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*Born in the Dust
of Rath*

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PREFACE

The story of Yorrân saga started a quarter of a century before the events described in this book came to be. It all begins in a small port in a country called Seaside. Here lives a merchant named Tharnizir who, with his wife Serniphel, got onto his wagon on one bleak fall morning, setting off on a long trading voyage. The destination of this strenuous journey is the White City far in the North. After two weeks the merchant wagon arrives in the city where the big fall festivities are just about to begin. Trading, however, is only a cover for their stay there. A much more important goal is the fulfillment of one hidden, but longingly expected wish, as Tharnizir and Serniphel have for years desired an offspring. Unfortunately, fate has not yet granted this hidden wish. During their stay in the White City, a palace coup takes place. Chaos and violence breaks out in the city. Tharnizir and his wife escape these wild and bloody events unharmed and in spite of all the danger they see the realization of their most pressing wish. The prophecy that a son awaits them in the White City becomes fulfilled. Happy Serniphel, sitting on the coach box of the merchant wagon, cradles a little boy in her arms. Neither the merchant, nor his wife know anything about the boy's true origin and since they don't even know his name, they name him Abarhil.

*This is the concise preface to the saga that bears the name Yorrân which, at the time of publication of this book, consists of five complete parts. The first part of the saga, *In the Times of Shadow*, depicts Abarhil's adolescence and coming of age, which preceded his voyage to the South. The long and strenuous journey across the Southern wilderness during which the boy becomes a man and the man then becomes a warrior is depicted in the second part of the saga, named *From the Dust of Path*.*

*After due deliberation I have decided to offer this part as the first one to the English-speaking reader, as it was well-received by Czech audience. I have conformed the contents to create a complete story that does not require the reader to be well-versed in the happenings of the previous events. And so a novelette came to be, which I named *Born in the Dust of Path* and with this I present it to foreign readers to consider its merit for themselves. Should it be well received, I shall gladly work with my colleagues on translating the next parts.*

J. Dobsensky



1. Chapter

FAREWELL AZRAPHEL

*Brighin, the Month of First Blossoms,
year 574 e.d.*

Azraphel, forced by a strong wind, was heading south. Stubbornly she struggled through the restless sea, rearing up like a horse before a hurdle, only to plop between the tops of the waves again and again. Each additional impact wrenched the sea open. Salty spray rose up like a mist towards Abarhil, who was standing on the bow holding onto the railing. Since the first journeys, the bow of the ship had been his favorite spot to let his imagination run wild. He felt like ancient seafarers who, like messengers of ancient kings, spread their fame along the shores of the great ocean in bygone ages of faded glory. He raised his head and looked around at the horizon. On the right, he saw only the silhouettes of several dolphins, which were following their ship for a second day since its departure from Nirruch. The occasional shadow of an albatross flashed on the sea surface and from the rear, the upset shouts of seagulls could be heard as they argued over residue from the ship's galley, which the chef rolled into the sea.

While standing there alone, he remembered the last few days. When he had returned with Oghlar from the Eagle's nest, he had found Azraphel in the harbor with an angry captain and a lazy crew. More than two weeks had passed since he had left and they had fallen behind schedule again. Lominas had yelled at him, red from rage, as if he were a cabin boy.

"Abarhil, you are completely irresponsible. Do you even remember what you promised to your father? Instead of taking care of the ship, you are running around the mountains. This journey isn't normal. This can't end well! From the beginning, there are problems and difficulties! Gods, why do I have to be a captain on such a journey?"

Lominas had been irritated to the point of insanity by everything associated with the number of delays and unexpected events that had accompanied this sail. Before their departure, he had had a long conversation with Tharnizir, which had placed more pressure than usual on his shoulders; beginning with overseeing the business matters, through directing the restless Abarhil, and ending with complying with the plan of the journey. It had been similar to when he had had to hold a wet rope of a swelling sail in turbulent wind. Despite trying as hard as he could, he had felt like it was slipping through his clenched fingers. He felt the same this time. He did not have things under control.

Abarhil had to admit that he had been devoting his time to adventures and long postponed plans instead of small dull tasks so important for the business. Reluctantly, he had to admit that his fierceness and impatience were to blame for the failure of his previous trades in Osttar.

He was just about to return to the rear to talk to the helmsman when Oghlar joined him. He instinctively sensed what was going on in Abarhil's mind. He stood beside him in silence, then broke it after a while.

"I think we should go further south than usual this year. What do you think?"

Abarhil looked at him briefly and said: "I don't know, maybe. I've thought about it. Why do you think it's a good idea?"

"I have got eyes, so I watch. There is an odd atmosphere on the ship and Lominas is as nervous as a primipara. I assume he got some tasks from your father. He should watch you and he knows well he is not managing. I must confess that I do not envy Lominas. Indeed, it is not easy to watch over such a wild stallion and stick to the plan."

As always, merry flames sparkled in Oghlar's eyes when he teased Abarhil. But he did not agree to partake in the game today.

"And how can going further south help us?" replied ratty Abarhil with his eyes still fixed on the distant horizon.

"Well, I heard that further in the south, in the middle of the humid forests, a mighty river flows into the sea, and there sinam, ganilva, and spices can be bought. Furthermore, I heard that the locals trade, perhaps with gold. There we could make up for our losses so far. What do you think?"

"Perhaps you're right," replied Abarhil thoughtfully, "I don't trust the gold but spices could be a win. I'll give it some thought."

Oghlar stood beside Abarhil for another moment, but when he did not speak again he shrugged and left for the rear, leaving him to his own thoughts.

In the following days, the journey went without any difficulties or problems. They sailed along the coast where the continuous cliffs were broken only by the mouth of the Red River. The red water of Birighin flowed into the sea in split branches, creating a reddish spot which dissolved into the surrounding blue sea water. Two days later, they saw a distant dark volcano cone with a red irradiated top, which spewed clouds of ash into the sky from time to time. According to Chyrrkhan legends, it was the seat of Durghár, a dark lord of the underworld, who had been defeated by his brother Maghúr at the beginning of time and had been shackled and imprisoned in the underworld. Madrughin flowed through the desolation under the volcano, breaking its way through the plains of volcanic sediments that gave it the dark color that left the dark red spot in the sea. Madrughin was translated as the Border River in the common language. Indeed, its flow separated the sparsely populated plains of the southern Anghir from the deserted land of swamps and hills called Bôghir, the Wild land. Those were savannas covered by thick high grass, which turned into vast swamps and wetlands around the basins of the Falghin and Welghin rivers.

The mood on the ship was slowly improving during the calm journey and even Lominas ceased his grumbling for a while. Therefore, Abarhil was able to dedicate his time to his great interest, cartography. He had loved maps since his youth, they appealed to his imagination and he

could spend hours pouring over them. He liked comparing them, marking new landmarks, measuring distance and he improved them and made them more accurate with every journey. It was difficult work but he liked it, so he never regretted the time and effort. With each journey his map gained accuracy and was quickly becoming his pride. After he exchanged the map of the northern coast with Deón, he was quite certain that there was a set of maps in his cabin which could not be found anywhere else in Merélos.

Meanwhile, Azraphel continued along the deserted coast, which Abarhil jotted down in his map as Azar Gôwilb, the Sea of Tranquility. Their next stop, however, was much further south, on the border between Bôghir and Schadarghir. Two weeks after their departure from Nirruch they arrived at their annual target, the mouth of Ogghin, the Southern River. Here, like every year, the crew of Azraphel met Nomghans to exchange the products of craft workshops from Merélos for local goods. As mentioned earlier, those were only shepherds and hunters but they could still offer interesting goods for trade. The most valuable commodities were ivory, exotic furs, colorful feathers and exceptionally rough gems which were collected by the locals in the streams and caves on the upper reaches of the river. Like every year, hundreds of locals awaited Azraphel in the temporary camp. Although the trading went well, Abarhil could not stop thinking about what Oghlar had told him. So far, Azraphel had never dared to sail south so far that Tharnizir could buy rare southern spices himself. Pepper, sinam, ginger, cinnamon, ganilva, those were all goods the price of which was rising in proportion to the distance it traveled to the North. On the market in Merélos, the price of these spices was twice as much in Osttar, and four times the price in Nirruch where Tharnizir traded with Tighan sailors. Abarhil could only guess what price would he get from the locals who collected spices in the forests or grew them on small fields near their villages.

Spurred on by Oghlar's notes and his own thoughts, he decided to persuade Lominas about this plan. He invited him to his cabin where he

had prepared his maps and calculations. He was expecting a lack of understanding, however, he was not ready for the fierce resistance he encountered. When he briefly presented his plan, Lominas' face flushed with anger and resentment and he blew up: "Abarhil, I do not agree! By the Gortar's whip, you have gone mad. It is madness to go further south. No, and again no! Damn it! Have you not had enough of adventures?"

However, the outburst calmed him down, and so although his attitude and gestures still expressed disapproval, he continued calmly: "The lower deck is half-full and we have to pick up the goods in Nirruich we left there. Where do you think we will store it all?"

Abarhil went back and forth across the cabin several times. He was trying to read Lominas' eyes and gestures and find a way to persuade him. But Lominas stood like a statue. Clenched fists and arms crossed against his chest revealed his internal struggle and the strain with which he controlled his feelings. He looked out the window at the open sea. Abarhil spoke unusually softly and slowly.

"But Lominas, you haven't heard my reasons yet. We're friends, aren't we? Could you then at least hear me out?"

Lominas turned his attention back to the cabin and nodded almost imperceptibly.

"You know as well as I do that spices aren't ivory, fur or bags of cotton. They won't take up much space and the profit of each pound we deliver will be much higher than of any other goods. And trust me, I calculated it maybe ten times."

Abarhil paused and watched Lominas to see whether his reasons somehow eroded Lominas' solid disapproval. He saw nothing, so he decided to play another of his trump cards in this strange game. "And you know very well that until now we haven't done such good trades. My father won't praise us for that. Neither one of us. Do you really believe that I propose this only because of my adventurous whims?"

Lominas was not ready to back down. "Very well, Abarhil, but it is almost the end of the month of first blossoms and in a few days Slaven begins. Azraphel has been sailing for three months. Autumn storms may begin in the next four months and what if we do not return on time?"

Yes, this was a compelling argument but Abarhil was prepared even for this.

"They may or may not. Usually the storms begin at the end of the month of withering. Trust me! To Nirruch, it's two weeks and from there to the mouth of the Great River it's another two weeks. We will have a couple of days in Nirruch and another one or two in Osttar. Altogether, it's about a month and a half. I think we still have a good two months!"

Lominas walked away from the window and came to the table where the unfolded maps, a pitcher of water, and a few tin cups lay. He poured water into one of them and drank it all. Reluctantly he had to admit that Abarhil made some sense. However, he was not going to back down easily.

"Of course, Abarhil, but you are counting on good wind and no delays or difficulties. You know yourself what we have encountered during this sail already. I know I have been complaining a lot over the last few weeks. But I have had an unpleasant feeling about this sail from the very beginning. We have talked about it already." He turned to Abarhil and looked him directly in the eyes, before forgivingly adding: "Please, consider everything very carefully!"

Abarhil turned the unfolded map toward Lominas and pointed a finger at it.

"I agree with you. I'm also aware of the delays and difficulties, but you must admit we've managed so far. Therefore good fortune and the Gods are on our side. I think that with their support we'll manage sailing even further south."

He put his finger on the map.

"We're moored here. According to Oghlar, it's the same distance to the mouth of the Forest River as it is from the Western Cape to the mouth of Ogghin. About two weeks."

When Lominas heard the navigator's name, it looked like Abarhil had just pricked a hornet's nest.

"Oghlar! Oghlar said so! Oghlar agreed! I talked to him too. Only the Gods know why he yearns to sail south so much! Does he want to surpass his father? And furthermore, has our navigator become our captain to say where we'll sail?" His face became tight and tense as he grabbed Abarhil's hand. "Abarhil, please, I repeat what I've said from the beginning. I do not like this. I have never seen so many unexpected difficulties. And it is not only me. Even the others say that this sail cannot end well!"

Abarhil slid his arm from Lominas' grip. He crossed the cabin and then walked back again. Silently, he turned and looked into Lominas's strained and worried face. Lominas is right, he thought, this year's sail has certainly not been usual. What if something unexpected happens and they do not manage to return? He recalled his conversation with his mother just before their departure. She had told him he might need to spend the winter in Osttar. If they got caught up in the autumn storms before they were able to return, Azraphel could anchor in Osttar Bay and sell the goods there. Spices can earn amazing sums even there. He could leave Azraphel in Osttar over the winter and travel to Merélos with a caravan across the Wastelands. At present, he was not even thinking of the crew and their families who would be awaiting them in vain. He looked at Lominas again who silently watched him and tried to guess what was going on in his mind.

"Lominas, do you have an answer for my father prepared? What will you tell him if we return only with the goods we have and which we've traded so far? I don't think I'm wrong when I say that this will hardly cover the cost of this year's sail. Will this be the first time Azraphel returns with so poor a cargo?"

Lominas hesitated. Until now he had only seen and complained about the difficulties of the journey. He had not thought of what he would tell his employer after the return to their home port. He was well aware that his reward was dependent on the profit of the journey. Abarhil sensed what was going on in his mind, so he let him think before he showed his next card.

"We'll sail south. Two weeks. Not a day more. If we don't find the mouth of the river, we will turn back and sail back up north. If we find it, we will stay for a week, maybe two. No more! Then we will go back immediately. If I count correctly, we'll be back here, at the mouth of Ogghin, in the middle of the month of winds. And then we'll sail without stopping, I promise! If it all goes well, we'll see the mouth of Dardún at the end of the month of harvest."

Lominas still did not say a word. Leaning against the desk he watched Abarhil and continued to think. If Azraphel were to return with a rich cargo, he could expect a heavy reward. He knew well that Tharnizir could be generous. If he returned with an empty lower deck, Tharnizir would ask for reasons. He was aware that blaming Abarhil was not possible. Success has many friends and asks for no explanation, but there is no sufficient explanation for failure.

"Well, I agree, two weeks and not a day more. And we will not stop on the way back!" confirmed Lominas, almost persuaded by Abarhil's promises. "In Nirruch, we will stay only for as long as loading the goods takes. No trips!" he added, stating the conditions. Abarhil smiled broadly. He knew he had won, so he held out his hand to Lominas.

"I agree. Done! Let's shake hands!"

"Good, tomorrow at dawn we will leave for the South. Let us pray to Guiar to be on our side," said Lominas as they shook hands.

When he had left, Abarhil sat down on his bed relieved. So he had done it, he had convinced Lominas of his truth. Every wish can come true when one is persistent enough.

A wish. He recalled what his mother had once told him.

He saw himself as a young boy running around the kitchen. Waving a small wooden sword and getting in his mother's way. He had just won one important victory, so he turned his cheerful face to his mother.

"Mom, did you see it? Was I like Elómir?"

She began to laugh.

"Of course, you fought like a lion, exactly like Elómir Râur, little one!"

He nodded enthusiastically but then his child's face became thoughtful.

"Mommy, I will have to practice a lot before I will be like Gothwin. Do you think that if I'm diligent I will be like Elómir when I grow up?"

His face waited anxiously for his mother's response. Serniphel felt that at that moment she could not joke because she might hurt that little heart which longed for heroic deeds. She sat down and drew him to her.

"You can do it, Abarhil! You can do anything you wish for in life! It's just that your wish must be strong and you must be persistent!"

He remembered how he had, back then, stubbornly shrugged his eyebrows and said firmly: "I will! I will be persistent and I will practice every day!"

I what you wish for, because your wish might end up like Bregedôr's winning crusade! Do you remember the story about the crusade of the king Bregedôr?"

The memory vanished. Beregedôr's winning crusade was a saying that was used for great deeds and plans that led to the overrating of one's abilities and ultimately to the destruction of the one who started them.

Abarhil felt tightness in his chest. These images, together with Lominas' resistance, sowed the seed of doubt in his mind. Was his wish to sail south the same as Bregedôr's Crusade?



The next day, the ship raised the anchor and to the surprise of the entire crew, except for the navigator and the captain, it did not turn its prow to the expected North, but to the South again. They sailed along the flat coast, covered with large sandy beaches slowly turning into large grassy savannas, for ten days. These waters were marked in Abarhil's maps as Azar Estâr, the Sea of Hope, because they were looking for the mouth of the Forest River every day. However, so far nothing had indicated that the mouth could be anywhere near. When they circumnavigated the tip of the mainland, which Abarhil named the Dark Cape, the coast finally turned dark due to a thick forest which reached out to the seashore.

"Exactly as Oghlar recounted," said the sailors tentatively, watching the terrifying dark green wall. Nergal's stories had the effect of water poured onto hot oil, and they prophesied that Azraphel would end up in a huge vortex which supposedly awaited them at the end of the world. The sailors began to recall all the horrifying stories about captains who had not heeded the warnings and had gone to seek the lost shores of Dairané and had never returned. Such stories were told all around the Sealands for dozens of years. Many crew members began to gripe, and Korah, who became their spokesman, complained the most.

"I was hired for a sail to the south, to Nirruch. But now we've gone a month worth of sailing further south. Who do they, for Dâurkhôr's sake, want to trade with here? Will someone explain, dammit? We're not paid for this!"

Excitement and nervousness on the ship increased when they came closer to the coast. The sailors saw what they, until then, had only known from Oghlar's stories, a sea dragon. At a distance of fewer than a

hundred feet, a huge lizard, about ten fathoms long, swam along the side of the ship.

"Dragon, did you see it? Was it a real dragon? I was right, the old legends don't lie, dragons live!"

Nergal was the only one who felt no joy from the unusual encounter. He felt that after some time he had the upper hand and this feeling fully dissolved his worries. Unfortunately, it concerned only himself. The same day, in the late afternoon, the sea shore turned sharply east into the mainland. They sailed around a low cape and with the sails half pulled down they continued to head east within reach of the shore. The sun was setting behind the distant horizon when Amarsin, who was charged with cleaning the deck, lowered a bucket over the lateral bracing to draw out water for cleaning. In a little while, his shouting resounded across the deck.

"The water is fresh! Hey, can you hear me? The water is fresh!"

This attracted the entire crew, including the captain and Abarhil, on the deck.

"You see, it's fresh! Go ahead, try it!"

The cabin boy could not get enough of his discovery and playfully splashed the water from the bucket on those standing around.

"It's a wonder, fresh sea water! No one will believe us!" The approval of the helmsman and the rest echoed around. They were licking their drenched palms and faces and nodding in wonder. What a strange land they had found themselves in. Fresh sea water! But, like a lightning out of a blue sky came the voice of the navigator, who had also been attracted by the cabin boy's shouting.

"You are such a bunch of fools! Do not tell me you believe it? Fresh seawater! Who ever heard of that? You are like old women hearing about far away sails for the first time. They too would believe everything!"

Oghlar was sneering at all of them standing there. "Yes, maybe a sea of fresh water, but fresh seawater? Do you really not understand this?"

The men stared at him in amazement. The only response were frowning faces, puckered eyebrows, baffled eyes. The helmsman, who at first was amazed, agreed with the cabin boy. Now he turned to the captain but he only shrugged his shoulders in uncertainty. Even he did not understand Oghlar's sarcasm. Only in Abarhil's eyes did the sparks of enlightenment flash.

"Oghlar? Are you saying? No? It can't be true! This can't be..."

A triumphant smile crossed the navigator's face. "Thank Maghúr, at least one understood. Yes, crew, we are here, it is Brighin, the Forest River!"

Darmúk, the first officer, pulled himself together and sarcastically said: "Oghlar, do you have a heat stroke, man? You're making fools of us, right? River! Do you even know what a river looks like? A river's got a bank here and another one on the other side. Where's the other side then?"

"The water is fresh, we are in the mouth of the Forest River!" insisted Oghlar with a triumphant smile, not even paying attention to Darmúk's jeers.

The mouth of a river. The sailors looked amazed at the distant shore, which was, by all accounts, one bank of the mighty river. The second was out of sight and hidden away behind the horizon. A river of such proportions exceeded their imagination. They had measured every waterway against the Great River, but in comparison to this one it was just a poor stream. But whatever doubts the crew had, they would be able to find out for themselves the next day.

The moment came when the unclear outline of the second bank ascended over the horizon. It took more than two days before the river narrowed to less than a mile, approximately the width of Dardún before its mouth. Meanwhile, Azraphel continued slowly against the mighty

flow, using either favorable wind, or the power of the human arms of rowing sailors. The flow of the river was dark brown and full of mud, which had washed off the shores at the upper reaches of the river. The riverbed was divided into many branches made of a number of islands and islets covered with wild vegetation. It was difficult even for the navigator to decide which branch they should take, so they sailed very slowly and carefully. They had had to return several times when they had chosen a branch where the shallows and large fallen trees blocked Azraphel's way. Abarhil and Lominas, knowing they were pressured by time, eagerly pestered the navigator with questions of when they were going to finally see human settlements. Oghlar only scratched his neck awkwardly and smiled guiltily. According to what he had heard, there were supposed to be several villages near the mouth, but it looked like the earth had swallowed them. Could he have been wrong? Or might they have been on the opposite side of the huge river? Similar questions were running through his head and he had no idea that he would soon receive answers to these unspoken questions.

It was around midday, with the sun was directly overhead, and Azraphel was threading her way through a net of shallows and small isles when a small fleet of full riverboats blocked their way. The boats were hollowed from a single piece of wood with around ten small dark-skinned men sitting in each of them. Their boats had a high fore and stern decorated with ornate carvings and drawings. In the center of the fleet was a boat, twice as big as the others, which appeared to carry the local chief.

"Well, now, Dâurkhôr help us, there's at least a hundred of them," said the helmsman Henderch with a grimace after he saw the fleet. Abarhil commanded the crew to anchor the ship and to arm themselves, but apart from that he decided to wait. It did not take long for one of the boats to separate from the fleet and float within earshot of Azraphel. A small man stood up on the boat and shouted something in an unknown language. However, no one from the crew understood

anything he said. The man tried again in a dialect very similar to the original one.

"Well, you've got a mouth, monkeyman, but how about trying to speak human?" said Darmúk sarcastically. Zârik followed immediately: "Well, it's not looking like we're gonna do some long friendly talks."

"And the trades will look the same!" Korah could not resist adding this poisonous note.

"Shut up!" shouted Lominas angrily.

Meanwhile, the current brought the boat a few dozen feet from Azraphel. Then the man said something that Oghlar found a bit more comprehensible.

"Where your boat from and what you search on territory of Nigans?"

Although the navigator tried to respond in short simple sentences to be understandable, it did not seem that his level-headed speech satisfied the speaker. Only when he mentioned that they had brought a number of presents, did his interest increase.

"You wait until great Nigan chief decide what to do with you!"

The boat turned back and in a short while it reached the large boat in the middle of the fleet. In the meantime, Oghlar shared what he had picked up from the short conversation.

"They do not speak Chyrrkhan, it seems more like a dialect from south of Bôghir. I do not understand some expressions but the whole is quite comprehensible."

"So far, it doesn't seem to be leading to trade. It certainly doesn't seem like he's ever seen anyone like us before. Didn't he mention, by any chance, whether they have already traded with someone?" asked Lominas solicitously, but his question was left unanswered.

Abarhil agreed: "You're right, Lominas. But we can do nothing but wait now. Perhaps it'll change. We'll have to see. I'm going to prepare some gifts for that great chief of theirs."

Some time passed before the boat moved. Followed by other boats it slowly floated within an earshot of Azraphel. The interpreter had another message prepared.

"The great Nigan chief is ready to visit big boat and accept gifts. Want to know who will talk? Who your chief?"

Abarhil, who in the meantime had returned from his cabin, stepped forward, leaned on the rail of the ship and said: "I am the master of the ship. The great chief is welcome and presents are prepared for him. I guarantee him safe arrival as well as exit!"

The interpreter spoke with the chief.

"Good, Mozauko coming!"

After these words, the boat approached the vessel. It reached the side of the ship where the railing was the lowest. Sailors lowered a short rope ladder on Abarhil's behest. The first one who came on board was the interpreter who led the conversations. After him came several armed men, apparently guards, and after them the chief. The crew examined the newcomers. They were small in height, the tallest could only have measured around five feet. Their bodies, however, were well-built and protruding muscles showed underneath their black skin. Their faces were wide, their noses flat, and from a closer distance it was visible that their faces, shoulders, and arms were tattooed. In their short straight thick hair, they wore decorations made of feathers and wood. Except for a leather loincloth, they were completely naked. Their chief was an older, small, chubby man with an unpleasant face accented by a few ugly scars. His eyes buzzed around the deck curiously and greedily. He was dressed like his guards, only he had spotted fur of some predator thrown across his back. He wore a heavy chain on his neck with various

bones and stones hung on them, and among these Abarhil recognized a few golden nuggets.

'Is it possible that those sailor stories might be true, after all?' he thought to himself.

Meanwhile, the visitors examined the crew just as curiously. Tall Abarhil with his fair hair, which had grown long over time, aroused their interest. They stared at him bluntly, pointed at him, laughed, and overall, behaved very casually. It was apparent that they had never seen anyone similar. Some of the men began to walk around the deck and touch the ship's equipment. One of them found an unattended knife on a box, took it as his own, and showed it to his companions while shouting loudly.

Korah, whose knife it was, did not like this: "Hey! You little thief, give it back or you go overboard!"

And because he meant it, he started to walk toward him. The native however, was not going to give up his newly acquired asset and responded by aiming his short spear at the sailor. The crew shouted angrily. No words had even been spoken yet and a skirmish was about to begin. Abarhil intervened. With a wave of his hand, he calmed the crew and snapped at the angry sailor.

Then he turned to the interpreter. "Tell your chief he's most welcome on board. We will be happy to give him presents, but he has to tell his men that our hospitality has its limits!"

The interpreter puckered his eyebrows and he looked like he was trying to understand Abarhil's pronunciation. Only when Oghlar repeated it, did he nod and translate it to the chief. The two men spoke to each other for a while before the interpreter replied: "You strange tribe when the youngest rule. You maybe not smart. You came to the Nigan territory and here all belong to brave Mozauko. But now you can keep your boat. Chief is curious about your gifts."

When Oghlar translated this, it sparked an outrage among the crew.

"Well, I call this hospitality at its best. I didn't like the old monkeyman from the beginning! When I saw his eyes I told myself he's a rascal!" said the helmsman. Even Abarhil was flustered by such a response. He looked at Oghlar with questions, but Oghlar only shrugged his shoulders.

"So, I don't know if we should just lift the anchor, turn around, and throw that rascal and his entire crew into the river. They can surely swim, so let them taste our response for their hospitality," suggested the helmsman provocatively. This aroused shouts of agreements. Abarhil looked thoughtfully at the chief. He agreed with the crew, but for now held his temper. He did not mean to follow Henderch's advice but he surely could not let it go either. He turned to Oghlar.

"Tell them that we do believe in the rules of hospitality, but we're not accustomed to such behavior. We're going back!"

When Oghlar passed on the message and the interpreter translated it, a heated debate began among them. To stress his words, Abarhil motioned for his men to prepare the ship for departure. He told the others to show their weapons. This impressed the visitors. The interpreter spoke again but this time his speech was longer.

"The great Nigan chief know well rules of hospitality. When he get gifts, he invite strangers to our village to celebrate. Chief know why your boat come. We get messages from village down river. We know that big boats come and sell them weapons. Because those weapons, Nigans lose war and must move up river. Nigans too trade. We have a lot goods, spices and sofir."

Oghlar made a gesture to show he did not understand. The interpreter grabbed a small golden nugget that hung on his neck and continued: "Nigans good and generous friends when they get gifts. Mozauko invite your chief to village to celebrate. We make big feast in your honor."

When Oghtar had translated it all, Abarhil said: "Well, that looks more promising. Friendin, bring the things I have prepared from my cabin, they're on the table!"

When the cabin boy brought some things wrapped in canvas, Abarhil took them and unfolded them on the deck. There were knives, clay and pewter dishes, several cheap brass necklaces, and a few pieces of plain flax clothing.

"Those are my presents for the great chief of Nigans'. They are only samples of what we can offer if we trade with Nigans."

The chief squatted and examined the presents. He paid most attention to the knives and necklaces. Then he stood up and spoke to the interpreter.

"The chief thanks for gifts, but he think from man he get gifts for man. This be gifts for his wives. Nigans need weapons! Like your men have. Long knives and spikes for spears and arrows. Chief believe you make good trade in Nigan village. Here be payment for long knife for his warrior."

With these words, the interpreter threw a golden nugget at Korah's feet, which the chief had taken out from his necklace. Surprised, a sailor picked it up and showed the men around him, which raised a wave of interest. The chief watched with satisfaction as his gesture was received as he had expected.

"All men come and make good trade?"

When Oghtar translated this, Abarhil turned to his companions: "What do you think, should we try? Will we take a look at their village? Whether they really have spices and ,perhaps, gold?"

"Sir, I'd certainly try. We haven't seen gold anywhere along the coast!" said Darmúk from somewhere in the crowd of men watching the negotiation. Korah's nugget was being passed from one hand to another and awoke greed among the men. It was common that the crew traded

within their capabilities, and the idea of exchanging an ordinary knife for a golden nugget miraculously dispersed their fears and anger.

"Gold? I don't like that man. I wouldn't even trust that the nose between his eyes is his. Did you see his eyes when he stepped onto the deck?" said Henderch, in whom gold did not awaken greed.

Abarhil tentatively turned to Lominas. "I don't know, perhaps if we're very careful we can give it a try."

"Well, the gold looks good," he replied thoughtfully, while turning the nugget that had been passed to him in his hand.

"Oghlar?" Abarhil turned to the navigator with an unspoken question.

"I agree with the helmsman. Let's return to the mouth. The village Tighans visit must be there. You heard it. Even the chief mentioned it. We must have missed them; perhaps they are on the opposite shore. I too do not have a good feeling about him!"

Now, everything depended on Abarhil and his thoughts were almost visible. He was not tempted by greed as his companions were, but more by curiosity and a desire for adventure. He hesitated. Go back or continue?

The chief, who watched their conversation, knew what this was about even though he did not understand. He motioned to the interpreter and whispered something to him. The interpreter looked at him with surprise, but the chief nodded and so he turned to Oghlar. "The great Nigan chief know hospitality. Each man from the boat get sofir from chief when come to celebrate to village."

When Oghlar translated this, men started shouting enthusiastically. Their worries vanished and greed won over their caution. For the moment, it was decided. The chief and his men descended onto their boats and the fleet set forth against the river flow. Azraphel followed them, docking among several islets, close to a large inflow of the Forest River. The Nigan village, however, lay a few miles upstream. The

tributary or distributary to which the boats were heading was too shallow for Azraphel. The fleet stopped and the boat with the interpreter floated to the ship to find out what was happening. When Oghlar explained, he was given an invitation for the sailors to move into individual boats.

When Abarhil later told the story he would say: "I will never understand. I think we must've all gone mad. I don't know whether it was the gold, but most of us were blinded."

Henderch was the only one to say that he was not interested in either visiting the village or trading and he would remain on the ship. Another nine men were chosen to stay with him. The rest of the crew armed themselves upon Abarhil's command, packed goods to be traded and moved into the Nigan boats. With Abarhil, Lominas, and Oghlar as an interpreter there were seventeen men.

The Nigans rowed their overcrowded boats against the flow for another two hours before a vast plateau in the middle of the forest opened up in front of them. Now they could see one of three Nigan villages, the most important and largest one where the tribal chief lived. In a small bay, the boats ran onto a sandy beach and all the warriors left with their chief to the village.

The sailors were left alone and Abarhil commanded that no one was allowed to leave the group. Only now did he realize how much he had risked by permitting them to leave Azraphel. He felt a rush of responsibility and he did not want to increase the risk by splitting the group up again. No one paid any attention to them for quite a time, so they only watched the village and its surroundings. The settlement consisted of about thirty houses grouped together. As they later learned, each house was inhabited by one large family, which sometimes consisted of a few dozen people. In the middle, there stood a large circular building, which, as they were about to find out in a short while, Nigans used as an assembly house. Around the village there were a number of small fields. In these fields women and older children

worked. However now the majority of them had ran to the village, where from a safe distance they watched the group of unusual visitors. They waited for some time and the sun was low on the horizon when the interpreter eventually came back. Then he finally told them his name was Waiko.

"Mozauko ordered you great feast in the assembly house. Women prepare food and drink and we come for you soon."

"We thought we'd trade first? We brought the goods?" said Abarhil anxiously.

Waiko shook his head decisively. "First the feast, it is great honor. Good food, drink, and dancing to reconcile spirits. Trading tomorrow."

Abarhil and Oghlar looked at each other uneasily and the navigator pointed at the boats spread out along the beach. "Something seems off here. I do not like it at all. I would rather get into the boats and go down the river towards the ship. We would make it before it gets dark."

"Well, perhaps it's not as bad? Until now, they've been quite friendly. And look, they're coming, we can't go now," said Lominas, pointing at the long procession heading from the village to the river. The procession was led by the chief Mozauko, and another important person from the tribe, a shaman whose name was, as they were to find out later, Izandro. At the head, young half-naked girls walked carrying floral wreaths and presents to honor their guests. Among the sailors, who had been on the journey for more than three months, this aroused excitement and they began to poke each other and a few lewd comments could be heard. However, when the tiny Nigan girls put the wreaths around their necks, most of them knelt with a fatuous grin, and many even put aside their warmers and helmets to fit the wreaths on their necks. The chief kept his promise and each sailor received a neck pouch with a gold nugget. The faces of all, Lominas' included, lit up with satisfaction. The procession turned around and slowly began to walk back to the village. Each of the men were accompanied by several

locals who led them into the assembly house where refreshments were prepared.

In this region, darkness came rapidly. Before they sat down in a circle around the free space, where the chief sat in an elevated position, it became dark outside. Many burning torches around the perimeter now provided light. Behind the sailors on the outer circle, local men sat down, and after them women and children. In the meantime, young girls served food to the sitting sailors. The food consisted of baked fish, baked and fresh fruit, and pancakes made of a special flour. It all tasted great. It seemed that Lominas was right and that worrying was unnecessary. There was nothing sinister in the food or the way their hosts behaved. Mozauko was sitting at the elevated place, talking to other men and sometimes he laughed livelily. Abarhil saw nothing to justify his hidden worries. He sought out Oghlar's eyes. It looked like the navigator had also calmed down and he smiled at him subtly. In spite of all of this, Abarhil could not shake the feeling of uneasiness. He remembered the warmth of the hospitality in Waghirach.

"That's it. The warmth is missing. They are all holding back as if they are forbidden to speak with us. Gods, let this end well," he whispered to himself as he swore to be vigilant.

When the meals were finished, the young girls carried wicker bowls containing leftovers. Behind the circle of men, the sound of drums and rattles could be heard. The sounds were isolated at first and did not create any solid rhythm. It looked like the musicians were talking to each other using their instruments. A drum resounded from one corner, then from the opposite corner another drum or rattle responded. Then the sounds slowly began to merge into a continuous and smooth rhythm. The sailors turned back, looking at each other, and smiling with uncertainty.

What does this mean? What should they do?

The rhythm accelerated and a couple of dancers jumped into the middle of the circle. They began to rotate, the rattles on their wrists and ankles

bolstering the captivating and accelerating rhythm. Clapping and encouraging sounds came from the onlookers. The sailors, who at first did not know what to do with their hands, now began to yield to the entrancing rhythm and the enthusiasm surrounding them. They had already set aside their weapons and now they even began to drop parts of their armor too. The temperature in the hut was increasing and the heat began to overcome the dancers as well as the spectators. At the behest of the chief, women began to serve drinks. The sound of the beating drums turned into a wild whirling rhythm, which began to take hold of the senses more and more. Some of the sailors began to slap their thighs to the rhythm.

Abarhil felt like his throat had become completely dry. He turned to look around for a drink. A woman standing behind him cheerfully offered him a fruit drink. He smiled thankfully and took the wooden bowl. First, he only tasted it. The drink was murky and not very tempting at first sight. It tasted bitter but it was cooling. The whirling of the drums reached a crescendo and some of the dancers had already sunk into trance. Abarhil's thirst became uncontrollable. He looked into the bowl and drank it all at once. He failed to notice Oghlar's cautionary and concerned look.

The frenzy overwhelmed both the dancers and the spectators. Abarhil saw some sailors jump up and join the dancers. He felt like the rhythm was taking over his senses, too. His alertness and dedication dissolved in the wild throbbing sounds. He felt his blood pounding in his ears to the beat of the drums.

Then suddenly his perception changed. To his surprise, he realized that the sounds were disappearing. He heard them as if from a distance, where they merged into a single soft whirling colorful ball. I can see sounds, he thought to himself, and felt the urge to laugh. He looked around and saw that some of his men were rolling on the floor in uncontrollable laughter.

He looked back at the dancers. He felt like they were dancing in the center of a ball made of sounds. As the sounds faded, his sight began to sharpen. He saw Lominas get up from his place and splitting into two. Simultaneously, Lominas sat on the floor and danced. He saw men who stood motionless, but they also seemed to move at the same time. He wanted to get up but his knees softened and he fell to the ground. As he fell, he saw Oghlar who stood like a tree with his arms spread. Everything was spinning at an incredible speed. He fell on his back, his eyes rolled, and all of a sudden he was looking up at the dark sky studded with an endless carpet of stars.

He exploded. His mind exploded.

He lost all sense of perception of his own body. He was everything and nothing at the same time and he flew across the endless sky. With amazement, he watched the eternal and infinite dance of stars. Stars were bursting all around him in incredible colors. He had never seen such wonderful colors before. It felt as if he was falling down from an enormous height. He saw a sea below him and jumped right in. Then he realized he was part of a flock of dolphins who played in the ocean waves. He felt their simple joy of motion.

I am. And I live. He thought to himself.

Then the images transformed again. Now he was flying above the ground. Flashing beneath him were boundless grass plains full of game, thick dark forests and high mountains covered with snow and ice. He lost all track of time; he did not know whether things were taking a second or an eternity. He felt as if he was hearing the time roar and rumble more and more, until finally the noise absorbed his mind. Then, all of a sudden, everything stopped and he saw just white all around. It was so quiet that it tore his ears. He realized he was standing alone in a snowy unknown landscape. On one side, the white plain stretched out to the horizon. On the opposite side he saw a thick forest of spruce and pine trees. He felt the snow creaking beneath his feet. With surprise he realized his arms and legs had returned again. He began to run. He was

in a hurry. He assumed his mouth was shouting, and, though he perceived the sound, he did not understand the words.

His ears were full of the sound of uproar, yells and metal rumbling sounds. These were the sounds of trumpets and drums. He found himself in a battle. He heard battle noises, the neighing of horses, and furious and poignant laments. With some amusement, he realized he had a sword in his hand. All of a sudden he was overcome with cold, wild, devastating, absorbing hatred. Kill. He could clearly perceive his immeasurable power. He saw his opponents moving towards him. They were so very slow. It was as if their legs were loaded with weights. He ran towards them and his sword caused devastation. With satisfaction, he saw the terror and horror he was causing among his opponents. Equally as coarsely he perceived his feelings. Power, invincibility, and cold ruthless hatred. His body worked as a perfect machine. He did not know how long all of this had taken, but he suddenly realized his limbs were becoming stiff. He felt as if his body was being tied down by a foreign will. He wanted to shake the feeling off. He turned and shuddered with horror. He was looking into foreign eyes. Huge, green eyes with elongated pupils. It was a cold snake look. Those eyes slowly filled his entire field of vision. Their will was stronger than his. They robbed him of his strength. He shook. He felt horror. He tried to prevent his panic but in vain. His limbs froze. He felt tied up, he wanted to look away but couldn't. With terror he realized that this alien had entered his mind and was now beginning to control it.

Then he heard a sound. It ceased to exist and then re-appeared. It sounded like weak, slurred music coming from a great distance. Beautiful, soothing, and protective music. He could not look back. His stiff limbs began to feel again. He felt calm, warm, and protected. He felt as if the music spoke to him, and tried to tell him something. He wanted to understand so much. The music was morphing into letters, whirling and creating words that were so well-known. He so desperately wanted to hear and understand.