

Fool Wolf only had a few days left to live when he saw the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes upon.

Her hair was spun black glass, spilling down the sides of a face incised from amber, flowing over shoulders and down breasts of the same red-gold hue.

He was too far away to see what color her eyes were, but he could feel her gaze on him. She stood on the edge of a cliff, half a bow-shot above him, looking down at the jade sea and the cinnamon sun it was swallowing in the west.

And at him, on the desolate strand, fifteen days along the way to starvation.

He stood rooted, stunned, watching her naked lithe half-shadow in the melting sunlight.

<<She is pretty,>> the goddess imprisoned in him sighed, wistfully. <<She looks good enough to eat.>>

Fool Wolf's stomach growled in agreement.

A month earlier, in the Land of Nine Princes, in the many-tiered city of Fanva, Fool Wolf had been considerably better fed. He had arrived in Fanva with a single carnelian and two copper coins, fleeing from the blood-guttered city of Rumq Qaj. In the incense-choked gambling temples of Fanva, he had increased that jewel and those two coins into what was for him a small fortune. He took a room in a good inn, draped himself in silk, and feasted on roast pork, pheasant, peacock, and eel. He ate sweet fruits from the islands-Lorn, whitemelon, fernpears, bananas. He drank wines he could not name but which pleased him a great deal, and he bedded a series of women of the same sort.

His fortunes changed, of course. He was caught cheating by one of the gambling-house priests. As gambling was a religious matter in Fanva, and cheating sacrilege, he was sentenced to death.

While bets were being placed on which form of death would be chosen and how long he would survive, Fool Wolf escaped his would-be-executioners and fled into the Gibbering Quarter, where foreign diplomats and madmen lived. He eluded his pursuit through the open window of a third-story apartment, waiting breathlessly for distance to hush their cries and footsteps, alert for any movement by the occupants of his refuge.

None came, and after five hundred heartbeats, he began to explore. It was a large place, well furnished with exotic rugs, censers of gold and cream-colored ivory, screens of lacquered wood and stippled velum. It smelled strange, like burnt sugar candy and wet dog.

And books, everywhere. Crammed into shelves, littered on the rugs and polished wooden floors, piled on low sitting-desks.

Behind one of those desks sat a dead man. He hadn't been dead long-drool was still leaking from his mouth. His flesh was still warm.

Fool Wolf could see no obvious reason why the man died, unless it was the small, empty cordial glass on the table before him. Suicide by poison, or just a last drink before dying from some natural cause? Probably the first-aside from being dead, the corpse did not look unhealthy. In fact, he looked something like an older Fool Wolf-tall and lean, narrow of face with sharp, high cheekbones, long black hair plaited into a queue.

That meant the dead man's clothes would probably fit Fool Wolf. He began rummaging about the apartment and shortly found a closet full of green robes. He took one and found it fit rather well, so he cast about for further items of disguise. A turban, of course, and something with which to make a false beard, perhaps.

He congratulated himself on his luck. It looked as if no one else lived here-there were no woman's clothes, no servants' quarters. The dead man seemed to have lived alone. He could keep his head down here until the pursuit cooled.

He had just settled onto a comfortable cushion with a plate of olives when the door splintered inward. Fool Wolf froze, an olive halfway to his mouth.

Standing in the doorway was a rather large man in a black fighting sarong and loose, blood-red shirt. His arms, visible from the elbow, were covered in elaborate tattoos. On his forehead was a single tattoo, the glyph of a tiger chasing its own tail. A long, curved sword gleamed in his sash.

The black-clad man walked into the room, followed by two hulking eunuchs that made him look like a dwarf, and ten guardsmen behind them. All had the tiger tattoo.

"Lohar Pang?" The man in black said. It sounded something like a question.

Fool Wolf pursed his lips. The corpse was in the next room. If they went in there ...

"Of course," he replied. "Lohar Pang, at your service."

"Wonderful. You will come with us."

"I'm busy at the moment," Fool Wolf replied, bowing.

"Ah. My apologies," the man in black said. "I misspoke. You will come with us, or you will die."

"Oh," Fool Wolf said, "this is a day for misstatement, for I'm not busy at all. Shall we go?"

Fool Wolf had heard of Prince Fa-few in Fanva had not. He wasn't one of the nine princes, but he was a merchant of considerable power and reportedly dark tastes. He looked about sixty, with a trim beard and sooty eyes. He wore a robe so deeply red it was almost black, bordered with twining serpents and eels picked out in garnet. His throne was of heavy dun wood and would have been rather plain if not for the human skulls along the armrests and high back. Into each skull twenty or so nails had been driven. Fool Wolf suspected that this had been done when the heads were still breathing and blinking and screaming.

Prince Fa frowned down at Fool Wolf, then examined his long, gold-leafed nails. "This should be a simple task, for one of your repute," the prince said, flashing teeth like bits of polished abalone. "You have familiarized yourself with the- problem-and with the gods in question? You examined the objects I sent you?"

"Absolutely," Fool Wolf said, wondering what in the name of the Horse Mother prince Fa was talking about.

"And you still say you can do it?"

"Of course. I have no doubts."

"Good. Then you will live. You will depart immediately." He leaned forward, and his shadowed eyes caught the flicker of a candle flame, a red fish in deep water. "If I have to take a hand in this myself, I will be most displeased," Fa murmured. "I detest the sea. You understand the consequences if I am forced to do something I hate?"

"Of course, Prince Fa," Fool Wolf said, wondering what the consequences were, imagining they were unpleasant.

"Good. One of my yachts is prepared to leave."

It occurred to Fool Wolf that a trip by boat would at least get him far from the city. After that-well, there would surely be opportunities.

A week later, he was still watching for the first of those hypothetical opportunities. More specifically, he was gazing at the horizon, wondering how big the ocean could be.

Too big to swim, he kept coming back to. So even though he was unwatched by the crew-somewhat avoided, even-there was no place to escape to.

Kreth-the black-saronged warrior from the apartment- joined him at the rail.

"Not much farther," Kreth said, spitting onto the sky-dressed sea, watching the little foam island thus created break up in the ship's wake. "Can you really do it?"

"I've never failed before," Fool Wolf assured him.

"Obviously. But you've never been to Ranga Lehau before, either," Kreth

grunted. "Still, the prince seems pretty sure of you. He read one of your treatises or somesuch. How will you do it?"

"How do you imagine I will do it?" Fool Wolf asked.

"You don't have to be mysterious," Kreth replied, a bit sulkily. "If you can't tell me, just say so."

"I can't tell you, but you can guess, and I can nod yes or no."

"Never mind then. I'm not good at such games, and I shall see shortly, yes?" He reached over and gave Fool Wolf a slap on the back that clacked his teeth together. "But you can do it?"

"Of course." Fool Wolf glanced over at Kreth. "What's your part in all of this? Aside from making sure I do my part?"

"I'm the hunter," Kreth replied. "I will find the Python King's treasure, never fear. He cannot hide it from me."

"I don't doubt that for a moment," Fool Wolf replied.

That's all Fool Wolf got from Kreth, and the hunter was too smart to push any further. Fool Wolf didn't want to ask a question that raised even minor suspicion-he didn't know what Lohar Pang was supposed to know. As long as he was on this boat, with nothing but sea around, he might as well be in Prince Fa's palace.

Thus it was, two days later, when Kreth came to Fool Wolf's cabin and said, "It is time," he still didn't have a fart's whisper of what it was time for.

Up on deck, Kreth pointed to the first land Fool Wolf had seen since the coastline of Fanva faded in the west. It was an island, looking something like a giant black horse tooth sticking up out of the water, with its sheer black cliffs and flat top.

"That is Ranga Lehau," Kreth commented. "According to our charts, we cross the tapu when we pass those rocks."

Fool Wolf saw the rocks he meant, two pillars of stone jutting up from the water, perhaps three ship's lengths apart. They looked manmade. At the rate the boat was moving, they would reach them soon.

As Fool Wolf studied the rocks and the island, Kreth shuffled impatiently. "Shouldn't you get started?" He asked. He sounded nervous.

"Don't tell me my business," Fool Wolf snapped. Then, a bit more mysteriously, "besides, I have started."

"Oh. I thought there would be more-chanting, or something."

"In a moment," Fool Wolf said. "If you will kindly darken your mouth."

The rocks were closer. "Chugaachik!" Fool Wolf chanted. "Do you have any idea what these fools want of me?" He sang in his own tongue, Mang, not a language anyone else on the ship was likely to know.

<<I don't know,>> the goddess answered, in that silent place between his breaths. <<Why not let me kill them all? That would solve the problem.>>

"Because I don't think we can kill them all, even with your power," he sang.

That was a half-truth. He hated Chugaachik, who had killed most everyone he had ever loved and made him a rootless wanderer, far from his native land. She just might be able to kill everyone on the ship, but letting her have her way, even to save his life, was not something he was willing to do unless he knew he had no choice.

Besides, it was his body she used, his body that paid for her excesses.

They were almost to the pillars.

<<But,>> Chugaachik offered reluctantly, <<there is a large and powerful god crouching there, beneath the water.>>

The sea raised up in a mound, and the nose of the boat tilted with it. Fool Wolf ran and jumped as far as he could toward the island. When he hit the water, he began stroking furiously, ignoring the brief screams and rending of wood behind him.

Fifteen days later none of the bodies or supplies from the ship had washed ashore anywhere. He knew - he had made a complete circuit of the island. In the four days it had taken, Fool Wolf had seen no sign of human life and no way to

the plateau above him.

And now this impossible woman, gazing down at him from that unattainable place.

"Hello!" He shouted. "Hello up there! Can you help me?"

She cocked her head to the side but otherwise merely continued to stare.

"Pakena lafa? Em'tagi?" he croaked, trying Jara and Fanvese. She didn't respond any more than she had to Mang.

"Please," he tried again, "I was shipwrecked and haven't eaten in half a moon."

The woman regarded him for a bit longer, as if he was some strange shorebird with an odd call. Then she turned and walked out of sight, into the forest at the top of the cliff.

For a little while, Fool Wolf nurtured the hope that the woman was coming down for him, following some secret path or tunnel in the rock he hadn't found. She would bring all sorts of things from the paradise above. Whitemelon, roast pig, chicken, deer. Bread. Beer. Wine. The comfort of her flesh, the sweet touch of her lips...

But the sea went from jade to obsidian, and the sky opened its six thousand eyes, and still she did not come. Fool Wolf felt as if he were made of driftwood. Perhaps when he became light enough, the wind would pick him up, and he could fly to the top.

By the time morning greened the eastern sky, he had given up. Whoever the woman was, she hadn't been as impressed with the sight of Fool Wolf as he had been with her. Of course he was half starved, his normally coppery skin burned almost teak and his long black hair in brine-petrified knots. He could hardly blame her if she didn't like what she saw.

Well, no, that wasn't true. He was dying. He did blame her. Her, and the gambling priests, and prince Fa, and Kreth, and every sailor and soldier on the lost boat.

And he blamed the island, of course. From the sea it had looked green and inviting. But all of the green was at the top of those walls of glassy rock. That left him with a narrow strip of sterile white beach, two to twenty paces wide, a few rocky spurs into the sea supporting nothing more edible than barnacles, seagulls he hadn't devised any way to catch, fish that must be out there but which he couldn't find or see in the foaming surf. And he wasn't going too far into that surf, not with whatever-it-was lurking out there.

But if she was up there, that indifferent beauty, there must be a way up - a way he had missed in his four-day circuit of the island.

So, cursing, he went to his one source of sustenance - a small freshwater spring seeping from the base of the cliff. He drank as much as his belly would hold and then started walking. If he remembered correctly, the next spring was more than a day away.

A couple of things occurred to him while walking. The first was that the woman - and whatever other people lived atop the island - might come and go by rope, or ladder, or not at all. Of course, the first time someone went up, there must have been a natural way, but that might have been a thousand years ago.

A more serious worry was that he might not have seen a woman at all. It might have been a ghost, or a goddess, a shapeshifter - or his hungry imagination.

He spent a lot of time studying the edge of the cliff, but he didn't see her again.

The next day he reached the river. He remembered the spot well, because it had been so frustrating. The cliffs here were lower than anywhere else on the island. If he could jump twice again his own height, he would be able to catch the tree roots straggling over the rim. At the lowest point, a waterfall tumbled mockingly into a pool and then flowed out to the waiting ocean. He had looked here for hours, searching for handholds and finding none. No fish in

the water, either.

The waterfall had worn a deep groove for itself - a narrow canyon, really. Standing at the base of it, he could curl his fingers onto the top of the ledge the water came over. But with the water pushing down on him, and the stone even smoother than elsewhere, he could never get enough purchase to pull himself up more than a finger's breadth.

He wasn't going to waste his time on it again.

That was when he noticed the falls looked strange. The water was bumping up, flowing over something. He trudged closer.

A dead tree was wedged in the mouth of the waterfall.

He caught the branch on his third jump, but his muscles had nothing in them, and he just hung there, water battering him.

<<Let me help you,>> the Chugaachik said.

"No. If I do, then you'll kill her. And anyone else up there."

<<Probably. But why should you care? She left you to die.>>

Chugaachik had a point. But instead of calling on her help, he pulled again, knowing it was his last chance. If he failed, he would have to let Chugaachik have him.

<<I won't eat her right away,>> the goddess promised. <</'// let you have her body first. I know you want it.>>

His arms trembled, and he almost gave up. Then he remembered the last time the goddess had been loose in his body - and what they had done together - and found some extra strength, enough for one great heave that allowed him to hook his arm over the wedged log. Another, lesser jerk, and he had a leg over, too.

He lay that way for a moment, draped over the log, suddenly, absurdly happy. He managed to cough out a series of chuckles while garnering his energy to move again.

The river broadened upstream, and the canyon walls here were still too steep to climb. But the banks of the river were wide enough to walk on, and gently sloping, and ahead he could see the waving fronds of fernpear trees.

He crawled onto the bank and began to walk.

Fifty paces from the dark, inviting jungle, he came across four wooden statues, each about the size of himself, carved from tree-trunks. They were very old, standing at odd angles, half rotted, made to resemble little squatting men with big heads.

Beyond them was a town. Or rather, the remains of a town. The roofs of the enormous buildings had caved in, and creeping vines covered their skeletons.

At another time, that might interest him. Not now. All he cared about was food.

He took three more steps, and one of the statues spoke to him. It didn't move its rotted wooden lips, but the words appeared just inside his ear, like a bee buzzing there.

<<You are not Talehau,>> the voice whirred.

"Sure I am," Fool Wolf asserted.

<<No. We know the lineages, and you are not of them.>>

"All I want is some food from the forest."

<<You might be a pirate. You might be a thief. You have a powerful spirit in you. We will not let you enter Lehau.>>

"The village? Look behind you! They are all dead! You guard nothing!"

<<No,>> the statue replied. <<One remains. As long as one remains, we guard.>>

Fool Wolf gritted his teeth. The woman! That damned woman again!

"I ignore you now," he told the statues, and strode briskly past them.

He came to in the river, his limbs twitching like dying eels, sparks dancing before his eyes. With a horrible start, he realized that he was fetched up against the log, about to float over it and back down the waterfall.

He flopped back onto the bank.

"Okay," he panted to Chugaachik. "Okay. Help me. Do whatever you want."

For the first time since he was a boy, he got no answer, not even a purr or a growl.

His heart did a strange twist in his breast. Was he finally rid of her? For years he had been fleeing the consequences of Chugaachik's actions and searching for a shaman powerful enough to release the goddess from his body. How ironic it would be to be free now, just before starving to death.

He trudged back up the slope to confront the statues again.

<<You are not Talehau,>> they reminded him.

"No. But I mean no harm. I just need food. Can't I just walk inland for a little while, if I promise to come right back out?"

<<No.>>

Fool Wolf felt dizzy. There must be some way to argue with these intractable gods, but he needed rest before he thought of it. Now that he was up here, he certainly wasn't going back down.

He awoke, then scrambled wildly away from the snake nudging him in the side. Only it wasn't a snake, he saw, as the foolish colors of sleep leaked from his eyes. It was a long piece of bamboo, and holding the other end of it was the woman.

The sight of her knocked the breath right out of him. She was crouched down, just beyond the guardian gods. She had wrapped some sort of kilt around her waist, but it didn't conceal much of her. And he could see her eyes now. They were the color the smoke would be if you could burn jade.

"Hello," he said softly. "It's nice to see you again."

She didn't answer, but she let the stick drop. Maybe she had been wondering if he was dead.

"I need a favor," Fool Wolf said, carefully. "Something to eat. Could you do that for me?" He pantomimed chewing, then thumped his belly. It thudded like a shaman's drum.

She watched him as he repeated himself in several languages, then got up and swayed off into the forest. He watched her long, shapely legs and thought of them crisped over a fire and served with rice.

Fool Wolf folded back down by the statues.

"Will you answer some questions?" He asked the guardians wearily.

<<Yes.>>

"Of all the people you once guarded, only one is still alive?"

<<True. Save for one, the Talehau are no more.>>

"What happened to them?"

<<My brothers and I were tree spirits. Long ago, when the Talehau first arrived here, we struck a bargain with them. They would refrain from cutting trees - beyond a certain allotted number - and we would guard them from enemies. We could not protect them from themselves, however. The tattooed Python King, whose island this is, fell in love with a woman of the village and took her to live with him. Her brother, Mahan, a proud and jealous man, heard of this. He sought his sister for months. When he found her, she told him she loved the Python King. The brother, who desired his sister, swore that if he could not have her, no one should. So Mahan killed her, to spite the King. In his rage, the Python King slew everyone on the island - all but one, for he wanted one to carry the memory of what had happened. Then he swore enmity to Humans and put the tapu around the island.>>

Fool Wolf tried to absorb all of that. There were a lot of questions there, but what was most important right now was getting past the guardians.

"Ah - when the Talehau had visitors from other islands - not pirates, just visitors - did you let them pass?"

<<Of course. If they were greeted by the Talehau or the gods of this island - if we could be sure they were guests, you see, and not interlopers.>>

"I see. Well - I'm harmless enough. I'm sure you can see that. And you are gods. Can't you invite me in?"

<<It is against our bargain to do so, of course.>>

"Of course."

But he could get her to invite him in. If she could talk, which he had seen no evidence of.

"How long ago was Lehau abandoned?"

<<Twenty years ago.>>

Fool Wolf nodded. The woman didn't look a sliver-moon over twenty-five. If she had been alone since the age of five and hadn't spoken to another human being since then, maybe she couldn't talk at all.

But maybe she could, or he could teach her.

So he took a bath. It wasn't easy - he was weak, and the current, though not strong by any normal standards, was too rapid for him. He dipped water out with his hands, then lay on the bank, ducking his head under, working the salty tangles in his hair out with his fingers.

He threw away the remains of his robe. Maybe, if she could see his wasting body, she would feel sorry for him. Or, if she had never seen a man before, perhaps she would be curious. If she came back.

And she did come back, near sundown, with a heavy netted bag. His heart thudded with glee as brightly colored fruit, steaming banana-leaf bundles, and a dead chicken spilled onto the ground. The woman set about gathering wood for a fire as Fool Wolf licked his lips.

"I can help you with that, if you just invite me over," He called. "Weak as I am, I would be glad to do the work of building a fire."

She gave no indication that she heard him.

"Very well - I understand. You have no reason to trust me. But you must like me - see, you brought me food. It's very nice of you to cook, but I wonder if I could have some of the fruit now?"

He might have been talking to the sea.

Soon he was panting like a dog at the scent of the bird roasting on a spit. He had never smelled anything better.

In front of him, she ate every bit of the food. When she was done, she considered the bird carcass, picked off what remained of the meat, and tossed the bones at Fool Wolf. Then she threw the rinds of the fruit at him too.

"You bitch!" Fool Wolf shrieked, pouncing on the remains.

He ate the rinds, though they were bitter. He ate the bones, too, smashing them and sucking out what remained of the marrow.

An hour later, he threw it up, and for the first time she made a sound.

She laughed, then walked away again.

She repeated her performance the next day, and the next. By the fourth day he didn't even bother to stir - it was a waste of energy.

"I wonder why you do this to me," Fool Wolf said. "I wonder how you can hate me so, when I have done you no harm." He watched her tear a drumstick from a chicken and take a large bite. He could hear the skin crackle, see the grease dribble down her beautiful chin.

"But you can't even understand me, can you? You're just like some poor dumb beast."

"No," she said, in Jara, or a language very like it. "I can talk."

"Then why-"

"I have little to say to you. You came here to kill me, yes? My father always said someone would."

"Not me. I'm just a castaway."

"Yes, from the boat the Python King destroyed. The one that violated the tapu."

"I know nothing of this. I was just a passenger, and an unwilling one at that."

"I don't believe you."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because you are the loveliest woman I have ever seen. Because if you are going to kill me, you at least owe me the name of my murderer, so I can tell it to my ancestors."

"Names are too important for me to give you mine. And you murdered yourself by coming here. It isn't my fault." She smiled, faintly. "You came for the Python King's treasure, didn't you?"

"I heard my captors mention that, yes."

"I am the Python King's treasure. So you came to kill or kidnap me. You see? I do have something against you. You aren't the first, you know." She tossed another cleaned carcass over the tapu line. It was difficult, but he ignored it.

"You are undeniably a treasure," Fool Wolf said, "but I did not come here for you. Though allow me to say - if you were mine, and not this Python King's, I would treasure you indeed. I have been to fabulous Nhol and ancient Lhe, to Rumq Qaj, Palipurn, and Fanva. I have seen the great mountain in Balati and the high plains of Falling Sky. I have walked most of this world, yet I have never seen any jewel or star as beautiful as your eyes. I have known many women, but next to you even the loveliest might as well have been a man. And now that I have heard you speak, no harp or flute - "

She was smiling, a fascinated little smile. "How long can you keep that up?" She asked.

"I could praise your beauty to the end of my days," he answered.

"Unfortunately, that won't be in the very distant future."

"Hmm." She considered that for a moment, then rolled a whitemelon toward him. It stopped just inside the tapu line - on his side. He stared at it, shaking, fearing a trick.

"Go on," she said. "You've pleased me."

He took the melon and split it open. The smell of the sweet white meat nearly overpowered him.

He gobbled it down and wiped his mouth. "May I have another?" He asked.

"Talk to me a little more, and you may."

"Your thighs are like - "

"No. Not about me. I know what I look like. Tell me more about those places. Those cities and such."

"Oh. Well - there's Nhol, Nhol of the white pyramids, which gleam in the sun as if they were made of eggshells..."

A week later, he was starting to feel less hungry. His flesh was beginning to gain substance again, though she was still miserly with what she gave him.

"Why don't you invite me over there?" He asked. "You must know by now I wouldn't hurt you."

"I know from your stories you are a thief and a liar," she said.

"I never said any such thing."

"No. You dance around it, but it's always there. You are a faithless and fickle man, Fool Wolf. How can I trust you?"

"Because I've changed. My love for you has changed me."

She laughed. "You love me no more than you have ever loved any woman, I'll guess. You do like the look of me, I think, but then that isn't love, is it?"

"What would you know about it? Have you ever even known a man?"

"Others have been where you are now. All were faithless."

A little chill bristled across his scalp. "I am not them."

"I've heard stories, too."

"From who?"

She shrugged. "I hear stories. That's all."

She tossed him a packet of steamed breadfruit and was silent while he devoured it...

"Tell me," she said. "If I allowed it, what would you do, if I let you come over here? If I let you love me?"

He looked up at that, at her supple, gleaming limbs, at the swell of her breasts. "That's cruel," Fool Wolf said. "That's worse than making me watch you eat when I'm starving."

"No it isn't. Or would you like to compare? I can always stop feeding you."

"No!" he said quickly. "No! I - ah - don't you want to hear more about my



travels?"

"No. I want to hear the other now."

He put away the remains of the breadfruit and crept as near the tapu boundary as he could. He fixed his eyes on her.

"Well," he murmured, reaching his hand up, as if to touch her, "I would first caress your arms with the tips of my fingers, until little bumps rose up on them. And then..."

That night he lay awake, unable to sleep. He was getting used to the strange night noises of the island, but his mind was working and would not let him rest.

He'd almost had her, today. He could see it in her eyes. Soon she would invite him across. Then he could start thinking about building a boat. Maybe there were old maps in the ruined village.

He shook that off - it was too many steps down the road. For now, the goal was much simpler - to not have to depend on her for his life.

He shifted his eyes at a slight sound, saw a shadow gliding.

She was about ten paces from him, a ghost in the moonlight. He kept very still.

"Listen to me," she said. "I still haven't invited you over the tapu line. If you hurt me, or kill me, you will starve here. Do you understand that? There is no one else to care for you."

"I would not hurt you," Fool Wolf replied.

"Good. Then I want - I want some of those things you talked about."

"Really? And then you will invite me over?"

"I promise nothing. But maybe."

"Come here, then," Fool Wolf said, "and you will see that I make good on my promises." He reached for her leg, and stroked along the inner calf. She made an odd sound, and after a moment, her knees buckled, and she knelt next to him.

He pressed his face into the hollow of her neck, and his face and belly prickled at the scent of her skin.

"My name is Inah," she murmured.

After that, she made more odd sounds. Many more.

One more awakening, one more rude surprise. This one was a sharp kick in the ribs and a curse. Fool Wolf opened his eyes in time to see Inah flee back over the tapu line.

"Liar!" She shrieked.

"What?" Fool Wolf yelped, staggering to his feet and clutching his aching flank. "What did I do?"

She lifted her chin and pointed with it. "Your friends are here," she said.

He turned. Beyond the waterfall, in the slice of ocean he could see, was a large boat, very much like the boat he had come on.

Prince Fa, or more of his men. Inside the tapu.

"No!" He shouted. "They are my enemies, too. Invite me over! Don't leave me out here!"

For an instant she seemed to consider it, then tossed her black mane contemptuously. "You almost tricked me," she said. Then she vanished into the jungle.

"I've been waiting for you," Fool Wolf said. Prince Fa did not look happy. None of the two-score soldiers with him looked happy, either.

"Have you." The Prince said, frostily. "What happened to my other ship? And Kreth, and the others?" "The tapu got them."

"But it didn't get you, the sorcerer who was supposed to deal with it. How coincidental. Have you secured the treasure yet?"

Fool Wolf remembered the night, the fierce tangling of limbs. "In a manner of speaking."

"Where is she, then?"

"I don't know."

The Prince smiled, very narrowly. "Things aren't going well for you, whoever you are. Lohar's body was found, you know, which reveals you as a fraud. Your lies have lost me a good ship and some very good men. You may remember, too, what I said about having to take a hand in matters myself. It cost me more than I care to say to quiet the Python King and his tapu. Even so, he won't stay quiet for long. So where is she?"

"If I knew, I would tell you. She ran into the jungle when you came."

Fa cocked his head. "But she was here? You talked to her?" His face traasfigured, slightly. "Oh, I see. More than that. Well. You shall live a little longer then." He signed to his men. "Bind his hands but leave his feet free."

A heavysset thug lashed Fool Wolf's hands together with leather straps. Meanwhile, Prince Fa approached the sentinel statues. Fool Wolf braced himself. When the Prince collapsed, he would take advantage of the confusion and flee back to the beach. If he could swim out to the ship, defeat whoever was on board...

He needed Chugaachik now, but he was beginning to think she was really gone.

The prince wandered beyond the sentinels. He turned and looked at his soldiers and Fool Wolf. "If s safe," he said. "All of you come with me."

They didn't go far. In the old square of the ruined village, Fa's men cleared the jungle growth and then, at the edge of the clearing, they hung Fool Wolf between two trees. They built a fire and amused themselves by searing his flesh with brands.

Fool Wolf was Mang by birth - his people were fierce horsemen who raised their children to expect and endure torture.

Fool Wolf had never been a very good Mang, and he was weak already. After a time, he screamed, and screamed again. When they thought he had screamed enough, they cut him down, bound him to one of the trees, and made camp some distance away.

Fool Wolf watched the moon rise.

"Chugaachik?" He whispered. "Are you really gone?"

He got no answer. He watched the moon set.

And with the largest eyes of heaven closed, Inah came.

"What have they done to you?" She whispered.

"Go away," he said. "This is what they want. They want you to try to help me."

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you," she said. Her fingers traced upon his face, and he could just make out her eyes.

"Inah, run."

"They cannot stop me. You don't know everything about me. I..." her voice stumbled, and she made a little choking noise. "What?" She gasped. She sounded confused, Then she slid against Fool Wolf, across his burned flesh, and fell in a heap at his feet.

"Well!" Prince Fa's voice came out of the darkness. "Congratulations! You proved useful after all."

"I'm going to kill you, Fa," Fool Wolf said.

"Of course you are."

"What did you do to her?"

"An extract of the poison of the Hutoew tree. She will live."

"Why? What do you want from her?"

Fa's face appeared in a little glow of witchlight from something in his hand. Fool Wolf looked down and saw Inah: She had two small darts in her neck. Her eyes were open, glassy.

"At first I just wanted her. Now, I want something more. I suppose I should thank you for forcing me to come here, to conquer my fears. Yes, my fears! I had not realized how powerful I have become. So I will allow you to live a while, and let you dream of killing me. Such dreams are sweet, are they not? It is my reward to you, to see me fulfill mine." He turned to his men, who had

been gathering behind him.

"Bind her, and complete the circle around them."

"Aren't we going, now that we have her?" One of the men asked.

"No," Fa said. "We await one more."

Fool Wolf sought for Chugaachik one last time, knowing that if he did not find her he would die, and so would Inah. Of course, if he did find Chugaachik, Inah might die anyway. Chugaachik did not treat Fool Wolf's lovers well, generally

Fool Wolf's father had wanted him to be a gaan, a shaman. That was how Fool Wolf had ended up with a goddess living in him. And though he had long ago abandoned his father's path for him, he still had enough training to set his spirit drifting into the world-beneath-the-sur-face-of-the-world, the world of spirit.

He went about aimlessly, at first, in the dark counterpart of the island. He walked hard beaten paths where the gaunt dead roamed in circles.

It might have been days or ten heartbeats of wandering before he found the guardians, but find them he finally did. Here they were four old men, balding and bearded, with flesh like knotted wood. They watched him approach with little half-smiles.

"Hello again," one said.

"Hello, grandfathers. I'm looking for something."

"That being?"

"The goddess that accompanied me to the island."

"Ah. She is with the Python King. She fled your body when we touched you. The King found her before she could return."

"And where is he? The Python King?"

They sent him through a forest of wailing trees and dark, scurrying things, through a marsh where slender cranes that looked liked wrought iron fished for souls, and at last to a high peak with a bowl-shaped valley at the top. All along the rim were the remains of shrines, low platforms with small standing stones. Clustered around the shrines, like ants around fruit, were Human ghosts, sitting with their heads between their knees, some weeping. One looked up at Fool Wolf with eyes like the empty space in a chrysalis, once the moth is gone.

"Help me," the ghost said.

Fool Wolf uttered a single, bitter laugh and continued on. But he thought he heard something, now. A faint voice, speaking his name. He tried to follow the sound, but it never seemed to get any louder or softer, and he could never be certain that it really was his name.

Until the melodic baritone suddenly spoke it right in his ear.

"Fool Wolf, I suppose?"

He turned. The speaker was a handsome man of middle years, densely muscled. He wore a crimson sarong, but the rest of his dark body was clothed only in tattoos, the mottled spots of a python.

"And you are the Python King?"

"That is one of my names. I expected to see you sooner."

"Prince Fa said he had put you to sleep."

The Python King blinked as if waking from a dream. "Fa? Fa? He is not that powerful. But Fa is not his name, and he has hidden his name from me. Hiding that, he has hidden himself. I cannot see him or even long hold the thought of him before me. Now he is calling me, and I am compelled to go into his trap. I will forget as I go. I fear he will kill me then, and you, and take Inah away."

"There is nothing you can do? They say you made this island. You must have more power than that."

The Python King shrugged and clasped his hands behind his back. "An island is a small thing, really. And in those days creating was easier. I have lived here too long, forgotten too much. This man - you see, I cannot even remember what you called him, now - he has studied arts unknown in my day. I do not ken

them."

"Fa. His name is Fa. He came here to steal your treasure and to kill you."

"And so he shall. And his name is not Fa."

Fool Wolf sighed. "You have something of mine."

"Oh, yes," the Python king said. "Her. Do you really want her back?"

"No. But I think I have no other choice."

"I suppose you don't. Though I suspect that she won't be able to help, much." Behind him a jackal stalked out of the forest. A gray jackal mottled black, the size of a horse, with red carbuncle eyes.

"Hello, sweet thing," Chugaachik said. "You missed me."

Fool Wolf ignored her. "Can you put her back in me? Back in my Mansion of Bone?"

The Python King looked at him for a moment, then reached for Chugaachik. He lifted her by the scruff of the neck and shook her once, hard, so that she became a long pelt. He rolled her up and squeezed her into a small, black jewel.

"Swallow it," the god told him. "Or not. I have to go now. Someone is calling me."

"Prince Fa?"

"I only know I must go."

The god lifted and flowed, a sinuous smoke, a great snake in the sky. Fool Wolf caught his tail and went with him.

Soon he saw the clearing, and his body, and Inah.

He lifted the jewel to his mouth and paused. Wouldn't it be better to die than to have Chugaachik in him again?

No.

He swallowed the jewel and smelled a sharp tang like wet metal or a bloody nose. He felt scratching, like a spider beneath his tongue. And, of course, her laughter, shrill, and a surge of desire that was only a little like lust for a woman.

He woke to his flesh.

But it wasn't his flesh for long.

He was still bound, but a grin stretched itself from ear to ear. His teeth felt like obsidian knives. His fingers were talons. And the rope that bound him - rotten string.

Prince Fa stood before him, seemingly oblivious to the changes working in Fool Wolf.

"Well," the Prince said, beaming, waving a curved, bloody sword. "You awake just in time. See who I have before me." He gestured. A huge python, the length of thirty men, lay near where Inah hung. Its head was hacked halfway off, but it was still alive, writhing, golden blood bubbling from its nostrils.

"He doesn't even know I'm here," Fa said, his voice full of delight.

Chugaachik chuckled, and it came out of Fool Wolf's mouth. <<Let me have him,>> she demanded.

<<Not yet,>> Fool Wolf told her. <<He might be too much even for you. Just wait a bit, and I promise you->>

<<You will not cheat me again,>> the goddess said.

<<I surely will. But not this time. This time, I need you.>>

Fa had turned his attention back to the great snake, and lifted his sword to strike again.

"I bet he would recognize you if I told him your name," Fool Wolf said.

Fa stopped, glanced at him, and for an instant, Fool Wolf saw fear there. Fa pointed the sword at him. "Shut up," he said.

Something clamped upon Fool Wolf's vocal cords. Fa stepped forward and raised the sword for a blow that would decapitate Fool Wolf. "Just in case you do know," Fa said.

<<Now,>> he told Chugaachik.

<<Now?>> Chugaachik screamed. <<You idiot!>> Black lightning uncoiled. And

as he lost his voice, and his limbs, and his mind to the goddess and her desires, he shouted to the Python King.

"Mahan!" He told the god. "His name is Mahan!"

Then Fa's blade struck him. Chugaachik had managed, in that less than a heartbeat, to snap the bonds and bring his arms up. The blade sank through flesh and shattered the bone of his right forearm, allowing the blade to bite into the side of his neck. Something splashed wetly on his shoulder.

Fool Wolf snarled.

Fa's eyes widened, and he swung again, shouting something at the same moment. Fool Wolf lunged at him but met with a peculiar slipperiness. His claws would not catch - it was as if the Prince were made of glass.

And the sword hit him again, this time crunching its way through several ribs. Fool Wolf screamed, a scream of pure fury, and looked up into the deathblow dropping toward his face.

At that moment a great coil engulfed Fa. His surprised look was suddenly hidden by another coil whipping around to the top of that one, and then the head of a great serpent, darted down, teeth gleaming.

Fa had men. Some were running, while others were coming forward to help their master. All moved as if walking through syrup.

Blood pumping from his arms, neck and side, Fool Wolf launched himself at them. Their terror was sweet, but not as sweet as their blood. He eviscerated every one.

Then he turned on Inah, full of joy and anticipation.

He slipped in blood, and to his disgust found that he did not have the strength to get up. The small part of him that was really Fool Wolf rejoiced.

<<You still owe me!>> Chugaachik howled, somewhere. <<You did trick me! You almost let him kill us!>>

<<You had your way with his men. Be satisfied with that.>> "Be satisfied that we're still alive," he finished, aloud.

"A gift from my father," another voice said. Inah, who was wiping his forehead with a damp cloth. He lay on a barkcloth mat in a dimly lit hut.

"The Python King. Your father."

"Yes, of course. He mended the worst of your wounds, made water into blood for you." She bent over and kissed him. "I'm sorry for the way I treated you. If I had known you would save my life - and my father's life - I would have been much nicer from the beginning. But I thought you were him."

"Fa? Mahan? The man who killed your mother?"

"Did he?" she wrinkled her brow. "Father told me only that he let one villager live, and that it was a man. He didn't say who it was. How did you know?"

"I guessed. All along I thought you were the last villager, the one the Python King let live. But you aren't. You aren't even human."

"I'm half human. I seemed human enough the other night, didn't I? You didn't know, then."

"No. But you are of your father's lineage, not of the village. It was only when Fa - Mahan - passed the guardians without even a struggle that I understood. Who better to remember the crime than the criminal?" He shook his head. "A mistake. Gods are too fond of poetics and curses. This irony turned itself on your father. It almost killed him." A sudden thought occurred. "Fa's boat - what happened to it?"

"Don't worry. It's still out there. Father kept it for you, and he let two of the sailors live, as well. We will have a way to other lands."

"We?"

She kissed him again. It tingled on his lips. Did he taste snake? A faint musk?

"Never fear," she murmured. "I'm fond of you, Fool Wolf, but I'm not going attached to you, in hopes of a husband and children. That isn't what I want. But I will see more of the world. I've become bored with this island." She scratched him behind the ear. "Anyway, I think you will need my help for a

little while, yes?"

"I won't argue with an offer like that," Fool Wolf told her, smiling.

All in all, it seemed the best idea to agree with everything she said, at least until he could walk again.

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J Gregory Keyes - The Python King's Treasure

mlnion scan #4

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mlnion scan #1: Sandman - Death The High Cost Of Living

mlnion scan #2: Jeff Wayne's Musical Version Of The War Of The Worlds

mlnion scan #3: Everything But The Girl (Article from Arena Magazine)