

Bones of the Past

written by Holly

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PROLOGUE

Throughout Ariss, the first bells of morning began to sound. The heavy fog that shrouded the city muted their clamor—still, they were loud enough to warn the whores who plied their trade in the street beneath Roba Morgasdotte's window their night's work was done. They were loud enough to rouse the musician who lived in the next apartment; through the thin walls, Roba heard him shuffling about the room, then out and down the hall to the communal water closet. After a few moments, his door slammed again and he began sawing away with great energy but little skill on his violetto. The poor instrument's squeals and shrieks and coughing stutters set Roba's teeth on edge. She clenched her fist around the pen and wrote faster.

The sheer incompetence of the violettist next door didn't bother Roba as much as her suspicion that he was making more money butchering music than she was teaching. *He'll still be killing Mambrsorme's "Apprentice of Dherolg" long after I've starved to death and blown away to dust*, she thought, and glared at the wall.

She had no more time to polish the student's paper. Her landlady rose with the bells. At any moment, the woman might arrive at her door and begin bellowing like a fishwife after the money Roba still owed her—and then Roba would have to climb out her window and down the stone-and-daub wall again to avoid the harridan.

No thanks, she decided. *I nearly broke my neck last time.*

She shoved the paper into her bag, grabbed her cloak, and swung it haphazardly over her shoulders as she ran for the door. If she were lucky, she'd get out before Madame Greldene caught her; if she were really lucky, she would find the student whose paper she'd edited before Antis. The four copper hidas he owed her would buy an entire loaf of two-day-old bread, a flask of watered wine, and a small pot of fish paste—awful fare, but enough to keep her on the right side of starvation for another day.

And tomorrow, she thought, as she crept down the rickety wooden stairs to the first floor, tomorrow I attend the secret meeting of the Delmuir Society. If afterward I don't get thrown out of the city for being a subversive, maybe Thirk will give me that raise he mentioned. She was nervous about any association with the Delmuir Society—from her department head's whispered comments, she gathered that it was dangerous to be a member—maybe even to associate with members. *I don't care anymore, though. I'll be a subversive if it gets me enough money to pay my rent.*

Two whores, hard-eyed and thin-lipped, swung into the dark, narrow hall from outside and headed for their room. Roba gave them both a polite, silent nod of greeting. The first merely nodded in return.

The second, with a malicious smile, yelled, "Ho, Teach-er! Madame said if I saw tha' I was to tell tha' she wants her money by th' morrow—or she will take tha' rent out in trade. If tha' canna pay her, tha' can stand onna corner with me, Teach-er!"

Behind Roba, Madame Greldene's door flew open with a crash, and the landlady roared, "I want mah money now, you! Today—or I'll throw you into the street!"

Roba didn't waste time looking over her shoulder. She could hear the woman's thundering footsteps behind her. She bolted.

Chapter 1

Seven-Fingered Fat Girl tested the soothing hush of wind through the trees, the soft murmur of a nearby brook, and the restful whispering of leaves—and found the jungle a liar. Jungles were never gentle. Thick loam on the woodland floor muffled the measured tread of big maneaters like roshu and koriu—the pleasant rustle of leaves covered the hiss of leather-winged dooru as they stooped to kill. Delicate greenery gave hiding places to smaller assassins; sometimes the greenery was the assassin. Prickling hairs on the back of her neck told her the jungle was hiding something now.

She had the point, leading the band of tagnu far from its last trade stop at Five Dots Silk. They were upland and deep in unknown terrain; and here, in a valley with the bony spines of mountains rising on either side, the trees were shorter, of smaller girth, and farther apart than those around the villages where they traded. The underbrush was heavy; the canopy above thin and in some places nonexistent. Everything about this place conspired to expose them to the things that hunted humans. The band roved in a pack, wary.

Seven-Fingered Fat Girl fought to slow her ragged breathing. She tightened her grip on her dartstick and shifted her dart packs to a more accessible position. “Myed on the right,” she snapped at her followers. She trotted around the coils of vine draped over the branches ahead, bare feet padding noiselessly.

Whitened bones gleamed from beneath the myed’s glossy leaves and told a truth the gaudy, sweet-scented flowers would have hidden. But the myed was merely a little danger to those who remembered to watch for it. The bigger dangers were not so easily avoided.

And with that thought still fresh in her mind, she heard it again—a subtle click, a near-silent cough more nerve-wracking than the most violent face-to-face confrontation. Without a doubt, something was stalking them.

Behind her and to her left, Dog Nose pulled a hurlstick from his carrier and twisted the rawhide thong in a spiral to the middle; he picked up the pace of his lope. “They’re on both sides.”

“Ya. Close in. Weapons ready.” Seven-Fingered Fat Girl shoved a poisoned dart into her dartstick, never missing her stride. Her nerves stretched taut. Behind her, all six companions moved closer to her and to each other. The tagnu increased their pace to an easy run, eyes scanning everything.

At that moment, she could even have welcomed the hated tree-paths of the Silk People. If the tagnu had been on such a tree-path, there would have been only one direction from which the skulking tagnu hunters could have attacked—impenetrable walls of trees would have guarded their sides, and the villages of the stinking Silk People would have protected their backs.

Ahead, the trees thinned further, and the underbrush became sparser—and in a beacon of sunlight, she spotted a point where the ground rose perceptibly into an artificial-looking mound. This mound was less overgrown than the surrounding terrain. She knew from experience that it was better to fight from high ground, so she nodded sharply in the direction of the rise, and the band, swarmlike, shifted and reformed and surged forward on its new course.

From both sides, the jungle echoed with the scurrying of heavy feet. Underbrush cracked as the unseen hunters maneuvered to cut off their prey. Then one of the stalking beasts emitted a low, rolling trill, followed by a bass hiccup. Fear hit Seven-Fingered Fat Girl like a gut-punch.

"Kellinks!" Toes Point In gasped. "Oh, Keyu, we're going to die!"

"Blast Keyu!" Fat Girl yelled. "Run faster!"

Any of a handful of predators could have been after them. That kellinks were the beasts on their trail, however, was an evil omen. Seven-Fingered Fat Girl cursed Keyu and her stupid ambition and sheer bad luck—bad fat. Four Winds Band could have stayed on the cleared paths—they had nearly enough to eat most days, and they probably would have scraped by without new trades. They didn't have much chance to scrape by against kellinks, however. The six-legged beasts were fast and tough and mean. They inhabited the deep jungle, ran in packs large enough to surround the herdbeasts they favored, and killed by darting in at their prey one at a time, nipping and snapping.

One bite was all a kellink would need against them; its spittle was deadly to humans. Seven-Fingered Fat Girl got her name because she once scratched her hand on a thorn on which a kellink had drooled. If Dog Nose had not sliced off three of her fingers with his dagger the day they turned red and started to swell, she would not have lived to run with Four Winds Band. For all the good it will do now, she thought.

Runs Slow made whimpering noises and stumbled along at the back of the pack, losing ground. Laughs Like A Roshi dropped back with her and urged her on. They would have made easy targets for their scaled-and-fanged pursuers, but kellinks corralled their prey. If they weren't herding us into a trap, Fat Girl thought, those two would be dead already.

Fat Girl ignored the stabbing pain in her left side and the breath that burned her lungs and whistled through her pursed lips. The mound was close, almost within reach. She quit pacing herself and bolted. If she could just get to that high ground—but to her right, a sudden flash of sunlight dappled a kellink's green-gold scales as it charged in to cut her off.

She saw the beast and put her dartstick to her lips and blew.

The dart, like a deadly bird, homed in on its target and landed silently. The kellink roared. She caught a glimpse of the beast twisting, trying to bite her missile out of its shoulder. Then the poison hit the creature's bloodstream, and every muscle in its body went rigid. The dead kellink crashed to the ground just as she reached the slope of the mound.

She found the going steeper than it had looked from the distance. The mound was a rubble of scree and square-cut, massive, tumbled stones. She scrabbled her way up, using the sparse, scrawny trees that grew among the rubble as handholds. Rock shards scraped her knees and the palms of her hands, while big stone blocks tripped her and bruised her shins. She loosed miniature avalanches of whitestone talus with each upward move, and as often as not, she slipped down a span for every two upward spans of progress she made. At the top, she turned and crouched and panted. Below, the rest of Four Winds Band scrambled behind her, still alive. All her people might yet survive—kellinks could run forever, but the beasts couldn't climb.

Dog Nose had kept up with her and was near the top of the rubble mound. Fat Girl reached down from her perch and gave him a hand up. He, in turn, assisted Three Scars and Spotted Face to safety.

The four tagnu at the top pelted the kellinks while the last three tagnu climbed.

Dog Nose muttered something as he buried one of his hurlsticks in the chest of a big kellink.

Fat Girl reloaded her dartstick. "What?"

"I said Runs Slow is going to get us killed one of these days." He launched another throw into the swarming kellink pack, and the nearest of the monsters roared and snapped at

the hurlstick. Fat Girl hit that one with a dart, and after an instant, the beast fell to its side, arching its spine and foaming around the mouth. The rest of the kellinks edged backward toward thicker cover.

“Na!” Fat Girl snapped. “She’s going to get herself killed—and maybe take Laughs Like A Roshi with her. But you shouldn’t complain about her. She hasn’t slowed your feet.” Seven-Fingered Fat Girl refused to dwell on Runs Slow’s unfitness to be tagnu. It was a problem that would resolve itself eventually. In the eight or nine season cycles Fat Girl had been tagnu, every original member of Four Winds Band—except herself and Dog Nose—had been killed. Most of the fresh recruits the band picked to replace them were also dead. Runs Slow was simply one of those people Fat Girl didn’t intend to get to know very well; there wasn’t much point.

She blew a series of hard, short puffs through her dartstick and a stream of tiny red missiles skimmed over the heads of her band. Three kellinks bucked and died, and the rest edged just out of range and started up a hideous keening shriek that made Fat Girl’s teeth hurt.

Meanwhile, the last three tagnu made progress. Toes Point In, who was a poor climber, was finally near the top. Laughs Like A Roshi had braced against a huge block of stone halfway up the mound; he threw his hurlsticks at any kellinks who ventured too close, protecting Runs Slow, who climbed and cried at the same time.

Finally even Runs Slow was out of danger. Fat Girl whistled shrilly, and the tagnu held their attack. No sense wasting ammunition, she thought. The kellinks dropped out of sight in the underbrush. They would crouch there, waiting, until the dead kellinks began to rot—or until the tagnu grew unwary or desperate for food and ventured within their reach. The big beasts snarled and trilled, and Fat Girl frowned. The kellinks would wait a long time for her tagnu.

Runs Slow reached the top, puffing and sobbing, with Laughs Like A Roshi right behind her. "I want to go home," she wailed. "I want my mommy! I want my daddy!" Tears rolled down her round, pink-flushed cheeks.

Seven-Fingered Fat Girl felt a long-festering wound reopen in her soul, but she refused to pay it any attention. "Tagnu don't have mommies and daddies," she said. She tucked her dartstick into the waistband of her myr and made a show of counting her remaining darts so she wouldn't have to look at Runs Slow. If Fat Girl just didn't have to look at the younger girl, her own tears would stay safely hidden. "You're tagnu now," she snapped.

"I don't want to be tagnu! I want to go home!"

Don't we all? Seven-Fingered Fat Girl thought, feeling a swell of old bitterness. If we just had a home to go to.

All the tagnu sat on the top of the rubble mound, breathing hard, looking like they were trying not to hear what Runs Slow had just said. The tagnu had an unspoken code that prevented anyone from talking about the days when they had been real children, before they became tagnu. Runs Slow had violated that code in the worst way, by reminding each of them of the best of all they had lost.

Seven-Fingered Fat Girl almost wished the rest of the band could feed the child to the kellinks. Instead, she looked more closely at the pile of stone on which she stood. She bent down and ran her finger along the straight, square shapes, still recognizable in spite of moss and obvious weathering. She looked along the top of the mound, which became less a pile of rubble and more of a stone causeway further back, and split in two directions. A few interesting white bulges showed over the line of what seemed to be a very high wall.

Dog Nose watched her, then nodded in the direction of the kellinks. "Wonder why they ran us right to a spot where we

could escape.” Like Fat Girl, he’d been studying the scree, but with a different purpose. He took his cutter out of his pack and tried the various kinds of rock in the rubble against it. He found a bit of glossy brown stone that was to his liking and chipped at it carefully, working it into a stone head for a hurlstick.

She was surprised by the kellinks’ behavior herself, but she had an idea. “They probably run most of their prey against this wall to trap it. Not many herdbeasts can climb.”

Dog Nose put the unfinished hurlstick head into the rawhide bag at his waist and dug through the scree for more of the brown stone. The other, younger tagnu watched him, then imitated his actions.

“Ya,” he finally said, and pouched a few more bits of stone. “Good fat for us. You saved us again.”

Fat Girl shrugged. “Maybe. Or maybe I have trapped us between kellinks and starvation. We need to see where this wall goes. We may be stuck here a while.”

At her signal, the band left off stone hunting and stood, brushing hands on skinny thighs or rough-woven myr—the ragged loincloths that were their only clothing. They waited and watched her. She turned without another word and paced cautiously along the top of the wall. Behind her, the tagnu followed single file.

Away from the rubble mound, the top of the wall became wide enough that her whole band could have walked side by side. Time or careful cutting had smoothed the whitestone blocks until they felt like frozen silk beneath Fat Girl’s bare feet. The gentle incline carried her slowly up, until with a start she realized she could see the tops of trees falling away to either side of her, and the ragged bones of the earth that broke free of the hated trees to soar toward the sky, and the sun, and Keyu’s Other Eye. It had never occurred to Seven-

Fingered Fat Girl to wonder what the world might look like from above the tree tops.

She turned slowly, taking in the odd view. In the valley beneath her feet, the treetops falling away down the steep hill were as rumpled and mussed as her own thin blanket when she woke in the morning. Great Keyi's blanket, she thought—then she shuddered. That was a bad image. It made the Keyu seem even bigger and more frightening. As she continued her turn to the left, she saw that the rest of the tagnu were as taken by the strangeness of the view as she was. They, too, stood and gaped. She saw them point, speechless, at the mighty stone mountains. She heard their whispers of, "Look at the trees," and "Oh, look at the sky," and she smiled. Her good fat had won them this view. They would be grateful—later.

She walked to the edge of the wall and peered down. Scattered piles of sun-whitened bones, some with shreds of flesh still attached, lay like drifts of snow at the point where the causeway joined the main wall. No doubt the kellinks had been herding the band of tagnu toward that same spot—their killing field. Lucky for her and her people she had seen the rubble mound first. She spared the boneyard another quick look, then shrugged. Most of the bones were of kree and hrod-haggu. A few bones looked human—but none of them were her people. So Four Winds Band could afford to be even more grateful. She wordlessly pointed out the evidence of past massacres to her followers; only when all of them had seen did she turn away.

Fat Girl walked onward. The stones beneath her feet were smooth and cool. They were far removed from the tree-walls and tree-walks of the Silk People—as far removed as Earth from heaven. Who made such a giant wall? she wondered. Marveling, she reached the intersection of the causeway with the main wall. She clambered up a step nearly as high as her waist, and then another, and stood at last atop the main wall. The other tagnu followed her lead.

Seven-Fingered Fat girl was vaguely aware that the tagnu had stopped whispering. The silence from her band echoed her own awe.

Beneath her, giant stone buildings and the broken remains of buildings sprawled like the bleached bones of monsters. Buried in vines, worn round and smooth by time and weather, they reminded her of the kellys' boneyard on an impossible scale—and each whitestone bone carried with it whispers of a long-dead past. Seven-Fingered Fat Girl crouched on the lip of the wall and stared.

Nearest her, tens of pairs of domes that curved like women's breasts jutted from the grass, their roofs flat nipples. Beyond, higher up the side of the mountain, the remains of soaring arches and spires and towers stretched broken fingers to the sky. White roads traced patterns through grass and weeds and scrubby brush. There were no people, no animals except the birds and hovies that swooped and soared and fluttered through the clustered ruins. The silent city lay like the broken promise of something wonderful, and Seven-Fingered Fat Girl felt the pang of its breaking.

Toes Point In asked the question foremost in Fat Girl's mind. "I wonder who lived there—and who sent them away."

Dog Nose was more practical. "I wonder how we can get down there. I don't see any way in."

Fat Girl looked along the wall in both directions. "The people who lived here had to get in and out. We'll walk along the wall until we find the place they used."

"Which way?" Three Scars asked.

"That way." Runs Slow pointed left and downslope.

Toes Point In glared at the younger girl and immediately pointed right and upslope. "That way would be better, I think." Fat Girl gave Toes Point In a hard look and led the tagnu left.

Seven-Fingered Fat Girl was sure that there would be some simple way to get down off the wall, but after a long hike, she began to believe she was wrong. When the party came to a broken spot where the stones formed another steep talus slope, she was willing to admit there probably were no easier entries. It would be the talus slope or nothing.

"Wait," she told her comrades. "I'll go first to make sure it's safe." She crept down the jumble of rock.

It was farther down than she had guessed—and the buildings were bigger than she had imagined. When she looked back at her band, they were nothing but specks at the top of the wall. They waited for her signal.

She turned once in a full circle to take in the grandeur of the city, and hugged herself to hold in her growing excitement. There is no one here but us. This could all be ours, she thought. A base—a roof over us at nights, a safe place to keep the jungle beasts away. Maybe a home. It had been a long time since she'd thought of anything in terms of "home."

Keeping her excitement to herself, she waved her band down.

The water-drums and slit-gongs outside the temple prayed tree-prayers to the far reaches of the winds. Inside the temple, the Yekou, the attendant-clergy of the Keyu, donned their best and brightest silks. They raced from branch-room to branch-room, pulling out their best ribbons, readying their censers, finding drumsticks and headcloths and good slippers. To Choufa, now twelve cycles old, all this activity was worrisome, because this time, it involved her. Between spurts of finding their things, the priests readied Choufa's group of temple children for the Tree-Naming ceremony.

Choufa had allowed the priests to strip her and paint her

green and braid flowers in her hair, but only because Doff kept saying she must. This was an important night, Doff repeated—over and over. It was Choufa's Tree-Naming, when she would cast her baby- name aside and become Keyunu, one of the Tree-People, if the Keyu so declared. Doff, the ancient, skinny Yekoi who was the only mother Choufa had ever known, insisted that this was the day when the Keyu would choose the fates of all their children "for the best."

So Choufa, excited and impatient, fidgeted as the bright green paint dried on her skin and started to tighten and crack.

"It itches," she whispered to Thasa, her temple-sister.

"Ya. Looks stupid, too." Thasa ran her fingers nervously through the alloo blossoms she carried in her clay basket. "Doff told me I had to give this to Great Keyi. She give you something to give Great Keyi, too?"

"Beads." Choufa unfurled her clenched fingers long enough for the other girl to get a quick glimpse of shiny reds and blues and yellows.

"You want to trade?" Thasa asked, eyeing the bright colors.

Choufa didn't miss the undertone of envy in the other girl's voice. Thasa loved pretty things. Like the rest of the temple children, she had so few of them. "Na. I like my—"

A crop cracked on the backs of Choufa's legs. "Silence and reverence, ibbi," snapped the slender priest who had appeared out of nowhere. She lashed Thasa once, too, before she swooped past the girls with her silks fluttering and her ribbons dancing behind her like butterflies in a high wind.

Choufa was a veteran of the crop across the back of the legs. After twelve cycles with the Yekou, nothing short of a solid beating fazed her anymore. She grinned as that particular Yekoi pranced down the branch to take her place beside the

other silk-clad adults. Her Tree-Name was Woman Of Great Grace, but until two years ago, she had been a temple child just like Choufa. Choufa harbored visions of winning her own silk and coming back to this tree in honor—maybe with a name like Most Beautiful One—and thrashing the skin off the backs of Great Grace's legs.

Then she glanced over at Thasa out of the corner of her eye. Thasa looked like she was envisioning revenge, too. Choufa nodded in Great Grace's direction and whispered, "She's just jealous of us because she has a face like a tree-frog."

Thasa grinned. "And a voice like a screeching hovie."

"And a temper like a tube-snake," Choufa elaborated.

The other temple-child got into the spirit of the game. She whispered with a conspiratorial wink, "And breasts like big, rotten marshmelons."

Choufa giggled. She'd just gotten her own breasts, and no one was going to compare them to anything as large as marshmelons. Scrub-apples, maybe. She started laughing and trying to cough to cover up her laughter at the same time.

Her struggle infected Thasa, who began to sputter and giggle, too. Then Choufa heard, overhead, the insults being quoted down a line of younger temple-children who sprawled along the arching branches, taking everything in. The giggles spread further.

A sharp command cut the good humor short.

The Yekou were all in line below, adorning the main branch like a flock of harlequin hovies. Suddenly the senior priest, the Mu- Keyu of the temple, brought his drumsticks high overhead with a loud crack and slammed them down onto his ceremonial drum. He rolled out the rhythms of the first prayer—"Oh, Keyu, We Come to the Naming."

Choufa's stomach churned, and she felt a little shiver of

fear. She had seen the first part of this ceremony at regular intervals all her life, sprawled in the upper branches of the temple-tree like the children who watched her at that moment. But now the drum-prayer was for her. "Be serious," Doff had told her. "Be brave and pure, because the Keyu punish all those who are not serious and brave and pure. Win a good name and a good silk from the Keyu, little Choufa—because after this night, nothing is ever the same again."

I'm brave, Choufa thought. I'm not very serious, and I don't think I'm very pure—but I'm brave. She tried to think serious and pure thoughts as she and Thasa marched behind the Yekou, down the main branch and out into the darkness, onto the first of the connectways that led to the Keyu. She hoped that would be good enough.

She had never seen the Keyu before. No children saw them. That was the privilege of the Tree-Named, the grown-ups. Doff said they were very frightening; old and huge. Doff said they knew what everyone thought, always. Choufa wished that she could see them for the first time while she wore patterned silk and ribbons, instead of bare skin covered with dry, cracking green paint and garlands of stupid flowers.

She gripped her beads harder. What would Keyu want with beads? she wondered. Or a basket of flower petals? Then she reminded herself not to wonder. The Keyu were not to be questioned, Doff said. The Keyu knew what was best. Choufa concentrated on thinking pure thoughts—or at least what she felt the Keyu would think were pure thoughts, which mostly consisted of promising Great Keyi that she would never again commit the many pranks she routinely inflicted on her fellow temple-waifs. The connectways soared up, dipped down, crossed and meandered, and she concentrated for a while on thinking pure thoughts and not falling off the tree-branch paths. She was conscious of other silk-garbed adults taking places behind her and of other green-painted children walking with them.

Abruptly the path dropped steeply, all the way to the ground. The drumming grew louder, and the Yekou began to sing. The procession marched across grass, the tree-priests' closed clay lanterns flickering in the darkness like a necklace of tiny suns; they filed into a huge circle of bare earth surrounded by the ugliest trees Choufa had ever seen.

The trees squatted like fat old men, glowering in at the Tree-Named who gathered there, and at the ibbiu—the postulants—who came to earn their Tree-Names. In the shadows cast by the lanterns, the hideous trees seemed to shrink, then swell, moving back and forth in their places around the circle. Their leaves were yellow and stunted and sickly looking. Their gnarled branches dipped near the ground and twisted and spread into little fans of diseased-looking twigs, covered by growths and funguses. Thick, shiny white growths spread out from high on the sides of the trunks and trailed down into the grass, glowing faintly.

Those white things look like whole nests of keyudakkau, Choufa thought, and shuddered, remembering her one sight of the blind white flying serpent the Tree-People held sacred. She had once—only once—spied on the Yekou as they prayed and had seen the snake then. The Yekou were kneeling and chanting in the hollow of the temple tree. The air was white with incense, and the drums throbbed. Choufa had lain on her belly, squeezed under two supporting branches high above them, and watched through a tiny space where the wood of the temple tree had split. The chief priest, the Mu-Keyi, had danced and drummed and shouted in the center of the circle of Yekou. He threw his head back and screeched, spinning and stamping his feet in a manner totally unlike the stuffy behavior he displayed to the rest of the world. The ceremony had fascinated Choufa. When the drums stopped, a streak of white shot through the temple from out of the darkness, and settled on the shoulders of the Mu-Keyi. All the Yekou sighed as this miracle occurred. They whispered that the God trees heard their prayers; that this

was a sign. Choufa's skin had prickled and her stomach had begun to churn. She had not liked the greasy white keyudakkai that coiled over the shoulders of the priest as he drummed and prayed—and she did not like the trees. She shuddered again. The trees felt evil. They felt hungry.

The drums rumbled away into silence, and the procession halted in the exact center of the tree-circle. Choufa peeked over her shoulder and gasped. Behind her, a long line of people trailed back dear to the connectway. There were, she guessed, at least fifty adults, and perhaps fifteen or twenty more children. She had not had any idea so many others would share her Tree-Naming with her.

A single drum began again, this one whispering, “Oh, Keyu, we are here—we are here—we are here—oh, Keyu.” To the soft pittering, the Mu-Keyi walked back along the line and separated out the children from the adults. Choufa was finding it much easier to be serious in this grim and frightening place. She did not share any secret smiles with Thasa now. She could not find anything to smile about. In her mind, the conviction that the trees were hungry grew stronger.

The Mu-Keyi led all the naked, green children to one side of the circle, while the adults spread out along the other side. Choufa wanted, suddenly and completely, to skip the Tree-Naming and go home.

“Ibbiu—who will from this night forward be ibbiu no more”—the Mu-Keyi intoned—“You are in the presence of the Keyu. Show honor!”

Doff had drilled her in this part of the ceremony. Along with every other child, she threw herself facedown onto the hard-packed earth. Then she lay there, frozen motionless—too scared even to take a deep breath.

The chief priest raised his voice and chanted over the heads of the ibbiu at the adults. “You have raised them, you who are

named and who know honor in the branches of the God trees. But only Great Keyi knows the worth of the seedlings you bring. If they are strong seedlings who will grow to be a glory to the forest, all will know today. If they are weak, Great Keyi will show us. If they have filled their souls with hidden rot, Great Keyi will make us see it."

The chief priest fell silent and let the silence build. The ground felt hard and cold and unforgiving under Choufa's hands and belly. It pressed against her nose and bent her toes back at an uncomfortable angle. Pure thoughts, she reminded herself frantically. Think pure, brave thoughts.

In the silence, the creaking of the branches of the ugly trees sounded like the crunching of dried bones. A deeper rumble started, and Choufa realized with horror that it came from one of the trees. "Begin," the rumble commanded in the Drum-Tongue.

"Stand, ibbiu!" roared the Mu-Keyi.

The ibbiu leapt to their feet and huddled together, round-eyed and breathing hard. The adults across the clearing shifted and fidgeted.

I want out of here, Choufa thought frantically.

The chief priest knelt facing the largest of the trees, a colossus so broad twenty men could have knelt side by side in the circle in front of it with room left over. His ribbons hung limply, and his glorious silks spread out in a fan over the hard-packed dirt. He drummed back, "We are your servants, Great Keyi. Make these, our children, your servants too."

The drum echoed into silence. No one moved.

"Give me first my gift," the tree thrummed.

Immediately, the chief priest responded, "We obey."

All the drums pounded into life, thundering, "Blessed be your

gift, Great Keyi, and your people who gift you.”

Four men in matching green-and-gold silks marched forward,

carrying something between them. That something struggled, then screamed, “No! No! I did what you told me to do! You promised! You promised! Let me go-o-o-o!”

The voice belonged to a girl.

The girl struggled violently, and one of the men carrying her stumbled. Choufa got a brief look at her. She was as naked and green as the ibbiu, but striped and decorated with hideous pictures and words that formed patterns on her skin. She was bald and soft and pudgy-looking, with big sagging breasts and a round, shapeless belly. She was ugly beyond anything Choufa could have ever imagined. Each man held onto her by ropes wrapped around her wrists and ankles. They carried her a few inches above the ground and made a great show of never looking at her.

Choufa self-consciously fingered her long brown hair and tried to imagine what force could have created the ugly creature that the men carried to the greatest of the God trees. The other ibbiu were obviously having some of the same thoughts—they stared at the girl with frightened loathing or disbelief written on their faces.

I wonder, Choufa thought, suddenly distracted by a minor detail, why we’re all the same color green she is.

The drums pounded louder and faster, “Bless this gift, bless this gift, bless-this-gift-bless-this-gift—” and all the while the men hauled the girl closer to Great Keyi. The girl screamed and pled, but most of her pleading was buried in the pounding of the drums. The men dumped her at the very roots of the Keyi, and backed off –fast.

For a moment, all the world seemed poised on the point of a very fine needle. The girl lay shaking at the foot of the

giant tree, the drums crashed and roared, the ibbiu stared with indrawn breath, and Choufa clutched her beads and prayed, I am brave, I am pure, I am brave, I am pure. The sense of waiting for something to happen—to really happen—filled the grove.

There was no warning when it did. One minute, everything hung in that horrible state of anticipation. The next, the white palps that grew in profusion from the sides of the tree whipped out and around the crumpled, sobbing girl. Great Keyi split his bark open from the roots to the base of the first branch, and his slimy- looking white tentacles flung the ugly girl into his black maw.

As fast as it came, the horror ended.

The drums stopped. In the hush, Choufa realized that all around her children were crying. It took her a moment longer, however, to realize that she cried, too.

“Send them to me now,” the tree drummed.

The Mu-Keyi bowed and drummed his brief “We obey” again; then he and the green-and-gold-silk men briskly grabbed the children and pushed them into a line. Choufa occupied the fourth place. Thasa was somewhere behind her, unseeable. Tears streamed down Choufa’s cheeks. “Nothing will ever be the same again,” Doff had told her, and she knew now that Doff had been right. These were the Keyu, the almighty Keyu, the ones to whom she had said prayers morning and night all her life. These hulking, lurking, awful trees were the gods she had asked to help her with her recitations from the Sacred Songs, and to make Massio stop bothering her, and to watch over Doff. In her prayers, she had imagined the Keyu as bigger versions of the friendly orchard trees, that gave fruit in season and let the temple children climb them. Nothing like these trees had ever entered her prayers.

The men in gold-and-green silks stood on either side of the

long line of children. Choufa stared up at them, and knew that she and all the children with her would be thrown to Great Keyi. When the Mu-Keyi said to the first child in line, "Go forward and take your Tree- Name," Choufa saw the boy's knees sag. Then one man on either side of him took an arm and propelled him forward.

The boy knelt—rather, he stumbled and landed on his knees— and his offering fell out of his hand to land at the base of Great Keyi. One man placed the boy's hand on the bark of God tree, where the giant tree-mouth had split open to swallow the striped girl. Choufa pressed her clenched fist into her teeth to keep herself from screaming. Now Great Keyi would eat him.

But the tree stayed motionless. A single drum began a count. One—two—three—four, and the two men moved forward and lifted the boy and walked him away from the tree, toward the line of waiting adults. The oldest of the Yekou, the priest-woman Fine Fingers, bowed in greeting him, and draped a simple red silk robe over him—the robe of the new initiate, of the newly Tree-Named. "Welcome, keyunu, brother of the People of the Three Flames Silk, Tree-Named," she intoned.

She then addressed the waiting adults. "Give him his name."

The boy's father stepped out of the crowd wearing a big smile, his eyes still wet with tears. "We name him First With Courage."

"You are so named. Go." The Yekoi made shooing motions with her hands, and First With Courage, newly minted, raced into the arms of his father and mother.

"Go forward and take your Tree-Name," the chief priest commanded to the next ibbi in line. The girl walked forward under her own power, though two of the gold-and-green silk men walked by her sides. She held her head up and carried her gift as if it were the most valuable thing in the world. Choufa watched her kneel and place her offering on the ground and her

hand on Great Keyi's mouth. The drum beat. One, two, three-four. Then the men tapped her and she rose, brave and graceful, and walked over to the waiting adults. She got her silk and her name; Heart Of Fire.

The boy in front of Choufa, a cycle or two younger than the first two, walked forward as bravely as Heart Of Fire. He knelt and placed his gift with the others and the drum began to beat. One, two, three-

On the third beat, one of Great Keyi's shiny white palps whipped out and lifted the boy's gift from the ground, and threw it far into the jungle. From the middle of the crowd of waiting adults, someone sobbed in despair. The men lifted the boy, whose eyes were white-rimmed with fear, and dragged him to the Yekoi. They dropped him on the ground in front of her.

The Yekoi clenched her hands into fists, and her mouth tightened into a thin line. She stared down at him, and Choufa, who knew Fine Fingers' rages, saw one coming. "You shame us," the thin old woman hissed. "You-who would dare pretend to be worthy of our kinship-have shown your unworthiness. Great Keyi has seen the blemish in your soul, and has declared you not one of ours. You will never be keyuni, a person of the Godtrees. You are tagni, not human. You have no Tree-Name. You have no name." She spit that out like a curse.

Choufa thought the Yekoi grew taller as she snarled down at the boy. She lifted one skinny old arm and pointed at the pack a green-and-gold silk man held in his hands. "Because we are kind, we will give you parting gifts-food and a weapon and a blanket, that you may find life elsewhere. But you will never enter the ground made sacred by the presence of Keyu and keyunu again, on promise of death. Take our gifts, tagni, and leave."

The boy stood uncertainly, then stumbled toward his parents,

who clung to each other in the crowd. "Mommy?" he asked, voice high and pleading. "Daddy—please, Daddy?" The man who held the pack grabbed the boy and shoved the pack in his hand. "Please, Mommy—Daddy, please don't let them make me go." The boy's mother, crying harder, squeezed her eyes shut and held her hands over her ears. Her shoulders shook from her silent cries. The father, his face streaked with tears, gave his son an agonized look, then took his partner and led her from the Tree-Naming ceremony. He hung his head as he walked away.

"Mommy!" the child shrieked. "Daddy! Please don't go. I love you—"

Fine Fingers slashed one hand down, a sharp, chopping motion. The man who held the boy, now struggling to get away and run after his parents, nodded and picked the child up. He carried the kicking, screaming boy down the path—taking him away from the village.

They eat people, and take children from their parents, Choufa thought. These cannot be the same gods Doff told me about—the ones who loved us so much.

"Go forward and take your Tree-Name," the Mu-Keyi intoned, and Choufa snapped back to attention. It was her turn. At least, she thought with a bitterness that surprised her, Great Keyi can't take me away from my parents. I don't have any.

She walked forward, shaking inside but on her own power. She knelt and put her beads with the other gifts, and with trepidation rested one hand on Great Keyi's rough bark. She heard the first beat of the drum, but not the second. A sudden alien whisper inside her head drowned it out—an exultant voice that murmured, <You! I want we want you are ours I want you!> Great Keyi's tentacles wrapped around her, cold and moist and slippery and incredibly strong, and pressed her hard against the rough, scratchy bark of the trunk. Choufa screamed, a wordless howl of pure terror, curled into a limp ball, and

closed her eyes tightly. Inside her head, the hungry, nasty, awful other voice kept crooning, <Mine you are mine I love we love you MINE!>

Rough hands pulled her away from the tentacles. Choufa looked up and found that the men in green and gold had saved her. She tried to smile at them, but they carried her as if she were something disgusting and dirty. Both of them averted their faces from her. She sprawled in front of the Yekoi when they dropped her—threw her—down.

The Yekoi shook her head in disbelief. Choufa looked up at the towering, silk-clad figure and found the woman's eyes hard with a hatred Choufa had done nothing to earn.

"We raised you," Fine Fingers said. "We taught you the goodness of life in the branches of Keyu, protected you from the evilness of your parents—and yet you have taken our goodness and made wickedness of it. You are the worm at the heart of good fruit, rot in the core of the strong tree. Yours will be a life of penitence and punishment—the keyunu do not leave the rot in the heart of the tree."

I didn't do anything wicked, Choufa thought. I didn't. This is all a lie!

The Yekoi seemed to sense her defiance. "Your mother was sharsha. Your father was sharsha. And now, in spite of all we have done for you, you are sharsha—sharsha you shall be called, and nothing more." The Yekoi threw her hands in the air. "So be it. The keyunu prune you from our branches." Fine Fingers directed her attention at the burly men in gold and green silk. "Take her." The same men who had saved her from Great Keyi now looped a rope over either of her wrists and used those ropes to pull her down the path between the trees. As she stumbled along between them, she looked back at the adults. No one, not even Doff, wept for her.

Sharsha, she thought. My mother and my father, two people I

never met –never even heard anyone mention before–were sharsha. Now I am sharsha. She shuddered, remembering the screaming green-striped girl the Keyunu threw to Great Keyi. Sharsha. It was an ugly word. It meant “sacrifice.”

Medwind Song woke to arrhythmic, head-throbbing pounding that rolled down over her from the jungle to the north. She hid her head under Nokar’s pillow, but the pillow didn’t help much. After a few moments of allowing herself to realize just how much it didn’t help, she sat up and sighed.

Damn, damn, damn! What time is it this time? she wondered.

She crawled out of bed, careful not to wake Nokar, pushed open the shuttered window, and looked out. It was still dark. Of course. And the racket was the Wen–again. She’d always thought the Stone Teeth Hoos were pain-in-the-ass neighbors–which just went to show how little people appreciated life when they had it good. She decided she’d rather have Stone Teeth Hoos trying to steal her goats any day than listen to another early-morning all- drum no-rhythm concert by the goddamned Wen. It was a regional hazard nobody had mentioned when she and Nokar and Faia packed up shop and fled Ariss for the politically safe wilds of Omwimmee Trade.

She wished some brave soul would venture into the forbidden jungle long enough to introduce the Wen to rede-flutes or violettos, or something else with a bit less carrying power. Or even the simple concept that days were for being noisy and nights were for sleeping.

Three cheers for the mysterious Wen, Medwind thought May they all roast in the sajes’ hottest hell. Behind her, Nokar rolled over on the mat, wrapping the blankets completely around himself. Medwind grinned and watched him sleep. As if the

sajes could agree which one that was.

Nokar, ex-librarian, history fanatic and dirty-old-man extraordinaire, was her most recent husband. He was also superbly talented at sleeping through anything. Medwind didn't think that was fair, but she didn't see where waking him up to complain would get her back to sleep. The drums thundered and rumbled on, and she groaned.

Then she snapped her shoulders back and nodded sharply, once. There were things that could use doing, even in the middle of the night. Due to the press of deadlines and production schedules, it had been several weeks since the last time she'd called up her vha'attaye. The spirits grew restless and bored when they didn't get the homage they required from the living. If not paid sufficient attention, sometimes they became capricious, lying when called upon. Sometimes they became angry and cursed their attendant with ill fortune. Worst of all, sometimes they got the spirit wanderlust and simply drifted away. Medwind imagined herself calling up her vha'attaye—and getting no response. She shivered.

She pulled the shutter closed and slipped out of the room. She didn't bother with clothing, just padded down the breezeway and out into the central garden. She'd pitched her b'dabba against the back wall, where it crouched, looking a great deal like a small, dark, hairy animal in the garden—thoroughly disreputable next to the big, rambling, breezy house she and Nokar had bought when they'd arrived in Omwimmee Trade. It was hard to remember that not only she, but at one point all her husbands, had occupied that cramped b'dabba—and sometimes, when it was cold, the human occupants had shared their space with the most valuable of the livestock, as well.

No, she amended silently, as she ducked into the waxed-felt tent and inhaled, it isn't all that hard to remember that once nine sweaty young men, two horses and a few goats shared this space with me. One deep breath brings it all back.

She took her bag of quicklights down from the hook high overhead—(gods forbid Faia's cat-from-the-hells should get hold of them, and incinerate the compound)—and lit the pots of incense that sat on either side of her altar.

The goat-and-boy reek died down a bit. Medwind, her nose pampered by twelve years of keeping company with people who used soap, decided this was an improvement. She bent over the low altar and lit both fat, herb-scented candles. The b'dabba began to smell even better.

I'm spoiled by too much clean living, she thought. I'd have a hell of a time going back to the Hoos Plains now. How odd, that when I left, I intended to change the world. The world is still pretty much the same, but I'm so different I don't know that I could ever go home.

She shrugged that melancholy thought away. Life is change. If you want things to stay the same, Medwind, die.

Faia's cat Hrogner—one of the progeny of Flynn, the Mottemage's handed cat—sat watching her light the candles, ears pricked forward and tail twitching. He had that smug air about him that always annoyed Medwind—the air of knowing something she didn't know. She didn't appreciate the attitude in humans and despised it in small furry animals. She gave him a hard look, and realized he held something gold and gleaming in his stubby furry fist. It was her favorite sslis, which had gone missing three days earlier.

Medwind lunged at the cat. "Give me that, you schkavak!" she yelled.

The cat darted out of reach and scurried into the forest of drums, still clutching her sslis. "I hate cats," Medwind growled.

She glared into the drums after Hrogner, then plopped herself on the thick cushion in front of the altar. She touched the

heads of her sho, the two-headed drum that was reserved for calling the vha'attaye.

The candles cast a yellow sheen over the bone and sinew candleholders and the Ancestors and Advisors who sat on the altar. Medwind took a handful of incense cones out of an apothecary jar and reverently placed and lit one on each of the tiny bowls that rested inside the skulls' jaws. Smoke began to issue from between the skulls' teeth—more from between the filed teeth of Troggar Raveneye, best enemy and advisor. She moved slowly down the line; she touched the skulls of her grandmother's grandmother, her enemy, her comrade, her father's grandfather. Her heart raced; blood throbbed in her fingertips. "May the incense and honor please you, fearsome dead," she whispered, "so that you will not hunger for my life."

When she got to the last, she rested her hand for a moment on the cool, smooth bone and closed her eyes. She traced the bright patterns on sharp cheekbones and empty eyesockets with one finger. "Have you forgiven me yet, Rakell? Will you ever?"

Her stomach tightened, and she took a deep breath. The vha'attaye waited—always waited. She had her duty, as Huong Hoos, to honor the spirits of those who lived and died honorably.

Medwind inhaled the tendrils of incense that swirled around her and began a five-beat rhythm with her left hand. With her right, she overlaid seven beats to the five and felt the magic build in a spiral, patterns chasing each other around, meeting suddenly, then darting in different directions. The soft, intricate rhythm washed away the Wen pandemonium and drew her deeper and deeper into its complexities. She hummed and breathed, steadying herself, settling into the comfortable shadows of the b'dabba, letting herself drift with the soothing flight of the drumbeat and the nasal tickle of her humming, until her body felt it had become another shadow. Her

eyes drooped, heavy-lidded, and the twin flickers of candle flame smeared into huge, blurred balls of light.

She called up the song easily then, the old Huong Hoos song to revive the vha'attaye. Husky-voiced, deeply entranced, she sang:

*"Mhaals-koth dla-aavuaba 'kea
Terirthoma etrebbo'kea baayayi?
Kea'aakashall dre-kashe-keo
Eihaydroomee-keo hoosando-ni!
Kea fa'oatado-thoma.*

*Koth'po-shompo!
Koth'po-tyampo!
Koth'dardvaapo-kea-di-*

*Kea 'dli-nerado po!
Keo'vha'attaye byefdo tro!"*

(For what shall I have let you die
When life ran hot and full in you?
You had not fought your best battle
Nor loved your last lover.

You are not done with life.
I declare it!
I demand it!

I announce this to you
So you may be sure of it!
Your spirit is still needed!)

She sang the song through a second time and then a third, increasing pace of song and drumming. Between the hazy twin lights from the candles, a pale, glowing fog grew, drawing form from the smoke of the incense and the damp of the night. The fog descended, separated, shaped itself into little balls

of woolly light, and settled into the skulls of Inndra Song, matriarch; of Troggar Raveneye, enemy; of Rasher the Hunter, comrade in battle; of Haron River, grandfather's father; of the Mottemage Rakell Ingasdotte, friend. And the mist smoothed hazy impressions of flesh over the sculpted bones. Foggy eyelids opened, and beneath them, green lights brighter than the candles gleamed. Ghostly lips formed shapes, the very real bones of jaws creaked, hard-edged whispers scuttled forth like spiders from their drybone lairs.

Medwind ceased her drumming and waited.

From behind her, the cat Hrogner hissed and snarled, and when the ghost-figures remained, vacated the b'dabba. "Wakened . . ." the skulls whispered. "Wakened . . . alive . . ." The row of glowing green eyes fixed on her, and Medwind, who had first met some of these same vha'attaye as a small child brought before her mother's altar to honor them, still felt ice down her spine. Her hair stood on her arms and the back of her neck, and her mouth went dry.

Inndra Song asked, in a voice that was every night- creak, bone-scrape, gooseflesh sound in the dark, "What would you have of us, distant daughter's daughter?"

"I come to honor you, revered ancient mother's mother," Medwind said, pressing her forehead to the floor in ritual greeting.

"We acknowledge that," the bonevoice whispered. The rustles of other vha'attaye blended with Inndra Song's words, a general agreement, temporary appeasement of the dangerous dead.

"This is no honor," whispered one skull. Medwind rose from her deep bow and stared along the line of bodiless heads that watched her unblinking from the altar. The bones beneath the ghostflesh gleamed along the line; ivory teeth, empty eyesockets, painted bones softened and obscured by the faint fur-sheen of light, but not gone. "I am dead," the bonevoice

of the Mottemage Rakell Ingasdottle whispered from her place in the far corner, "Let me die."

Tears damped Medwind's cheeks, and she said, "I cannot. You are my best friend. I need you."

"If you are my friend, let me go," the bones said, and the ghostlids shuttered down over the green-lit eyes, and the eyes guttered out and went dark.

"Rakell!" Medwind cried, and clenched her fists so tightly her nails dug into the flesh of her palms. She hung her head.

When Rakell was gone, Rasher the Hunter spoke. "That one is weak, Hoos-warrior. She fears the things that hunt between the worlds. She cowers in the cold darkness and does not bear the suffering of the vha'attaye bravely. She cries out—she begs for the light, and for life, and sometimes for release."

"She shames herself, and shames us," Troggar Raveneye whispered. "Not even I begged for the soul-death, I who am your enemy, and not your people."

Inndra Song said, "You profane vha'atta. You give this gift to a coward, a weakling. We do not welcome her. We do not want her. Take her away."

The other bones rasped and whispered, and Haron River, grandfather's father, said, "We have had enough of the cryings of the outlander vha'attaye. Girl, your heresies compound. You brought to the spirit realm a woman unworthy to join us—not brave, not willing, and not Hoos. This would be dishonor enough for anyone—but not for you." The bonevoice grated louder and the green flames in Haron River's eyes burned brighter. "Though you keep your b'dabba and honor us as you should, and though your husband brings incense for us on the sacred days, your husband is not Hoos. Do you think the eternal valleys of Yarwalla wait for one of his kind? A worshiper of a pantheon of petty, squabbling godlets who has

never ridden into single combat—who is unblooded? But that is not all—not even that. Always, we wait and wait for the children. Where are the children who will honor us in the next generation? Why don't you bring them to us?"

Medwind looked into the cold angry glitters in her grandfather's father's eyesockets, and tensed. "I still have no child to bring."

The bones hissed. "Our shame . . . our shame . . ." and Grandmother Song asked angrily, "How is this, then? Are we to be abandoned, barren one? Left without honor at your death? Who will light candles and incense for us when you are gone?"

Medwind grew angry. "I'm trying to get pregnant! I just haven't yet."

Around her, the hissing grew louder. "Get a younger husband," some of the voices demanded. "Kill that old makcjek," Troggar Raveneye urged. A small drum, a shempi, suddenly leapt off the hanging rack and flew past her, almost hitting her.

"Stop that!" she yelled.

The hissing stopped. The vha'attaye glared at Medwind. "Don't throw things at me," the mage said.

Inndra Song whispered, "Then honor us as you should. Destroy your unworthy vha'attaye. She shames you and shames us. She has not earned the long passage of vha'atta. And bring a child for us to teach, a child who can honor us when you are gone."

"And if I cannot do these things?" Medwind asked.

The bonevoices rose again in grating wails—soft, horrible echoes that mimicked living voices—but stripped of all humanness. Teeth clacked and gnashed, eyesockets blazed bright, ghostflesh contorted in shapes of remembered rage. The vha'attaye did not answer her.

Medwind asked again, “If I cannot do these things?”

Inndra Song spoke over the rest of the voices of the dead. “Then we will not know you—and when you ride to the gates of Yarwalla, you will be turned away. Living, you will have no people –and dying, you will have no home. That shall be our curse.”

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