Alashkurrut they were ready to fight at need. Because they were ready to fight, they did not have to fight. The ... band Sharur supposed, did nothing but nod and tramp on past them.

Seen from the hills, the fortified town of Zalpuwas looked even more formidable than Tuwanas had. As the caravan approached the fortress, peasants came running from the fields to stare and point and jabber. They found the men of Kudurru, who wore clothes different from theirs and curled their beards, as funny as a troupe of mountebanks with trained dogs and monkeys.

Looking to sow goodwill, Sharur passed out bracelets and bangles. He also opened a small jar of date wine and let that pass from hand to hand among the peasants. Everyone who got it took a small sip before passing it on to whoever stood next to him till it was empty. Sharur had been sure it would happen so. In Gibil, someone would have been greedy and gulped down half the jar. He was sure of that too.

In Gibil, men thought more of themselves and less of the gods than they did here. Sharur chose not to dwell on that point.

The woman who did finally empty the jar returned it to him, smiling with a smile, "We have never seen a caravanmaster so generous before." Her stance and the sparkle in her eye suggested that, did she choose to be a little more generous, she might give him something in return.

"We trade with all," Sharur declared loudly, and many of the peasants exclaimed to hear him speak in their language. "We trade great for great; we also trade small for small." None of the gods of Alashkurru had forbidden their people from trading food and donkey fodder

for his trinkets, for which he was duly grateful.

Surrounded by an excited crowd of peasants, the caravan passed

through the stone huts ringing the stout walls of Zalpuwas and up the gateway into the fortress. One of the guards said, "Is it Sha

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son of Ereshguna, out of Gibil in the land between the rivers?" His voice broke in surprise, as if he were a youth rather than a solid warrior with the first threads of gray in his beard.

"Yes, it is I, Malatyas son of Lukkas," Sharur replied. "I pray that

your mighty wanax, Ramsayas son of Radas, flourishes like the wheat in your fields. I pray that he flourishes like the apple trees in your orchards. I have many fine things to trade with him, or with the merchants who are his servants: swords and spearheads and knives

and medicines and-

He broke off. Malatyas was paying no attention to his polished sales pitch. The gate guard burst out, "Are you not come from Tu-

wanas Sharur son of Ereshouna?"

"Yes," Sharur admitted.

"And when you were there," Malatyas persisted, "the gods did not warn you to come no farther into the mountains of Alashkurru?"

"They did not," he said truthfully. Tarsiyas had warned him of many things, but not of that. Perhaps the god and his fellows had assumed Sharur would be so downhearted, he would not continue. They were not his gods. They did not know him well. In reasonable tones, he went on, "Had the gods forbidden it, how could I be here

now?"

"It is a puzzlement." To prove how great a puzzlement it was, Mal-

atyas scratched his bushy head. "We were certain that-

"Since I am here, since I have goods the mighty wanax Ramsayas will surely covet, may I enter great Zalpuwas?" Sharur broke in.

As had the guards back at Tuwanas, Malatyas and his comrades plainly wanted to forbid the caravan from going into their town. As had those guards, these found themselves unable. "The mighty wanax will attend to you according to his wishes," Malatyas said, which sounded more like warning than welcome. But he stood aside and let Sharur and his companions pass into Za1puwas.

Being deeper in among the mountains than Tuwanas, Zalpuwas received visitors less often, and was not so well prepared to accommodate them. The couple of inns were small and dingy and dark, with sour straw in the stables. Their sole virtue, in Sharur's eyes, was that their proprietors made no fuss about accepting beads and bangles

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"The Alashkurri gods may be against us," Mushezib said, sip beer made bitter with the flowering head of some plant that gre the valley, "but the innkeepers aren't so fussy."

"Are you surprised?" Sharur answered. "When have you ever h of a god who would bother taking notice of an innkeeper?" Mu zib's laugh sprayed beer over the top of the table where the two of Kudurru sat.

But Sharur's joke soon turned as bitter as the local beer to for none of the copper merchants of Zalpuwas took notice of hi of his caravan. When he went to greet men with whom he had t on previous journeys, their doors were closed against him as if had never heard his name. He sent word to Ramsayas son of R requesting an audience. No word came back from the wanax.

Finally, in growing desperation, Sharur sent Ramsayas not but a sword, one of the finest swords he had brought from Where nothing else had, that did prompt the wanax to send a se to seek out Sharur. Sharur bowed to the servant as he might ha the master, saying, "Tell the mighty wanax I am honored tha deigns to notice me."

"Ramsayas son of Radas, mighty wanax of Zalpuwas, notices e thing and everyone that passes inside these walls," the servant swered.

"Of this I am truly glad," Sharur said. "Does he likewise n everything that passes outside the walls of his fortress?"

"No, he does not claim that," the servant said. "He is not a to have so wide a purview, only a servant of the gods."

"I thought as much," Sharur replied. "He should know that I him the sword in token of what he does not see: other wan other valleys arming themselves and their retainers with such w ons. If he would not be left behind his neighbors, he might thin the wisdom of gaining more such blades."

The servant's mouth fell open. "I cannot believe other wan would-" He checked himself. "But who knows into what depr men of other valleys might sink?" After coughing a couple of t he went on, "I shall take what you say to Ramsayas son of Radas his judgment, not mine, rule here."

Ramsayas sent for Sharur the very next day.

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Sharur bowed before the wanax of Zalpuwas as he might have done before Kimash the lugal of Gibil. "I am honored! Ramsayas son of Radas, that you deign to notice me," he said as he straightened.

Ramsayas grunted. Actually, he put Sharur more in mind of Mush-ezib than of Kimash: he was a fighter, first, last, and always. He had a narrow, forward-thrusting face with a nose hooked like a hawk's beak and almost as sharp. The way he leaned toward Sharur in the tall chair on which he sat emphasized that seeming inclination to

attack

"Oh, you are noticed, Sharur son of Ereshguna. Rest assured you are noticed," he said. His voice had a harsh rasp to it; too much shouting, Derhat)s, on too many raids against too manv nearby vallevs.

"Now, what is this you say about my neighbors' buying blades from

I said nothing about their buying such swords from me, mighty wanax," Sharur replied, though that was the impression he had wanted to leave with Ramsayas's servant. "I said they are acquiring them. Gibil is not the only city of Kudurru trading with the many valleys, the many fortresses, of Alashkurru, but our blades-and our other goods of all sorts, I make haste to add-are among the finest to be had. You have dealt with me; likewise, you have dealt with my

I have dealt with you. Likewise, I have dealt with your father.' Ramsayas ran his tongue over his lips. "That was a splendid sword

Sharur bowed. "A wanax deserves nothing less than a sr)lendid

"And yet, you are of Gibil." Like Huzziyas before him, Ramsayas seemed of two minds. Part of him plainly wanted what Sharur had brought up to Alashkurru from the land between the rivers. That was the part Sharur and his father and other men of Gibil had always seen when they dealt with the Alashkurrut. The rest of Ramsayas,

"Yes, I am of Gibil," Sharur agreed. "I was likewise of Gibil when also came here to trade. You were glad to see me then

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Ramsayas son of Radas. You were glad to trade with me. You glad to buy from me." He knew he sounded bitter. He had reason to be bitter. He was bitter.

Ramsayas's fierce eyes went up to the timbers of the ceiling. How so much fine timber, the men of Alashkurru often used it in the style struck Sharur as profligate. He had even seen, in some valleys deeper into the mountains than that of Zalpuwas, whole buildings made of wood. Ramsayas's eyes flashed past Sharur to the far wall of the audience chamber. Sharur realized he had succeeded in embarrassing the wanax. That might bring him profit, or might bring trouble if embarrassment turned to anger.

To his surprise, embarrassment turned to regret. "Yes, I was glad to see you then, Sharur son of Ereshguna," Ramsayas said with a smile. "Yes, I was glad to trade with you. Yes, I was glad to buy from you. Suddenly, the wanax looked more hunted than hunter. His head bowed, his voice dropped to a whisper. "As a man, I am still glad to see you. But I am more than merely a man. I am a man who obeys his gods. I may not trade with you. I may not buy from you. So my gods have ordered. My men obey me when we war against our neighbors. I obey the gods."

"But we are not at war, you and I!" Sharur cried.

"No. This is so," Ramsayas said. "But you Gublut, you are at war with the gods of Alashkurru, I fear. Do I understand rightly that you are at war with the gods of Kudurru as well?"

"No," Sharur said. "I say ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times, no. Engibil is my god. I and all of Gibil worship him."

"But he does not rule you," Ramsayas said, and Sharur had no reply. "That is at the heart of why the gods of this town, the gods of this land, fear you and will not let you trade with us. They do not want the men of Alashkurru to become as the Gublut are."

"So I have seen, though I tell you, mighty wanax, this fear is groundless," Sharur said. "I worship my god. I fear my god." That was certainly true. The merchant went on, "And I would not, Wanax, try to seduce you away from-" -

"No," Ramsayas broke in. "I will not hear you." To prove he would not hear Sharur, he stuck his forefingers into his ears, so that

looked rather like a three-year-old refusing to hear what its father told it.

Back in Tuwanas, Huzziyas had quivered with eagerness for chance to get around his gods and trade with Sharur. He would have disobeyed them had they not forced obedience upon him. They had won this battle. Sharur did not think they would win the war in Tuwanas, not if Huzziyas stayed on as wanax there and was not overthrown. Huzziyas wanted, panted, to be a lugal, or whatever the Alashkurrut would call a lugal: a man who ruled in his own right. He had not been able to take this chance to do it. He would surely try again. Sharur guessed he would succeed, sooner or later.

Ramsayas-unfortunately, from Sharur's point of view-was different. Like Huzziyas, he was a rough, strong man. Like Huzziyas, he would have liked to trade with Sharur for the fine weapons the man of Gibil had brought. But unlike Huzziyas, he was not willing to risk def~ing or deceiving the gods to get what he wanted. He was either content with the arrangement he and his forebears had long known or simply afraid to try to change it.

Sharur held up a hand. Ramsayas asked, "Does that mean you will speak on something else?" Sharur nodded-the wanax of Zalpuwas still had his fingers in his ears. At that nod, he removed them, wiping one against the wool of his tunic. "Very well then, Sharur son of Ereshguna. Speak on something else."

"By your leave, mighty wanax, I should like to speak to your gods." Sharur had no great hope anything would come of that. The same gods dwelt in Zalpuwas as in Tuwanas. But Tarsiyas did not speak with the loudest voice here; that place belonged to the goddess Fashillar, If the gods of the Alashkurru Mountains knew discord-as the men of the mountains did, as the gods of Kudurru did-perhaps Sharur would find those strong here more friendly to his cause.

Ramsayas's eyes got a faraway look, as if he was listening to someone Sharur could not hear. That was exactly what he was doing. As Huzziyas had back in Tuwanas, he said, "They will hear you." And, as Huzziyas had, he added, "They will not listen."

When Huzziyas had said that, he had appeared to be speaking for himself. Ramsayas sounded more like a man delivering the words of

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the gods. That was not a good omen, not so far as Sharur co He had had few good omens since setting out from Gibil. He even missed them any more.

Had the gods been besieged in their temple in Zalpuwas, the have held it even longer than was so for their citadel back wanas. Sharur felt, and was no doubt meant to feel, like no much as a tiny insect as he walked into the great stone pil weight of the stonework, and of the power indwelling there him want to shrink down into himself, making himself of ev account when measured against the gods of Alashkurru.

Fasillar, the Alashkurri goddess of birth, was depicted enor pregnant. By Sharur's standards, the statue was earnest but work; it might have been carved by the brother of the man w shaped Tarsiyas's image back in Tuwanas. Ninshubur, the go birth in Kudurru, was also the goddess of new ideas. Sharur think that was so for Fasillar; as best he could tell, the Ala gods actively discouraged new ideas.

Ramsayas stretched himself out at full length on the gro fore the cult image of Fasillar. Sharur bowed low before it. pected the gods of the Alashkurru Mountains (more acc he respected the power of the gods of the Alashkurru Mou but they were not his gods.

The goddess spoke: "Whom do you bring before me, Rams of Radas? Why do you bring him before me?" Did Sharur ima or was that last question full of ominous overtones?

"Mistress of the mysteries of birth, provider of warriors, gre dess of this town, great goddess of this land . . ." After the ho the wanax of Zalpuwas took a deep breath so he could come point: I bring before you Sharur son of Ereshguna, a foreign man of the distant land between the rivers, a man of the t Gibil." He did not raise his head as he spoke, not once.,Ind reckoned himself far more a servant of the gods than did Huz Tuwanas.

Sharur wished the wanax had not mentioned Gibil. Fasill knew whence he came, but reminding her of it would do h

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no good. He bowed again, saying, "I greet you, great goddess of this town. I greet you, great goddess of this land."

Fasillar's stone eyes swung in their sockets till they bore on Sharur. "You are the foreign man who spoke with Tarsiyas my cousin in the town of Tuwanas."

"I am that man, great goddess of this town, great goddess of this land," Sharur acknowledged.

"Tarsiyas my cousin made it plain to you we do not want what the men of Gibil have to trade, Fasillar said. "Tarsiyas my cousin made it plain to you that we do not want the men of Alashkurru to take what the men of Gibil have to trade. Tarsiyas my cousin having made that plain to you, why did you not leave this land? Why did you not return to Gibil? Why did you go deeper into these mountains, into this land, to disturb another town, to disturb Zalpuwas?"

"Great goddess of this town, great goddess of this land . . ." As he spoke the honorifics, Sharur used the time they gave him to gather his own thoughts. "I understood from Tarsiyas your cousin, great god of that town, great god of this land, that he rejected dealings for the things of Gibil, dealings with the men of Gibil." He licked his lips.

,P1 did not understand him to mean a the towns of this land, all the gods of this land, rejected my city and the men of my city."

Fasillar's stone eyes blazed. The nipples of her swollen stone breasts sprang out and pressed against the rich wool wrappings in which the folk of Zalpuwas had decked her. "You knew what Tarsiyas my cousin told you, Sharur son of Ereshguna. You knew what Tarsiyas my cousin meant, man of Gibil. In your heart, you chose to misunderstand, to

twist the words of Tarsiyas my cousin to a shape more pleasing to you. That you do this, that you can do this, shows why all the gods of Alashkurru hate you."

Still down on his belly, Ramsayas moaned. Again, his was a different kind of fright from Huzziyas's. The wanax of Tuwanas had been frightened because Sharur had got him in trouble with his gods. The wanax of Zalpuwas was frightened because Sharur had got himself in trouble with the Alashkurri gods. Huzziyas wanted to be out from under them, but could not escape. Ramsayas was content down to the bottom of his spirit to remain their servant.

Their anger frightened Sharur, too, for it meant he would not

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return to Gibil with his donkeys' packs nicely burdened with and copper ore. It meant he would not return to Gibil with r beautiful things for Kimash the lugal to set on Engibil's altar might in turn make Engibil angry at Kimash and at the rest men of Gibil.

And it meant he would not return to Gibil with Ningal' price. She would have to remain in the house of Dimgal smith, her father. Perhaps Dimgalabzu would offer her to s else, someone who had not been so rash as to pledge a brid from profit and then come home without it. Ereshguna would happy to see this marriage alliance fail, for he wanted his joined to Dimgalabzu's. Sharur would not be happy to see th riage alliance fail, for he wanted himself joined to Ningal.

He said, "Great goddess of this town, great goddess of this will appease you and the other gods of this town, the other this land, with any contrition-offering you ask of me, short of or the lives of my countrymen. I want no more from you trade my wares for the wares of this land and to return to my return to my god, in peace."

"No," Fasillar said, and Ramsayas moaned again at that b jection. The goddess went on, "A contrition-offering depen true contrition. You, man of Gibil, you would make the offer speak the words of contrition with your mouth, while you laughed within you. For the gods of this town, for the gods land, to accept such an offering would be for us to eat of p fruit. Better it were never made."

Sharur bit his lip. Fasillar had indeed seen what was in h he would have made the offering as part of the price of doing in the Alashkurru Mountains, not because he repented of bei he was. Bowing his head before the superior power he could but recognize, he asked, "What am I to do, then, great go this town, great goddess of this land?"

"You have but one thing to do." Fasillar's voice was limp "Leave this land. Return to Z alpuwas no more."

"Great goddess of this town, great goddess of this land, Sharur bowed his head again. Even as he spoke, though, he he might bend the Alashkurri goddess's words to his own pu

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As the caravan pressed deeper in among the Alashkurru Mountains, Harharu asked, "Are you sure you know what course you take, master merchant's son, the goddess having told you to quit this land?"

"Donkeymaster, I obey Fasillar." Sharur's smile was crooked. "We quit the land of Zalpuwas, do we not? When we leave these mountains, we shall not leave them through the land of Zalpuwas, but by another route."

Mushezib laughed. "Thus did I obey my mother after I got too big for my father to beat me." The guard captain eyed Sharur. "Are you too big for these gods to beat you, master merchant's son?"

"Not a chance of it," Sharur answered. "If the gods-any gods-take it into their minds to beat a man, they will beat him. My hope is that they will not take it into their minds to do any such thing, that I can make myself too small to draw their notice."

That satisfied Mushezib. It did not satisfy Harharu, who said, "Master merchant's son, on what do you pin this hope? Slice words as you will, the goddess told you to quit this land, and you press deepet into it. Before long, we shall halt in another valley. Before long, you shall present yourself before another wanax's chief merchant, or more likely before another wanax himself. Before long, you shall be brought into the presence of the Alashkurri gods. How can you fail to draw their notice?"

"Before long, we shall halt in another valley," Sharur agreed. "I know the valley in which we shall halt: the valley of Parsuhandas. The trading in the valley of Parsuhandas has long been good for Gibil. But I shall not present myself before Wassukhamnis, the chief merchant of the valley of Parsuhandas. I shall not present myself before Yaddiyas, the mighty wanax of the valley of Parsuhandas. Most especially, I shall not be brought into the presence of the Alashkurri gods in the valley of Parsuhandas. I shall not draw their notice."

"Ah. Now I understand." Mushezib boomed laughter. "You will trade swords and spearheads and good date wine to the peasants of the valley of Parsuhandas, and we will go back to Gibil with our donkeys piled high with cucumbers." He laughed again.

"The peasants of the valley of Parsuhandas are Alashkurrut like

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any other Alashkurrut," Sharur said. "No doubt, could they pay them, they would be glad to have fine swords of bronze, and i spearheads of bronze as well. Could he pay for it, any man would glad to drink good date wine. But we have in Gibil cucuml aplenty. I would sooner bring back to our city copper and copper And this, if matters go as I hope, I shall do."

Harharu's frown remained. "And you will not see Wassukhami chief merchant of the valley of Parsuhandas? And you will not Yaddiyas, mighty wanax of the valley of Parsuhandas? Master rr chant's son, what will you do?"

I shall present myself before Abzuwas son of Ahhiyawas, Sha replied.

Harharu. considered that for as long as a donkey took to walk f paces. Then the donkeymaster bowed so deeply to Sharur, his l fell off his head.

Rain spattered down from a cloudy sky as the caravan entered t valley of Parsuhandas. By that time, guards and donkey handlers h stopped exclaiming in dismay at summer rain, and most of them h stopped making signs and charms against the evil omens to be drai from such a phenomenon. For his part, Sharur took the evil weatf as a good omen: rain made it more difficult for the gods of the Alass kurru Mountains to peer down and see what he was about.

Stronger than both Tuwanas and Zalpuwas was the fortress tm of Parsuhandas, which seemed to have sprung from the stony groul rather than being built. The valley of Parsuhandas was narrow aj steep, the fields of the valley small and cramped. Nevertheless, P" suhandas prospered.

Parsuhandas prospered because many black-mouthed holes h; been dug into the sides of the Valley, most often where it was steepe! Men went into those holes and grubbed at the ground with copp picks and with pry bars made from branches and shod, sometime with copper, and with shovels more often of bone and wood ihan i copper and wood. Not many men went down into the mines, for d. mountains of Alashkurru were like any other land in that their pea ants could not raise food enough to support more than a few wh

were not peasants. But miners there were, who brought copper ore and, every now and again, masses of native copper up from the darkness into the light of day.

Near one of those mines, the largest in the valley of Parsuhandas, dwelt Abzuwas son of Ahhiyawas. A great pillar of smoke rose from his stone home, guiding Sharur and the caravan thither. Yet that home was not afire. Like so many in Gibil, it was also Abzuwas's place of business, and he the busiest and most clever smith in the valley of Parsuhandas and, probably, in all the Alashkurru Mountains.

As if Abzuwas had been a man of Kudurru, he wore only sandals and a linen kilt. He did it not to ape the men from the land between the rivers, but because he spent so much time tending his forges, and would have steamed in his own wrappings had he donned the usual Alashkurri tunic.

He stood outside the stone building when Sharur led the donkey train up to him: outside and, too impatient to wait for the rain to do the job, pouring a big jar of water over his head and hairy torso, both to clean himself and to cool his body after some long stretch of sweltering work. "I greet you, Abzuwas son of Ahhiyawas, master of metal," Sharur called out as he approached.

Abzuwas shook himself like a wet dog. Water sprayed out from his hair and beard. He rubbed at his eyes to get the water out of them, too. "Well, well," he said, his voice deep and rolling like the voice of a big drum. "Well, well. I greet you, Sharur son of Ereshguna, master merchant's son. For a man from the land of Kudurru, a man with the knowledge of bronze, to call me a master of metal is praise indeed. It's more praise than I deserve, but a man fool enough to turn down praise would also be fool enough to turn down a woman if she offered him her body, and, whatever kind of fool I may be, I am not such a fool as that. Welcome, Sharur son of Ereshguna, welcome!" He walked forward to enfold Sharur in a wet, smelly embrace. No matter how wet and smelly it was, Sharur was glad to have the hug. Since he had come into the Alashkurru Mountains, Abzuwas was the first person to have fully returned his greeting. Since he had come into the Alashkurru Mountains, this place was the first place he had felt welcome.

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As he freed himself from Abzuwas's massive arms, he realized it was literally true. Here by the smithy, he did not feel in the back of his mind the unfriendly presence of the gods of the Alashk Metal. Metal had power, and gave a man power-power that was not yet, the power of any god.

"So," Abzuwas boomed. "So! I had not heard you, were in the fortress of Parsuhandas. I had not heard you were treating with Yaddiyas, the mighty wanax of Parsuhandas. I had not heard Yaddiyas, the mighty wanax of Parsuhandas, had sent you to me." He spread his broad shoulders. "But so what? When I get to working, when the metal pours bright into the mold, I do not hear anything, even when many men think they tell me."

"Abzuwas, my friend, I will not lie to you," Sharur said. "I was not in the fortress of Parsuhandas. I was not treating with Yaddiyas. Yaddiyas has not sent me to you."

"Well, well," Abzuwas said again, in a different tone of voice. "You came straight to me, did you? Why did you come straight to me? Why did you not go into the fortress of Parsuhandas? Why did you not treat with Yaddiyas, the mighty wanax of Parsuhandas?"

"I came straight to you because I felt sure you would trade with me," Sharur replied, sounding more confident than he felt. "I did not go into the fortress of Parsuhandas, I did not treat with the mighty wanax Yaddiyas, because I did not think he would trade with me." Abzuwas frowned. "And why is that, Sharur son of Ereshgun? The mighty wanax Yaddiyas has always been glad to gain your goods. The mighty wanax Yaddiyas has always been glad to gain your goods. I can give you only copper and copper ore in trade. Copper and copper ore are all I have. The mighty wanax Yaddiyas has always traded different things. He can give you many different things in trade."

"Copper and copper ore will do nicely," Sharur said. "That is what draws the men of Kudurru to the Alashkurru Mountain."

"You did not answer my question." Abzuwas folded his arms across his chest and looked straight at Sharur. "Why did you come here and not go into the fortress? Why would you treat with me, a man with the mighty wanax?"

"For no reason I can see," Sharur said, almost truthfully. "The Alashkurru gods are angry at me. They have forbidden the,

of this land from trading with me. They have forbidden the merchants of this land from trading with me. So far as I know, they have not forbidden the smiths of this land from trading with me."

"Ah, the gods." Abzuwas spoke in some surprise. "Yes, the gods.' Sure enough, he needed to be reminded of them, just as a smith it Gibil might go for days without worrying about the will of Engibil. The gods were stronger than he was but they did not much impinge

on what he did in his daily labors. "They are angry at you, you say?" Reluctantly, Sharur nodded. Abzuwas asked, "Why should they not be angry at me, then, if I give you copper and copper ore in trade for your goods? Why should they not be angry at me if, of a sudden, I trade Gibil swords and wine and cloth and whatever else you may

"Because you are a smith," Sharur answered. "Because you have your own power. Because here in this place I do not get the Alashkurri gods on my shoulders." Because you are more like a man of Gibil than any other Alashkurri I know, even Huzziyas the wanax who would be a lugal if only the gods here would let him. But Sharur did not say that aloud, not knowing how Abzuwas would take it.

The smith understood it even if he did not say it. "I cannot take this chance, Sharur son of Ereshguna. You and I, we are not so much

"But we are," Sharur insisted. We both have more freedom from the gods than is common here in your mountains or in the land

"No." Abzuwas shook his head. "You are nearly right, but you are not right. I have freedom under the gods. I do not have freedom from

"It amounts to the same thing in the end," Sharur said.

But Abzuwas shook his head again, sadly. "I have seen you Giblut. Whether the gods give or not, you snatch. Such was never my way

"Content?" Sharur had, so far as he was able, been holding in his temper in the presence of the Alashkurrit and their gods. Now, for the first time since he'd entered the mountains, it escaped him altogether. "Content?" His voice rose to a shout. "No, I am not content! I have fine goods to trade here and no one will trade with me

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I am going to face a loss, not a profit, because no one here will trade with me. Your gods have the foolish notion-your gods have the stupid notion-I have some sort of a disease of the spirit, and I am liable to give it to you, and so they will let no one trade with me. I shall not have the bride-price for the woman I want, the woman who wants me, because no one will trade with me. And you are content? Would you be content, standing where I stand?

He was dimly aware of the donkey handlers and caravan drivers staring at him while he raged. What gossip they would have when they got back to Gibil! Most of his attention, though, went to Abzuwas the Smith, who, he had thought, was more like a Gibli than any other man of Alashkurru.

"If the gods made it plain to me they did not want me to trade, Abzuwas answered. "The gods have made it plain to me they do not want me to trade, and I will not trade. They are right, whether they are wrong, they are the gods. They are too strong to fight. I will not fight them."

He was like a Gibli: he had come so far out from under the rule of his gods that he could see they might be wrong. And he was like a Gibli: he accepted their rule nonetheless, on account of their strength, and did not seek to work around that strength with his own strength as he and his fellow men possessed. Sharur did not know what to make of him, how to reckon him.

"What should I do?" Sharur asked the question at least once of himself as of Abzuwas.

Abzuwas answered it nonetheless: "Go home to Gibil, Sharur, to the land of Ereshguna. You cannot profit on every journey. In your country you must know this is so. If you do not earn the woman's bride-price here perhaps you will find another way of getting it. You Gibli are not used to such things, as in so many others."

I cannot, not in this, Sharur thought. But he had not full confidence in his reasons for concern even with his own father, even with his intended, and he would not take them up with a foreigner even with a sympathetic foreigner like the Smith.

Harharu came up to him. The donkeymaster chose his words with great and obvious care: "Master merchant's son, if Abzuwa

Ahhiyawas will not trade with us, no Alashkurri will trade with us.

Is this the truth, or is it a lie?"

"It is the truth," Sharur said dully.

"If none of the Alashkurrut will trade with us, do we not waste your substance, do we not waste your father's substance, by persisting in this land where the gods hate us and the men obey the gods?"

"We do," Sharur admitted, dully still. He let out a long sigh. "I understand your words, donkeymaster, however much my heart rebels within me at yielding to them. But you are right. Abzuwas is right, or partly right. We have failed here. We shall go home to Gibil." He pretended not to hear the muffled cheers that rose from his followers.

The caravan had no trouble leaving the mountains. The Alashkurrut were willing enough to trade food for Sharur's trinkets, even if they would engage in no commerce that meant anything. No bands of raiders, no wanax's guardsmen (these two groups sometimes being difficult-sometimes being impossible-to distinguish one from the other) beset him or tried to rob him of the swords and wine and medicines for which the Alashkurri great men refused to bargain.

That puzzled Sharur as much as it relieved him. The Alashkurrut sometimes plundered caravans for the sport of it, even when their gods were not ill-inclined toward the foreign merchants in their land. If their gods hated him so, if their gods hated all men of Gibil so, why not seek to wipe him from the face of the earth?

He pondered that as day followed day and bandits continued to stay far away from his donkeys. Nor was he the only one pondering it. As the caravan encamped one evening, Mushezib came up to him and said, "Why are they leaving us alone, master merchant's son?" He sounded aggrieved at losing the chance to fight.

By then Sharur had devised an answer that, if not provably true like a question of arithmetic, at least helped him toward understanding this strange part of the world. "Guard captain, we know the gods

here hate us."

Mushezib nodded emphatically. "All the more reason for wanting to be rid of us by hook or by crook, wouldn't you say?"

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"They want to be rid of us, O," Sharur said, "but I th
fear us too much to try to slay us w despoil us. Perhaps they 2
of what our ghosts might do if ,ie were murdered in this
Perhaps they are afraid of what 4e living men of Gibil mi
we were murdered in this wat rarp So long as we are willing
their land, they seem willing to ~ W- us leave in peace."

"Gibil is a long way off, and is waly one city," Mushezib sa
could the living men of Gibil BITre to avenge us against A
bandits?"

"Against Alashkurri bandits, I do not think they could
avenge us," Sharur said. ",-T

Mst Alashkurri gods, I tb
might. The gods of Alashkurru M-r the men of Alashkum
out of their hands, as we Giblut -,Lave to some degree slipp
the hands of Engibil." He spoke ioftly as he made to his coi
the admission he would not oo-1_7-3 to the Imhursagut or Ah

"How does that help the living men of Gibil avenge-?"
held up a hand. "Wait. I think I ,ee. If many Giblut came
Sharur nodded. "Just so, -giLij-

j captain. Trading with u
with us, has already made many Jlashkurrut much more lil
they were even a generation ago. If enough Giblut came a
and talked, sooner or later a -,owax would do what Huzz~
not do, and would m~ake himself liato a lugal, a ruler in his (
My guess is, the gods of the 1Mltkurrut believe that, if al
of Gibil leave this land, if none %ls any reason to come he
kurru shall remain forever as it Ws always been."

Mushezib weighed that, then grunted. "Do you thir
right?"

"What an interesting aaL&M" Sharur said, and did r
it. He thought the Alashkurri t ~st likely-almost certaint
but was not so rash as to say so where they could hear.
drink some beer, Mushezib?"

"That's a good idea, master cierchant's son." Mushe
thought drinking some beer a tilLed idea.

Two days later, in the -valley 4ominated by the fortre
Danauwiyas, to the north of the valley of Zalpuwas (thro
Sharur dared not go, not now), Ae caravan met that of i

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Imhursag, which it had left in the dust long before reaching the Alashkurru Mountains.

Sharur recognized the Imhursagut before they figured out who he was. He would have been angry at himself had it been the other way round. If a man from Gibil, a man who thought for himself, was not more alert than the Imhursagut, drunk with their god as they got drunk with wine, what point to being a Gibli?

Then he bethought himself that the caravan from Imhursag would have made a fine profit here in the mountains. He knew in his heart he would have made more even on the same shoddy Imhursaggi goods-if, that is, any of the Alashkurrut would have consented to deal with him. Since the Alashkurrut, as he had seen to his sorrow, would not deal with him under any circumstances ... what point to being a man of Gibil now?

"Pride." Finding the answer, he spoke it aloud, and then addressed his companions: "Show pride, one and all. Do not let the Imhursagut know we are downhearted; do not act like slaves before them. Follow my lead in all I do. If the Imhursagut think we have done well here, it will confuse them. If they think we have made a profit here, it will confuse their god."

Where nothing else might have served, that raised the caravan crew's spirits. Putting one over on Enimhursag was sweeter to the Giblut than dates candied in honey, more satisfying than a great bowl of stewed lamb and lentils.

And so, by the time the men of Imhursag realized the men and donkeys approaching them came from the city that was their hated rival, by the time they scurried around and readied themselves for a fight that might or might not come-by that time, Sharur and the caravan guards and the donkey handlers showed new life in their step, new cheer on their faces. Striding out ahead of them, Sharur marched confidently toward the Imhursaggi caravan.

An Imhursaggi came toward him, too: the same man with whom he had spoken on the road to Alashkurru. "Gibil and Imhursag are not at war. Engibil and Enimhursag are not at war, Sharur said. "Let us by in peace. We shall let you by in peace. We are homeward-bound."

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The Imhursaggi cocked his head to one side, as if listening. Hearing he was, to no voice Sharur could hear, to no voice Sha cared to hear. Having learned the will of his god, he answered, "I shall let you go in peace. Go home to your city, Gibli; go home with your tail between your legs."

"When I get home to Gibil, I shall thrust my tail between the legs of my Imhursaggi slave woman," Sharur retorted. "Why do you mock me? Why do you insult me? May you make as much profit on your journey as I have made on mine."

He knew how he meant that. He did not think the man of Imhursag would. He did not think Enimhursag would, either, when god heard the words through the man's ears. He proved right on both counts. Angrily, the Imhursaggi said, "Profit? How can you have made a profit?"

"Why do you ask? Don't you know how yourself?" Sharur's smile was easy, lazy, happy, as if he had just had the Imhursaggi slave. He knew how much effort holding that smile on his face required. Holding it there, he hoped to keep the man of Imhursag from seeing that effort.

And he succeeded. Swarthy though the Imhursaggi merchant he flushed angrily. "You cannot have made a profit in the Ala Mountains!" he shouted. "You cannot! The gods of this country forbid you. They know what Giblut are. They know what Giblut do." Sharur's smile only got wider. With a shrug, he answered, "Imhursag hates the men of Gibil, but we trade all through Kud and make good profits. We do not trade with Enimhursaa. We

trade with men. We do not trade with the gods of this country, either

From dark and ruddy, the merchant of Imhursag went pale. He understood what Sharur was saying. Enimhursag understood what Sharur was saying, too. "You have made the Alashkurrut into

"They will tell you otherwise," Sharur said. "They will insist on it. They will deny they ever traded with me. They will so insist if you should believe them. But how will you know for certain

"You are worse than a demon of the desert places," the Imhursaggi

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BETWEEN TWO RIVERS

said, horror in his eyes—a horror that was a window into a place deeper and darker than the bottom of his own spirit, a window into all the fears Enimhursag felt. Putting the god of Imhursag in fear felt almost as good as making a profit would have done. Almost.

"We shall go by now," Sharur said. "We shall go by in peace now. I told you once and now I tell you twice, man of Imhursag: may you profit here as I have profited here."

He wondered if Enimhursag would change his mind and order the Imhursagut to attack his men rather than letting them pass in peace. The merchant with whom he spoke evidently wondered the same thing, for he stood poised, his eyes far away, awaiting any orders his god might give. No orders came. The merchant slumped, ever so slightly. "We shall let you go by in peace. Go home to your city."

As warily as they had west of the Yarmuk, the caravan from Gibil and that from Imhursag sidled past each other. The Imhursagut scowled frightful scowls at Sharur and his companions. At his command, his own guards and donkey handlers did their best to pretend the caravan crew from the other city did not exist. Not a word was said on either side.

Continuing east, back toward Kudurru, back toward Gibil, Sharur looked over his shoulder. Looking at him was the Imhursaggi merchant who led the other caravan. When their eyes met, the man of Imhursag flinched, as if from a blow. Quickly, he turned his gaze in another direction.

Sharur told his own caravan crew how he had confused both the Imhursaggi merchant and Enimhursag. His fellow Giblut laughed and cheered and clapped him on the back. Harharu said, "The only way the tale could be better, master merchant's son, would be for our donkeys in truth to be heavily laden with copper and ore and the other goods of Alashkurru."

"If the Alashkurru were like us—if they truly were their own men first and took care of their gods to keep them quiet—we would be heavily laden with copper and ore and the other goods of Alashkurru," Sharur said, from out of a strange place halfway between frustrated fury and amusement. "But they are not, worse luck. And so Enimhursag wins this game." And so I lose it. That was even more

to the point.

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