

CRYSTAL RAIN

TOBIAS S. BUCKELL



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For Emily

my first reader and then girlfriend,
fiancée, and finally wife as I wrote this book

No escape!

John wriggled his back up against the tree and looked across at the men.

“What are your names?” he whispered, but they remained silent. “My name is John deBrun. I’m from Brungstun, who are you?”

The man with a battered face next to him looked off in the distance. “Is best we don’t know each other. Trust me.”

“We *have* to get free,” John said. “We have to warn Brungstun.”

“Shut up, man, just shut up,” a second man hissed. “We ain’t escaping, and you ain’t making things any easier.”

John’s thighs cramped underneath him. “What do you mean?”

The man next to him, the first to speak, shifted. “Make you peace. Because soon we go die.”

Last night’s captors surrounded the tree and pointed at the captives, coming to a decision. They sliced the ropes free and made two men stand up. To his shame, John felt relief.

The two men were dragged off around the tree’s branches, out of sight. For several minutes only a few jungle birds fluttered and cawed into the silence.

Then the screaming began.

PROLOGUE

Brown vines dried and crumbled along the village Refojee-Ten's edges. Everything thirsted for the impending rainy season: the dry jungle, the hard-packed dirt roads winding through the village, the two wells, and the drooping emerald ears of corn.

Wiry elders sat hunched over rickety tables outside playing cards, their eyes scanning the late afternoon sky as they shuffled and dealt.

In the distance over the green fringe of the treetops, the hazy Wicked High Mountains cut across shredded dark clouds, forcing them to release sheets of rain several days' walk away from Refojee-Ten. The elders flicked their cards, flashed their gums, and licked lips as they eyed the pictures on their calloused hands.

Rainy season tugged at their joints. It made them feel older, creakier, and yet thankful life was about to return because soon the jungle air blowing into the streets would be wet, the roads muddier, and the corn so fresh you could hear it grow at night in the fields.

Yes, rainy season would burst in any day now.

So no one jumped when the thunder cracked the sky. They looked up and nodded, wise to the land's regular cycle proving itself for yet another year, as it had all the many years of their lives before.

But the thunder did not die and give way to fat raindrops. It continued to boom louder and louder until mothers ran away from their wash-lines to grab their children. Men stopped and looked up at the fiery smoke trail that crossed the sky.

The elders dropped their cards and stood up, shielding their eyes to watch in awe as a white-hot fireball flew over the village. The ground shook as it disappeared into the jungle with a distant explosion. Panicked birds swirled into the air to create confused patterns of bright plumage above the trees.

The smoky trail remained in the sky until dusk.

By that time the greatest hunters in Refojee-Ten had taken up their rifles and walked off into the dangerous night with torches to see what this curiosity was.

Two days later the hunters found a section of the jungle where the trees had been blown down like mere sticks.

Cautious, they followed the destruction inward. To walk over the hot ground, they bound their feet with aloe and arm-sized leaves. They choked from the smoke. When they could walk into the destruction no longer, they turned around and found a weary-looking man sitting on a steaming metal boulder.

He wore a top hat, a long trench coat, and black boots. His eyes were gray, his dreadlocks black, and his face ashen. It was as if this man had not seen sun in all his life, but was born brown once.

He spoke gibberish to them, then touched his throat several times until the hunters understood his words.

"Where am I?"

Near the village of Refojee-Ten, they told him, which is as far from the north coast as it is from the south coast, but a week's walk from the Wicked High Mountains.

They asked him if he came down from the sky, and how he did it.

The man ignored their questions. He leaped from the metal boulder and landed among them. He pointed at their rifles.

“These weapons, you got them where?”

~~They told him they traded with northerners for them: bush hunters and merchants.~~ It was an infrequent trade, but enough to let the villagers understand the world outside the jungle’s depths. Their rifles, they knew, were made in a place called Capitol City.

“And how would I get there?”

Go north through the jungle, they said, to Brungstun, and then use the coastal road. Or wait for a northerner to come trade with us and go with them.

This satisfied the stranger. He seemed harmless, tired, and thin. He looked much like a pale insect one might find in the mud, so they took him back to the village. On the way back he ate their dried foods and acted as if they were the finest meats.

He only stopped eating once: to stare at a bush by their side. A jaguar leapt out, and the stranger grabbed its throat and slung it across the road. The hunters watched the cat drop to the ground, neck twisted at an odd angle.

The stranger stayed in the village for a week. He ate anything offered to him and gained strength. When he left, his muscles bulged. His skin looked like earth now; a proper and healthy color for a man.

He chose, against all their protestations, to walk north through the dangerous jungle to go find the rest of the world. He asked one last question while among the Refojee-Ten villagers. “How long do you have until carnival?”

They told him the number of months. Though, they knew, some towns celebrated carnival on different days throughout the land. When they asked him why he wanted to know about carnival, the man smiled.

“I’m looking for an old friend, one who never misses carnival.” And that was all he said.

After he left, the hunters talked at length about what they had seen and wondered who he was. But the elders shook their heads over their cards. Not who, they said to the hunters. What.

When pressed for further details, they shook their heads and turned back to their cards, waiting for the rainy season to start.

PART ONE

THE WICKED HIGHS

CHAPTER ONE

The Wicked High Mountains loomed around Dennis and his men as they skirted house-sized, reddish slabs of rock jutting from the soil, avoided deep, echoing chasms, and paused at a tiny stream to fill their canteens.

Above the tree line the air cooled enough that Dennis could see his own breath. Yesterday he would have been amused. Today his huffing betrayed how fast he moved over the crumbling ground.

Dennis looked around at his men. Mongoose-men. Nanagada's best bush warriors. They hopped from rock to rock with grunts. Some had long dreadlocks down their backs and full beards. Others had short, cropped hair. They came from all over Nanagada, and despite being smeared with mud and colored chalk to help them blend into the shadows, they had skin ranging from mountainside and Capitol City soft brown to south-coast dark black.

Each man dressed in gray: heavy canvas trousers, long-sleeved shirts, and floppy wide-brimmed hats. All over this dull uniform sticks and leaves jutted out, glued on in random patterns.

Out of the jungle and on the rock they stood out like shaggy gray-and-green creatures.

Still, this was the quickest way to Mafolie Pass.

The second moon rose. A dim double-lit darkness would be far better than the blatant daylight they'd been running in. Dennis glanced at the sky. They'd be less likely to get spotted by an Aztec airship at night.

Earlier, many miles downrange of Mafolie Pass, they'd captured an Azteca scout. Much to their surprise, the Aztecan knew several code phrases. The mongoose-men had few spies among the Aztecs. It was a rare encounter.

Most Aztecs who came over the mountains fled for Capitol City: Nanagada's farthest northeastern point. As far from their past as they could get.

This Aztecan said his name was Oaxyctl. *O-ash-k-tul*. His teeth chattered. He had barely made it over the mountains. Shivering, hungry, and hardly understandable, he told them Mafolie Pass was under attack.

"That happens sometimes," the mongoose-men replied. Aztecs threw various-sized attack parties over the pass randomly to test the thick walls and Mafolie's perfectly placed guns, but the pass remained impenetrable. The mongoose-men based Nanagada's defense from Mafolie Pass.

"Not from the pass," the spy hissed, his back against the rough bark of a turis tree, his legs in the mud.

"Mafolie Pass the *only* place any big army able to cross," Dennis objected.

The spy wiped his face with a dirty sleeve. "They dug a tunnel," he spat. "You understand?"

They blinked. "A tunnel? Under the whole mountain? We would know about that."

"*Nopuluca*," the spy cursed at them. "Aztecs dug for a hundred years now. They fooled you into thinking they were still testing the pass while always digging. But they're here. Believe me. We are dead men."

He'd begged water and food off them. They'd told him where the next low-mountain station was. Then the strange spy scrambled off down the mountainside.

“If we all done dead,” they called after him as he clambered down into the thick greenery, “why you come here? Where you think you going?”

But he had already disappeared into the bush.

Dennis and his mongoose-men broke their camp after a minute’s consultation, leaving anything they couldn’t carry where it sat, and started the run for Mafolie Pass.

The heavy morning mist made it impossible for Dennis to see more than a few trees ahead. Small animals skittered around them, noises amplified in the dimness. The mongoose-men relaxed a bit back in the jungle now. They were still three hours from Mafolie Pass. Better they relax now and not fray their nerves before getting closer.

A twig snapped. Dennis signaled stop by flicking his wrist.

The group’s rifle barrels rose in quiet unison.

“*Pddeeett?*” chirped a voice from deep in the mist. It sounded birdlike enough to fool any townie.

“Pass?” Dennis called out.

“Plain porridge,” came the answer. “No sugar.”

Everyone lowered their rifles. Their best runner, Allen, had dropped his packs and gone ahead yesterday to scout. Now he pushed through a prickly bush, sweat dripping from his forehead, and grabbed an offered canteen. He splashed water on his face.

“Come follow me.” Allen wiped his face on his sleeve, smearing dirt over his cheeks and breaking a leaf off his hat.

“Azteca?” Dennis asked.

Allen nodded.

No one slung their rifles.

Allen led them down through a ravine, then back up the other side. They followed him, leaning into the sharply angled ground, arms loose, zigzagging up. A small dirt road cut through the bush at the top. Next to it a stone sentry-house perched on the ravine’s edge. Thick moss clung to the cracks in the wall and dripped with condensation.

“You had see anything?” Dennis asked.

Allen shook his head. His baggy canvas shirt was stained with sweat over the chest and armpits. “Real quiet now,” he said. “Come.”

Together they walked forward. Allen pointed at a dead animal beside the sentry-house. Flies buzzed around it. Dennis walked over; saw a pair of hands bound with rope. “Look upon that.” He pushed the flayed body with his boot. He managed to roll it over, breathing through his mouth to avoid the smell. He pulled his machete free from its scabbard strapped to his lower leg. “See that?” He pointed at the ragged hole between the corpse’s second and third ribs.

“Them cut through for him heart,” a mongoose-man said.

“Warrior-priest in a hurry, don’t want cut through no breastbone,” Allen added.

Dennis didn’t see an eagle-stone imprint. Some passing Azteca warrior did this in a hurry without the usual Azteca equipment. Typical of a small hunting party come over the almost impassable Wicked Highs ... but this was here in the heart of the mongoose-men’s world.

Allen pointed to the sides of the dirt road. “See that crush-up leaf and footprint? I guess a thousand come through. At least.”

A thousand. No small hunting party. A full invasion swing toward Mafolie Pass, but on *this* side of the mountain. Just as the spy had said.

Dennis glanced down the road, imagining the tightly packed throng of bright feathers and padded armor marching down the mountains and into Nanagada. If they destroyed Mafolie Pass, Azteca could come over the mountains with ease. With enough time and supplies they could march anywhere.

Nanagada. The Azteca would rule everything if no longer held back by the mountains.

~~“Got some decisions for we make.”~~ Dennis squatted by the road. He leaned forward on the machete’s handle for balance. The dark blade dug into the dirt. “You all ready for some heavy reasoning?”

The mongoose-men stood in a loose circle around him. Two stood up on either side of the road looking around the curve for any surprises.

“Mafolie Pass probably already run over,” Dennis said. “We late. So what next?”

Allen shuffled in the dirt. “No wheel imprint here.” He looked up at everyone. “These Azteca a moving on foot, seen?”

“Make sense, wheel don’t do you much good in the mountain.”

“They have no supplies with them. They moving light, moving quick. But they go have to get supply coming behind them if they want eat.”

Dennis thought about the hungry, tired spy. How much food could these Azteca carry? A few days worth at the most.

There had to be supplies on the way.

“Yeah. More Azteca go be coming down the mountain,” Dennis agreed. “We could choose to run down the mountain to warn people, or we can slow down Azteca supply.”

“Could do both, if we split up,” Allen said.

Dennis cleared his throat and looked around, an unspoken question in the air. Who stayed to face more Azteca, and who got to run down the mountain to do the warning?

They drew straws. Four men would split with Allen to run down the mountains and find the nearest station with a working telegraph. If all the wires were already cut, they would do their best to make through the jungle to warn any towns they came across.

“*Pddeeett!*”

Dennis looked up. One of the men doing watch down the road. “Yeah?”

“Azteca!”

“Supply or warrior? How many?”

“Jaguar warrior party, no supply-men,” the lookout yelled back. Dennis’s stomach churned. A supply group would have been easy to ambush. “A hundred. They got clubs and packs and guns. bunch of regular-looking warrior coming behind as well.”

Allen looked at Dennis and unslung his rifle. Dennis shook his head. “Leave. Now. We go hold them down a bit. You run. Get the word out. Hear?”

Allen nodded and shook Dennis’s hand. Then Dennis pushed Allen away and picked up his rifle. He jogged toward the bend as Allen grabbed his pack, strapped it on, and disappeared down the ravine with four mongoose-men following him.

Dennis slowed and inched his way up the roadside, using the heavy bush as cover. The lookout scabbled his way over on his elbows and carefully parted a prickly bush for Dennis to look through.

Azteca feathers and standards flapped animal likenesses in the wind. The first scouts appeared down the road. Then the first row of regular Azteca marched out, a dust cloud rising around them.

“Some say a cornered mongoose the most vicious,” Dennis said. “We go be even more ferocious.”

The rest of his handful of men crawled into the bush near him. They dug around for the best hiding positions. One mongoose-man monkeyed up a tree, his feet kicking off loose bark.

Dennis raised his gun and sighted the lead banner carrier. “When you ready.”

A rifle cracked from up in the tree. The Azteca line slowed. The mongoose-men opened fire and the first row of Azteca dropped to the road. Dennis fired. The gun bucked into his shoulder. He blinked his eyes clear and reloaded, levering the still-steaming spent cartridge out with a practiced flick.

The Azteca return fire ripped through the bush around him. Pain exploded down Dennis's arm. He grabbed his shoulder, trying to stop the blood spurting into the leaves around him. Feet pounded the ground as Azteca slashed through the branches at them.

Dennis heard more shots from his men, branches snapping, grunts, gasps, and screams as Aztecs and mongoose-men fought hand to hand.

A light-skinned warrior jumped past Dennis, smacking him in the head with a club.

He struggled to raise his rifle with one hand, but it was knocked free. Two Jaguar scouts grabbed his legs and pulled him out onto the road. They aimed their weapons down at him.

Dennis lay there and looked up into the sky.

The mist had cleared away. Between the blotchy green leaves and branches he saw that a strong wind was pushing clouds rapidly through the sky, far above him.

Against the sound of the pitched jungle battle, the two rifles above him fired, one just after another.

CHAPTER TWO

John deBrun sat in a canvas chair and doodled on a piece of paper with his good hand. His left hand, a simple steel hook, rested with the tip dug into the chair's wooden arm. He drew a semicircle on one side of the paper with a swoop of his quill. He did the same on the other side to form an egg. Then he shaded shapes onto it. Wicked spikes. Shadows in the crevices. John added water dripping from the spikes, a slight déjà vu moment flitting through him, and then held the piece of paper back at arm's length.

Just a spiked sphere. That's all. He set the paper on the floor.

Several other sketches lay on a varnished table in the basement's corner. A giant metal bird with a beak that writhed into a human face. A half-finished sketch of a woman melting into a fiery sun.

The largest painting hung from the ceiling. John often lay beneath its chaotic blue ocean-wave landscape. When salt spray drifted in through his shutters, John recalled sailors' screams and water streaming across the deck. Cold, frigid water.

Half-sunk into the earth, his house remained nice and cool, despite the heat outside. Wonderful protection as dry season came to the lowest slopes of the Wicked Highs. After all day fishing the Brungstun reefs, John often retreated down here. But even at the basement's coldest, it never compared to the chills he got when looking at the painting.

"Hey," said a familiar voice. The twenty-year-old memories of his sail north fled. John turned. His thirteen-year-old son, Jerome, sat on the stairs. "Mamma done cooking. You go come up to eat or what?"

"What'd she cook?" John didn't sound Nanagadan. He'd spent enough years listening, but he kept his own strange language patterns. Despite his son's teasing. Or the inlaws'. It was the only thing he had from his past.

"Saltfish stew. Rice-n-pea," Jerome said.

John loved Shanta's cooking, but could never find enthusiasm for her weekly dose of saltfish. Just rice and peas for him today, then.

He leaned forward and stood with a grunt. The scars down his legs ached. Jerome grinned and ran up the stairs.

"He coming, he coming," Jerome yelled, headed for the kitchen.

Shanta leaned around the corner, then turned her attentions back to the iron skillet of rice. Cooked and burned in the square stove's bin, heating the kitchen's confines. Her white dress shifted against her curved hips.

"What take you so long?" Shanta berated him. "I call you already."

John sat down at the scarred table. A plate of fresh johnnycakes still glistened with oil in the middle of the table. John reached over and speared one with his hook.

Jerome turned in his chair. "He using he hook to eat he food." Jerome grinned as he told on his dad. Shanta turned around and gave John a look. John avoided her eyes and pulled the fried dough off his hook.

Shanta set the skillet on the table. "Quit playing," she warned.

Father and son exchanged meaningful mock glares, blaming each other for drawing Shanta

irritation.

~~“You want to go into town with me, tomorrow?” John asked Jerome. Jerome scrunched up his face and thought about it.~~

~~“Yeah. Where?”~~

~~“I need to go out to Salt Island.” The salt bin had reached the halfway mark last week, and John needed to make some extra fun money as well; carnival started in two days. He didn’t want to be late. He broke during the food fair. It was his favorite time of year. “If you help me, I’ll give you some money for carnival.”~~

~~Shanta filled Jerome’s bowl with saltfish stew and then nudged the pot toward John. He shook his head. She sighed and handed him the skillet of rice and peas. “Be back before dark. You know how I get when you out late.”~~

~~John nodded. It would be Jerome’s first sail out of the harbor. “We’ll be back in time.” Jerome kicked him in the shin and John winced. “Don’t do that,” he warned in his best “danger” voice. It was halfhearted. Jerome had been a surprise after six years of marriage. Shanta had been thirty-six and they both had worried throughout the pregnancy. John doted on his son as a result. The strong emotions still sometimes startled him.~~

Later, once Jerome slept in his room, John helped Shanta with the dishes. She cleaned. He rinsed and set them on the rack.

“He excited,” Shanta said.

“Yeah, he’ll enjoy the trip out.” John’s hook hit a pot and clinked as he balanced the last wooden bowl on the other dishes. Shanta flicked the water off her hands. John moved up close to her when she turned. “Hello, Miss Braithwaite.”

“Mr. deBrun. How you doing?”

“Fine. Fine.” John kissed her and held her close; his tanned and weathered skin against her deep brown. “I thought about you when I was fishing today.”

“What you think?”

“How much you would have liked to salt those groupers we netted.”

“Hey! Man, why you tease me so?”

“Cause I love you.”

“Ah.” She leaned into him. Then: “John?”

“Yeah?”

“When you painted ... you remember anything?”

“No.” He kissed her hair and noticed several gray streaks. More and more had been appearing. Yet she never commented on the fact that when she’d met John, he’d looked older than her, and now he looked younger. “Don’t worry about it.” He loved her for caring. Shanta didn’t talk much about the gap in John’s memory. Yet sometimes it seemed to him she secretly worried about it more than he did. Did she want him to stop thinking about it because it always tore him up so? Or did she worry about some past secret that might be exposed that would tear them apart?

Shanta grabbed a towel and dried her hands. “I don’t want Jerome going sailing much after this.”

“Why not?” John took the dish towel from her hands and hung it up on a peg. “What harm is there in it?”

“I remember when they pull you up out the water. Twenty-seven years, John, but I remember. You all wrinkled. Strapped to some floaty thing ...”

“You were young.” John remembered her standing on the beach. Then he remembered the gray streaks in her hair and regretted saying it.

“Huh,” Shanta snorted. “Twenty-two. Old enough to give you plenty grief.”

John had struggled with the fact he couldn't remember anything before he had washed up on the beach. He had taken his name off the silver necklace around his neck with the name *John deBr* written on it. Even though he didn't speak like everyone else, he understood Nanagadans. Which meant he must have been exposed to the land before.

John stayed to sail boats in Brungstun, hoping to regain his memories. He could picture maps in his head as if they were before him. He could navigate by stars, sun, map, and with his eyes closed. But he started out a horrible sailor. He had known nothing about winds or the tides or the waves and weather around Brungstun.

"He won't be like me," John said. "None of that adventuring spirit. He'll grow up, be respectable town banker, right?" Shanta mock-punched his arm. "He won't break any young girls' hearts," John teased, continuing. "Won't leave for Capitol City ..." Shanta's grin disappeared.

After six years learning the sea with local fishermen, John had trekked to Capitol City with a small group of mongoose-men led by Edward, a bushman who became a close friend for the trip there.

Shanta stepped away from him. "Don't talk about Capitol City, John. Not tonight. I never sleep when you was sailing the ocean. I don't want ever think you was dead again. You know how horrible ___"

"I'm sorry." John pulled her back to him in a hug. "I'll shut up." During the trip John had looked for clues to his past in other towns on the way north, and in Capitol City itself. He'd been offered a chance to join a trio of ships as navigator. The expedition was to see if there was land to the north, but in the dangerous, icy waters of the north seas John had found nothing but death, and some fame as he navigated the single surviving ship back to Capitol City. He'd been forged into a captain and a leader during that horrible trip back to Capitol City from the icy north. Or maybe that had been something always in him. "I came back, right? I'm here now."

Shanta shrugged. She spun away from him. "No excuse for all that."

"Let's quit being glum. Carnival's almost here." He turned around with a large grin.

Shanta sighed. "You and carnival. Look at you. You like a little boy, all excited."

John extended his good arm and danced a quick circle around her. "Just a couple days." He smiled.

"Come on." She smiled back and pulled him along. John followed her down the hall to their room. Shanta paused at the doorway. "It really cold there up in the north, like you say?"

"You could see your *breath*." John imitated her accent to make her laugh and, at the same time, remembered that the cold had almost killed him. He helped Shanta unstrap the hook. She didn't need help with his loose shirt, and by now he could undo the back of her dress with one hand.

"Please don't go adventuring north again," she whispered.

"Once was enough. Never again."

They made love. She chased the chill out of him.

For the night.

CHAPTER THREE

Oaxyctl ran through the jungle toward Brungstun in the double-shadowed light of the twin moons that peeked out from between a break in the rain clouds. He was so close to safety since making it out of the mountains, skirting well wide of Mafolie Pass and a few mongoose outposts along the way. He had come too far not to make it now.

The padded cloth strips wrapped around his feet pulled loose. Round trellis leaves slapped him and left conical stickies and dripping sap down his chest. Oaxyctl slowed down and hopped, pulling one foot up to his hands. He tore the last piece of dirty white cloth off his right foot and threw it into the trees. The movement tripped him up, and Oaxyctl pitched forward.

He threw his hands up and slid through sweet-smelling, half-decayed leaves. He scrambled over a root, caught his balance again, and wiped away dirt stuck to his forearms.

He knew he was easy prey. He left tracks. Tracks all over the place: the footprints, the cloth, the broken twigs, and the dirt falling from his arms. Even if he left nothing to betray him, *it* would still follow. This was a desperate dash for freedom. Oaxyctl leapt over vines twining themselves over the ground and twisted past tree trunks he couldn't put his arms around.

Any magical abilities inside the tall, domelike ruins he'd stumbled on a few hours back had failed centuries ago. The men who had grown the buildings' rock outer shells had died not long after, and no one would think to occupy a building of the ancients this deep in the jungle. Oaxyctl had hoped just to shelter from the rain for a night in them. But when he'd pulled himself over the glassy, slick stone and looked down, he'd seen flesh and metal hanging from a hook forced into the wall beneath him. A wall that he could have shot a gun at and not chipped. Two hearts lay tossed in the mud underneath. Oaxyctl had looked at the broken saplings and torn vines throughout the courtyard, claw marks in the mud, and known exactly what he saw.

A Teotl, a god, was surely here.

He had let go and slid down the side, not even noticing as he banged his chin against the lip, and ran back into the forest.

Now Oaxyctl burst out of the steaming, cool rain forest and into a copse. Mud stretched out before him for two hundred yards. Beyond that he could see tamarind trees waving in the gusting wind. Rain fell, and then poured down, in sheets. It splattered into tiny pools that collected in kidney-bean shapes across the sea of brown.

He looked down at his bare feet. Cold freshwater rushed in to encircle them as his feet sank down into the mud.

Footprints, Oaxyctl gibbered to himself. Footprints everywhere! In his mind's eye he could see the long line of prints leading across the muddy copse he would leave as he ran.

"Sweet, sweet, Quetzalcoatl." He dug at his left hand with a fingernail. He scratched until blood trickled down into the skin between his index finger and thumb. Quetzalcoatl didn't accept blood sacrifice. Many others demanded it, though, and Oaxyctl had to try *something*. He scratched and scratched until the blood flowed freely and mixed with the rain.

"This is not even my land," Oaxyctl said. "But I would fertilize it with my own blood for mercy."

A trellis tree snapped and shook in the wind. Oaxyctl jumped. He looked around, his eyes wide. The

wind died. The world fell silent. In the distance a frog let out a long belching croak, then shut up.

Oaxyctl broke from the protection of the forest and sprinted across the mud. The ground threatened to slip out from under him. He flailed his arms to keep balance. Hyperventilating and sloshing through puddles, he got halfway across the two hundred yards before he heard a long, sharp whistle in the air above him.

He froze.

The Teotl landed in front of him with a wet explosion of mud that plastered Oaxyctl from head to toe and threw him backward from his feet. Oaxyctl sat up and huddled forward. He shook with fear and averted his gaze.

He wasn't scared of dying. No. He was scared of far worse. Oaxyctl feared the pain that was sure to come.

"*Notecuhu,*" he whimpered. *My lord.* "Please, it is a great honor." He crawled forward, not taking his eyes off the mud that almost touched his nose.

Squelch, squelch. The sound of the clawed feet slushing forward sent shivers roiling down Oaxyctl's gut. He tasted bitterness coming up his throat and his nose flared as he smelled rotted flesh. Face this like the warrior you are, he urged himself. Be noble. Meet an honorable death and give your heart willingly. He thought these things even though some deeper instinct in him raged to fight tooth and nail to the last gasping second.

But that would accomplish nothing, Oaxyctl knew. His body tensed like rope about to fray and snap, and Oaxyctl steeled his soul.

"*Amixmähuih?*" the deep and raspy voice of the Teotl asked.

"I am not afraid," Oaxyctl said.

"*Cualli.*" *Good.* The Teotl wrapped two sandpapery thumbs around Oaxyctl's neck. The forefingers rested on his spine. "*Quimichtin.* Spy. Traitorous creature, we know of your betrayal. But we are not done with you."

The Teotl cupped Oaxyctl's chin with its other hand. It drew a long bead of blood up his neck with its second thumb. The hand was ribbed with tatters of pale, blueveined skin.

"I was found out." The Nanagadans had caught him and sent him back over the mountains to work for them. "What could I do?"

The Teotl ignored his rationalization of double treason. "What you will do now is what I bid you. You know where other *quimichtin* are here, ones that you have not betrayed just yet. Give them away. The black human warriors that live on this side of the mountains will trust you and let you walk among them if you give them this information, and if you fight on their side."

Oaxyctl dared to look at the Teotl's legs. External bones ran down the midnight black cartilage of its thighs. On each side of the Teotl's hip, rain and pus quivered along the joints of tentacles, one of which stirred, coils shifting to reveal tiny jaws.

"I will do so." Oaxyctl looked back down.

The Teotl shifted its grip and pulled Oaxyctl out of the mud. Oaxyctl struggled for air as two thumbs pressed down on his chest and the Teotl's fingers on his back pushed his shoulder blades inward. He dangled above the mud. Oaxyctl faced the god and panted. Here stood a being whose kind dwelled in Aztlan's sacrificial pyramids. It wore a cape of flayed human skin, the empty, floppy arms knotted around the Teotl's neck, feet twined around the tentacles by the god's hip.

It shook rusted locks of hair and looked at him through oval steel eyes.

"We hunt men who may stop this invasion. Now we hunt the man who will try to go north," it hissed. The silver jaw and gray gums did not move as the Teotl spoke. The whisper wormed its way past from deep in the fleshy throat. "You are to find a man, here. He has great secrets within him. You must get codes from him. Then you will kill him."

“The man who goes north?” Oaxyctl gasped. “I don’t understand.”

~~The hand holding Oaxyctl’s chin up caressed his cheek. Blood ran down the sides of his neck and collected in the V of his chest.~~

“He will try to leave the land for north. This man is dangerous. But important.” The god puffed with air. “Any moment now ... we will push in greater numbers over these mountains. We will have men sacrificed before us in this land. We will destroy their gods, our ancient enemies. But we must have this man.”

“So how will I know him?” Oaxyctl croaked. His vision danced as he tried to pull a full breath.

“His name is John deBrun, and we think he lives near this town. We are sure of it. We smell him faintly. He has the secret codes that set free the *Ma Wi Jung*. Torture them from him or bring him back to us alive. That is your choice, for you can walk among the *nopuluca* as I cannot. He must not die before releasing the codes to the *Ma Wi Jung*.”

“Lord,” Oaxyctl shook in fear for his impudence. “May I have Jaguar scouts to help me capture him during the invasion?”

“You do this *now*. Only days remain before we begin to march again, and there are those who do not want to risk this man living, no matter what we may reap. They give no orders to save him, as I wish. They are weak-minded and miss potential. So we charge you with this mission. As we all invade, you find this man. Keep the human alive and obtain his secrets. Do well, you will be rewarded well. Fare ...”

The god did not finish but let go with a snort of steam. Oaxyctl dropped into the mud, his legs folding painfully under him.

“Remember.” The god turned around. “The *Ma Wi Jung* codes. I will be near you again.”

Oaxyctl inhaled deeply and watched the Teotl walk back into the forest. Somewhere near the trees he slipped into the shadows and Oaxyctl was alone.

He lay back into the mud. Without thinking he put a hand over his heart. It still thudded. He was still alive. He’d thought he was dead when he’d crossed the mountains and the mongoose-men captured him, and he’d thought he was more dead when the god had landed in the mud in front of him, yet he was somehow still alive.

It was almost the end of rainy season, but the heavy clouds opened up anyway. Oaxyctl lay still in the downpour and began shaking. Several hours later a Brungstun mongoosesquad circled him. Their guns hung easily by their sides, dangling from leather straps, and their canvas clothes dripped rain. Their unshaven but quite human faces looked down at him with suspicion. Oaxyctl cried with relief to see them.

But even now he realized there was still nowhere to hide. The Teotl could walk almost anywhere. Jaguar warriors would be coming over the hills any day now. The gods still commanded him. There was nothing he could do against this.

Nothing.

The mongoose-men tied his hands and dragged him off to Brungstun. Oaxyctl shook all the way there.

CHAPTER FOUR

John sat at the table the next morning, buckling his hook's metal cup tight onto the stump of his hand. He levered the straps until they bit into his wrist's calluses and looked up to see Jerome in the doorway.

"Hey, Son." John smiled.

Jerome blinked. He picked up a piece of bread and some cheese from the counter by the stove. He had something on his mind. "You always have to do that?"

John nodded.

"You wrist all scar up. It hurt?"

"Sometimes."

Jerome took that as a good enough explanation.

"You ready for a good sail?" John asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah, man." Jerome waved the bread in the air. "Ready for sure!"

"Good." John packed a bag with extra bread and cheese wrapped in wax paper, added a bottle of ginger beer, and picked up a heavy canvas bag, brown and stained with use, from the stairs. Dry sand crusted the two loop handles. "All right, let's go."

They walked out and waved at Shanta, hanging clothes up to dry on the line in the yard. Shirts and pants flapped in the wind.

"Take care," she called. "And bring me back plantain to fry up."

The walk to Brungstun took twenty minutes, the footpath passing by boulders near where John sometimes watched the ocean below explode up into the air, spraying and hissing as it turned into tangy mist when it reached him. Then the rock under their feet turned to dirt, and then into a shiny rock road made by the old-fathers that followed the coast's curve through Brungstun to Joginstea where it stopped. Brungstun houses, pink and yellow with sheet tin roofs, lined the road's edge.

Brungstun nestled in a carved-out nook in Nanagada's coastal cliffs that dipped down into a natural harbor. The rocky trailing edge where the Wicked High Mountains entered the water protected the small village from the ocean's worst, and the jagged offshore reefs made a natural breakwater that made a large area around Brungstun safe for fishing. The Wicked High Mountains themselves protected Brungstun and the rest of Nanagada from the Azteca.

John and Jerome passed a farmer selling fruit along Main Street, and Ms. Linda waved at them and asked Jerome if they had any sweet tamarind. She would bring some by, she said. The post master told John the telegraph was down, yet again, and he hoped it would be back up soon. He asked John to pass the message on if he was going to Frenchtown. It took another twenty minutes just to walk down the slope of Main Street to the boats as people chatted with them. Five thousand people lived in Brungstun, and they all knew John.

"Here we are, finally," John said. "Jetty number five."

His small boat yanked at the pier cleats while the ones out at anchor bobbed, their masts swaying. Water stretched out for miles beyond the harbor, dark in some places, light in others that indicated reefs just under the surface. In the hazy distance, rock chimneys jutted above the water.

Jerome dropped the two bags he'd carried with him. "It windy."

“No worry,” John replied, stepping into the fifteen-foot wooden boat, *Lucita*. Water splashed around the bottom. He leaned over and grabbed the calabash-gourd bailer. As he scooped out the water lapping over the floorboards, he continued, “It’s a good day for a sail. Sharp and steady.”

Still somewhat dubious, Jerome said, “We won’t capsize or nothing?”

John held up his hook as he walked forward and put the two bags under the bow’s lip where they would stay dry. “I swear by the hook.”

Jerome laughed. He sat down on a wet seat. “Okay then.”

The snappy wind leaned *Lucita* over. They passed through the forest of anchored boat masts. The harbor steamer paddled by, going the opposite direction. The passengers on their side waved at John and Jerome. Jerome held on tight to his seat and didn’t move. He jumped at every unusual crack of the sail and squeak of floorboards.

John skirted some smaller reef, then sailed north. Eventually he tacked and turned northwest for Frenchtown.

After half an hour he tacked again, pushing the tiller over and ducking the boom as it flew by his head, ropes and blocks rattling. It snapped taut and they continued forward. John shifted to the high part of the boat.

The water lightened into aquamarine. John let the sails out with his good hand controlling the mainsheet, his hook on the tiller, and *Lucita* slowed. Another reef. He dodged the boat left toward darker blue, and thus deeper, water. Jerome relaxed, leaned over, and trailed his hand in the water. “How far Frenchie Reef?”

“Not too far.” People who didn’t sail needed patience. John sighed. You didn’t just get in a boat and show up somewhere.

In the distance a long line of white breakers roared. John skirted them and followed another reef line, edging up against the wind until palm trees magically rose from the clear water. Frenchtown, Sa Island.

John closed his eyes and looked at his mental map of the area around the *Lucita*. Sharp, clear, and in his mind’s eye he could rotate it around to examine it from different directions. The Wicked High Mountains rose to John’s left in the west, splitting the continent in half as they ran north and south. They trailed off into the sea to make a commalike curve of rock chimneys and reef. Inside the protective curve lay Brungstun. Among the reefs were the flat islands the Frenchi lived on.

It was all an impassable, jagged maze. No ships ever got out from this protected area into the ocean. No ships got in. In this safe basin the Brungstun and Frenchi fishermen existed.

“Mom say the water dangerous. Story does say that old metal airships from the old-fathers fell in the harbor water. We could wreck on them.”

John opened his eyes and nudged the tiller to adjust their course. “I’ve never seen that. Just the reefs I need to watch out for.”

Nanagada’s coasts were too rocky and clifflike to land on. Except for fishermen in Capitol City’s great harbor, a few traders from Baradad Carenage on Cowfoot Island on the continent’s other side and the fishermen in this protected area, no one sailed the ocean. The towns settled on inland lakes and rivers. Safe, with calm weather and easy wind.

John smiled as a gust leaned the *Lucita* over. They didn’t know what they were missing.

Lucita pulled into Frenchtown’s flat, still water. Huts clustered on the beach’s edge, and brightly colored fishing skiffs lay canted on the sand.

The water depth shortened to three feet. John moved forward and pulled the daggerboard up. It s

in a little well just behind the mast and dripped water as it slid out. John could see water, and the sand beneath it, passing under his boat. Without the extra ability to point into the wind, *Lucita* skittered sideways.

John ran back and grabbed the tiller. He expertly wobbled the boat the rest of the way to shore and dropped the sail as the *Lucita*'s bow hit the beach.

Then he grabbed Jerome and threw him into the water.

"Hey, man!" Jerome stood waist-high in it, dripping wet.

"Hey, you." John jumped in after him. Jerome splashed at him as John pushed the boat as far up the sand as he could.

"DeBrun, that you?" someone called.

"Yeah."

Troy, a fisherman, sat in his boat with a paint tin. Troy's white skin flaked from sunburn. His straight blond hair hung down to his shoulders. No locks, just limp strands. "Where you been all the time?"

"Busy fishing. Have to make a living."

Troy laughed.

John couldn't help looking at the bad sunburn on Troy's pale skin. Frenchies could put on an accent so strong he had trouble understanding them. But they were very white. That was uncommon. Cowfoot Island off Nanagada's southeastern coast, and northeast up the peninsula in Capitol City, yes, he had seen some white people. But that was it. John reached over the prow and pulled out the canvas bag.

"More paintings?" Troy asked.

"Yes."

"Good." Troy put down his brush and hopped out onto the sand. He looked down at the canvas bag. "I go trade with you."

Jerome wandered down the beach toward several Frenchie children. His darker skin color stood out oddly enough. He joined them kicking a leather football down the beach, laughing when it hit the water and stuck in the wet sand.

John smiled and followed Troy in toward his small beach store. Two old, wizened Frenchies sat on the porch smoking pipes. They nodded as he passed, then continued playing dominoes enthusiastically slapping the ivory pieces down with sharp bangs. Once inside, John set the canvas bag on the counter. Wooden shelves of tinned food lined the back wall. A few burlap sacks leaned against the counter's foot.

Troy opened the bag and pulled out the two paintings.

"I like this. Is a righteous picture," he said. A ship listed at sea, mast broken. Giant waves smacked at it. "This other one"—Troy pointed at a sketch of the Brungstun cliffs—"I sell me cousin that."

"Those took a lot of work," John said.

"I won't go thief you, man." Troy reached under the counter and pulled out a gold coin.

John sucked his breath in. "You're too generous." Frenchies dove along the reefs to supplement their fishing. Sometimes they found strange machines that had fallen from the sky in the days of the old-fathers and would strip them for any precious metals they could find. "You're making carnivores very sweet."

"Is a time to enjoy." Troy smiled.

"You coming to town?"

Troy laughed. "I know I go see you there, right?"

John chuckled with him and looked at the sacks on the floor. "I'm going to need some salt."

"I get you a sack. Hold up." Troy disappeared and came back out with a hefty bag he dropped on the

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