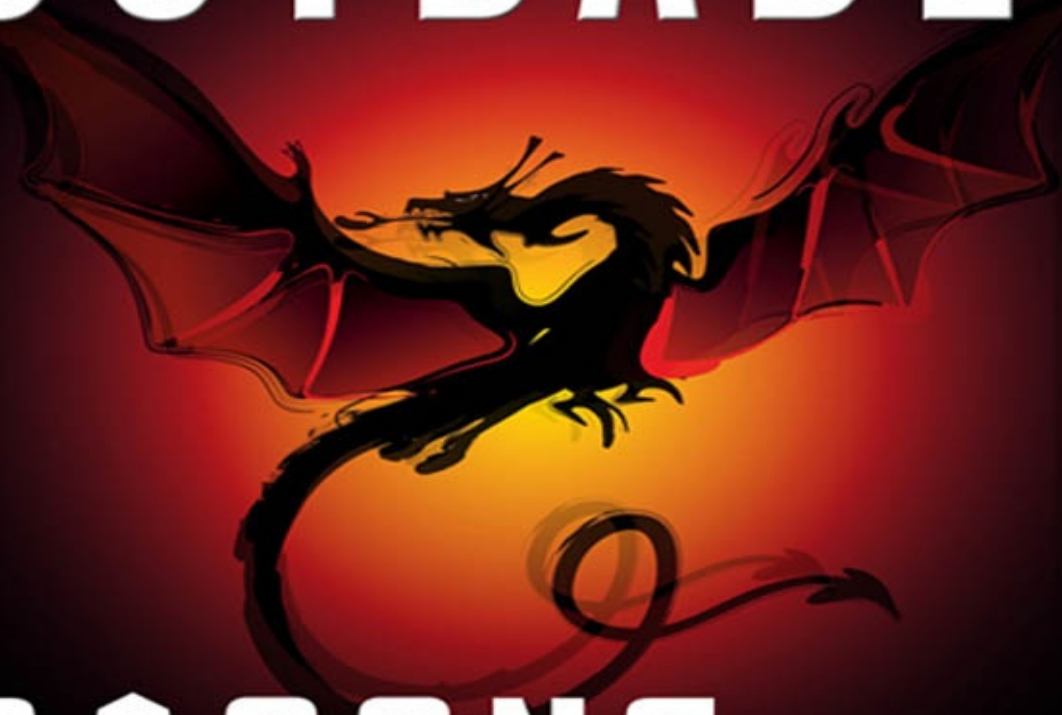


**ERIC VAN
LUSTBADER**



**DRAGONS ON THE
SEA OF NIGHT**

A SUNSET WARRIOR NOVEL



Dragons on the Sea of Night

A Sunset Warrior Novel

Eric Van Lustbader



*This is for my father,
Who asked for more tales.*

The world is more –

Once we understand there is

Only this, we have woken

From the Dark.

From the Tablets of the Iskamen

That which is known as Magic

Was once the progeny of ignorance.

Ancient Shinju saying

KILL RHYTHM

‘He is coming!’

Qaylinn, the chief Rosh’hi of the Bujun, gripped the wooden balustrade of the terrace that ran the entire length of the top floor of the temple of which he was the master. His old, lined face shone in the deep russet glow of the huge, oblate sun as it began to sink over the marshes where geese rose and a as they had from time immemorial.

‘I told you he would come!’

‘Yes,’ the voice said from behind him, ‘but will he listen to what we have to say?’

Qaylinn, who had been trained since infancy to intuit intent from the nuances of the human voice, turned to face the other man – a tall, stately figure with a halo of steel-gray hair. Even so long from the battlefield, he is still the soldier inside, Qaylinn told himself. ‘You are afraid,’ he said quietly.

‘Are you not?’

Qaylinn shook his head. ‘You forget. I have met the Dai-San. I know him.’

The tall man shook his head. ‘I, too, have met the Dai-San in the presence of the Kunshin, our sovereign, and my private opinion is that he is allowed too near the Dragon Throne,’ he said. ‘I think it is foolish to delude oneself into believing that he is knowable. Can one know a god? I think not.’

‘Whatever he may be now, he was a man, once,’ Qaylinn said steadily. ‘And I assure you he has no designs on the Dragon Throne. He has bonded with the Kunshin; they are closer than brothers.’ It was important to keep the minister’s fear in check. Should it spread to the other members of the council? In any event, their faith in the Dai-San must not be shaken. His work was not yet done, and he was their only hope. ‘From the womb of woman he came and so in his mind – whatever he has now become, whatever magic has been worked on him – he remains at his core a man.’

High Minister Ojime grunted. ‘Would that I had your faith, sayann.’ Sayann, a Bujun term for extreme respect, was not often used, and even less by Ojime. ‘I, too, know that our fate – and the fate of the entire world of man – rests in the hands of the Dai-San.’

A wind was rising, unnatural and unsettling. It caused Qaylinn’s deep saffron robe to swirl about his bare feet, ruffled Ojime’s oiled cotton and cured leather coat which was the color of indigo, connoting his senior rank within the Sekkan, the council of Bujun.

Of course Ojime is frightened, Qaylinn thought. He is a political animal; he has been taught to fear and covet power that is greater than his own. It is how he came to don the cloth of indigo. Qaylinn wondered how many of the other high ministers feared and envied the Dai-San his godlike powers. His bald pate tingled. There was danger here, he knew, over and above the pressing reason he had summoned the Dai-San to Shinsei na-ke Temple in Haneda, Amano-mori’s capital. It was a danger closer to home, the viper hidden in the breast of those who would have you believe they were friends. Ojime – and, indeed, all the high ministers – would need constant surveillance.

He looked to the west, where it seemed the lavender clouds were parting and, if he squinted, he

could just make out a black speck near the horizon. The wind blew in his face and he felt the kind of electricity in the air one experiences during a lightning storm.

‘I see him,’ Ojime whispered from just behind Qaylinn. ‘He answered your call, after all.’

‘As I knew he would,’ Qaylinn said without inflection. ‘He is the Dai-San.’

‘Even so,’ Ojime said, ‘he is not going to like what you have to tell him.’

‘What the snow-hare’s feet have told me!’

The Rosh’hi had whirled around, his voice uncharacteristically tense. ‘When I speak to the Dai-San – when I tell him what I must – I will merely be a messenger of the kami, the spirits who reside in Ama-no-mori and protect it from harm.’

‘Let us hope the Dai-San believes that, eh?’ the high minister said darkly.

The wind whipped their cloaks around them with a fiery turbulence. The speck, illumined by the setting sun, was now an identifiable object. As he stared, Ojime’s bowels threatened to turn to water for he found that he was facing the great triple-horned head of a Kaer’n, one of the ancient beasts the Bujun warriors rode in the days of fire, ice and necromancy which, even for the Bujun, were becoming a thing of legend.

Where once they had been plentiful, living in harmony with the Bujun, the huge winged Kaer’n were now vastly reduced in number, living in a valley protected by the icy alpine regions of the northernmost of Ama-no-mori’s three islands.

What I would give to get my hands on one of those beasts, the minister thought, shifting from one foot to the other. My power would increase tenfold if I was seen directing one of the legendary Kaer’n. My drive to become head of the Sekkan would be assured, and I could then begin my assault on the Kunshin himself. But, by the gods, this creature makes my knees weak!

Qaylinn’s thoughts were also filled with the Kaer’n, but they were tinged with nostalgia and regret that the Bujun had somehow lost their abilities to nurture and interact with the Kaer’n. He looked up at the beast with awe and veneration.

The flapping of the Kaer’n’s wings filled the men’s ears just as it caused the curling and blowing of the cloud formations high above. There was a certain rhythm, a kind of pulsing that seemed to invade the entire body. It was said, though Ojime had never seen documentation, that when the Kaer’n killed their wings beat the air with a rhythm that slowly aligned itself with the victim’s heartbeat. When synchronicity was achieved, the victim somehow died.

Astride the beast was the last person on the planet able to control and speak to the Kaer’n – the Dai-San, the Sunset Warrior.

Qaylinn felt a fire on his face as the Kaer’n’s golden talons extruded through flesh, horned and armored to grip the highest parapet of the temple. Its iridescent wings folded in upon themselves, its long scaled neck bent, the large-boned, trapezoidal head almost touching the stone flooring, the amber intelligent eyes impaling the minister and the Rosh’hi in their unwavering gaze.

The two men stood transfixed as the Dai-San dismounted over the arch of the Kaer’n’s neck. He was impossibly tall, wrapped in a cape of an unidentifiable material the color of night. His high curved helmet was studded with gems that gave off a lambent illumination not unlike starlight. His faceted armor was unlike anything Ojime had ever dreamed of. A veritable galaxy of mythical beasts was embossed into the metal with such consummate skill that they appeared to be alive. What unknown artisans had fashioned this fantastic second skin he had no idea, but he longed to touch it, to don it, to investigate for himself its efficacy, the heady sense of invulnerability it must surely engender. Or what he could do with such armor!

The Dai-San’s face was human-like, but in a multitude of ways it was vastly different. For on

thing, his hooded eyes were faceted. It was almost as if one were being scanned by a company of people all with different personalities, differing points of view. His prominent nose seemed sculpted out of granite, his cheeks to have been scraped from the depths of the howling deserts. His mouth was like a dagger of ice, slashed horizontally across the lower half of his face. He was, in short, like no other creature either man had ever met.

‘Dai-San,’ Qaylinn said softly, with a small, ceremonial bow. ‘It was good of you to come.’

The Dai-San’s terrifying mouth split into what might, in others, have been a smile. ‘It is good to see you again, my friend.’

Qaylinn lifted a hand briefly in Ojime’s direction. ‘May I introduce High Minister Ojime. He represents the lay portion of Bujun society.’

When the Dai-San fixed Ojime in the glare of those inhuman orbs, the minister blanched. He was adept at reading people; this was, after all, a talent that had served him well in his climb up the political ladder. But this was another story. He tried to fix his sights into the depths of those eerie eyes, because he knew that the soul of each man and woman was written in those individual depths. What he saw now appalled him. Rather than the blank wall he had imagined, he encountered a hall of mirrors which threw back on him the excesses and sins of his own soul, so that he felt a line of sweat creep down his spine and his stomach turned to ice. He bowed deeply, if only to free himself of the terrible images that had danced before his gaze. He felt sick to his stomach, but he hid his distaste as deep down as Qaylinn ushered the Dai-San into the sanctuary of the temple. Through the Hall of Secrets they went with its peculiar curved walls and massive thousand-year cedar columns, down the Corridor of Remembrance where the scrolls of the founding Rosh’hi hung in hand-carved niches, until at length they came to the Chamber of Prayer.

The last dying rays of the sun touched the thick stone sill of the high narrow west windows so that slices of crimson stained the tea-green walls, illuminating in electric fashion the raised platform from which hung a vertical scroll in stark black and white. The running calligraphy upon it had been written by Qaylinn’s greatgrandfather, who had founded this temple long ago.

‘Please excuse us for not offering you hot tea, Dai-San,’ Qaylinn said, bowing again, ‘but our purpose is urgent and time is very short.’ He went to the platform and, kneeling at the spot directly beneath the scroll, pressed two of the short wooden boards. Ojime, almost morbidly fascinated by the Dai-San, switched his gaze momentarily to the Rosh’hi. Lifting aside the boards, Qaylinn reached into the space beneath and, a moment later, lifted out an object swathed in layers of sueded leather. He rose, holding it away from him as if he would become contaminated by it. Without a word of explanation, he slowly unwrapped the cloth until all the layers had fallen away. He offered it up for the Dai-San’s inspection.

Ojime caught the quick reaction in the Dai-San’s face before he bent down, sniffing the thick gray object. To Ojime’s surprise, the Dai-San’s head jerked quickly back.

‘It is fresh!’ His voice, though a whisper, thundered in Ojime’s ears.

‘Fresh.’ Qaylinn nodded. ‘Yes.’

The Dai-San took a step backward. It happened so quickly that Ojime missed the motion. One instant, the Dai-San was in one place, the next he was in another. Astonishing!

With a whisper of polished leather and beaded silk, the Dai-San drew his enormous sword, *Aka-tsuchi*. Its long blue-green blade shone in the last of the day’s light just as if it were noon outside instead of dusk. The Dai-San held the blade horizontally, the point almost touching the layers of sueded leather as they lay open like the petals of some alien flower. Slowly, the tip slid along the leather, then beneath the gray object until it rested on the blade. Then the Dai-San lifted it away. Wa-

it his imagination, Ojime wondered, or did the Rosh'hi heave a sigh of relief?

The Dai-San regarded the thing with intense interest. 'It is the tongue of a Makkon.'

'A Makkon, yes.' Qaylinn nodded. 'One of the Chaos beasts that were the outriders for the Dolman.' The Dolman, ruler of the creatures of Chaos, had attempted to take control of the world some years ago. A pitched battle had been fought, culminating with the Kai-feng at the citadel of Kamado. The Dai-San was intimately familiar with the Dolman. They were linked in a curious and particular manner, since it had been the Dolman's decision to invade this world which led to the creation of the Dai-San, the savior of mankind, he who had defeated the Dolman.

'But all the Makkon are dead,' the Dai-San said. 'There were four and they all died.'

Qaylinn shook his head. 'What you hold on your sword, Dai-San, is a Makkon's tongue. It is fresh and unpreserved. It is proof that either one Makkon lived somehow or ...' His voice petered out, his words hanging in the air.

'Or there are more than four.'

'Yes.' The Rosh'hi refolded the layers of leather, set them aside. From the pocket of his robe he threw five small items across the floor. 'I have cast the foot bones of the snow-hare, Dai-San, and the tell of a new attempt by the forces of Chaos to enslave our world.'

'The Dolman—'

'Exists no more,' Qaylinn said. 'You made certain of that when you sundered it with your magical dai-katana. But Chaos did not die when the Dolman ceased to exist. It was thrown into disarray and torment, and we wished to assume that it would remain leaderless and, therefore, without threat to us. Now the bones of the snow-hare have told us the truth. There is a new leader in Chaos, and it means to succeed where the Dolman failed.'

'I knew my work was not yet done,' the Dai-San said.

'I wonder whether it ever will be, my friend,' Qaylinn said.

The Dai-San flipped the tongue into the air, caught it on the talons of the scaled, six-fingered glove made from the hide of a Makkon. 'Where was this tongue found?'

'On a Kintai clipper during a routine inspection,' Ojime said, pleased that the tactical phase of the discussion had begun. Since the Dai-San's return to Ama-no-mori, the islands had been opened up to trade. 'A keen-eyed tariff assessor spotted a nervous crewman and ordered the ship searched from stem to stern. The tongue was found secreted within the crewman's sea-chest.'

'I would question this crewman,' the Dai-San said.

Even being asked questions by him was painful, and Ojime sucked in his breath before he said, 'I am afraid that is impossible. The crewman took his own life.'

'Are you certain this is the way it happened?' the Dai-San asked. 'Your men are still unused to outsiders. They are notorious for over-reacting.'

Ojime noticed the Dai-San's gaze meet Qaylinn's, and he found himself deeply envious of the relationship. 'Absolutely certain,' he said stiffly. 'There are half a dozen witnesses.'

'All men under the tariff assessor's command, I will warrant,' the Dai-San said.

'Why the Makkon's tongue was being brought here we have no idea,' Ojime said, desperately trying to deflect the Sunset Warrior's wrath. 'But we did discover where it came from: the Great Rift.'

'That is a long way from here,' the Dai-San said. 'Beyond the Mu'ad desert of Iskael, the country of my bond-brother, Moichi Annai-Nin.'

'Upon the summit of the sacred mountain of Sin'hai,' Ojime affirmed. 'We need you to beat back this new threat, Dai-San. We believe that something *or someone* is using the depths of the Great Rift to break through from the dimension of Chaos.'

The Dai-San nodded. 'Who knows, perhaps the Great Rift itself is the tunnel built by the new forces of Chaos. I will go there immediately.'

He turned to depart but Qaylinn's voice stopped him in his tracks. 'There is something else the snow-hare revealed.'

The Dai-San turned his baleful gaze upon the two men. 'Tell me.'

'Yes, Dai-San.' Qaylinn recognized an order as well as did the minister. 'There is an agent – a human agent whom the Chaos forces are using to help them gain a foothold in our world.'

'Have you a name?'

'Yes.' Now, to Ojime's astonishment, the Rosh'hi actually appeared to quail beneath the burden of his message. In the face of his cowardice, Ojime spoke.

'The bones of the snow-hare were cast and there can be no mistake,' he said quickly, before he, too, lost his nerve. 'The agent, the traitor, Dai-San, is your bond-brother, Moichi Annai-Nin.'

ISKAEL

SEA-CHANGE

The ship heeled over and Moichi Annai-Nin shouted, ‘Haul away! By the Oruboros, haul away now lads!’

All the sheets were being struck, coming down in fluted columns as the howling wind tore at them in great clawing gusts. But the mainsail, larger than the others and therefore more vulnerable, was caught out of position. The carefully tied rigging gave way beneath the violent storm’s startling sudden fist. It tore the fittings like corks out of a line of bottles: pop! pop! pop!, the highest end of the triangular sail a serpentine banner, slapping wetly against the rain-slick mast before shredding into ragged tongues.

Moichi, his great brawny dusky-skinned body fighting aft toward the terrified tillerman, felt rather than saw the heightened agitation of the sea. The diamond set into the flesh of his right nostril flashed blue light as he drew in the sharp, charged scents of the storm, and he thought, damn this Bujun vessel and its delicate construction – unless I can straighten our course we’ll go under for sure. He unsheathed one of the pair of copper-handled dirks that were his trademark, cutting through ratlines that had broken free and were whipping about the halyard.

Outwardly, he grinned hugely as he urged his men on with his immense confidence. But inwardly he cursed each and every one of their grimy souls, for he recognized the panic that had gripped them all on the *Tsubasa*’s decks at the storm’s initial onslaught. Well, he told himself resignedly as he went from group to group, hauling hawsers here, lashing down wildly swinging spars there, what can you expect from a crew dredged up from Sha’angh’sai’s bituminous waterfront dens but drunken ex-sailors and drugged-out petty criminals whose dreams had been faded by time and evil incidence? He should never have allowed himself to cobble together such a crew, but the urge to return to his native Iskael with his love, Aufeya Seguillas y Oriwara, had been too much for him. He had been on dry land far too long.

This morning, six-and-a-half weeks out from Sha’angh’sai, the principal port on the southern face of the continent of man, he had been belowdeck with Aufeya, having already tested the wind thrice during the cormorant watch and learning nothing for his efforts. Or else he had been distracted by Aufeya. He had asked her to marry him when they reached his home in Iskael and she had accepted, her joy igniting the copper of her eyes.

A gray-green wave, opaque in its turbulence, sprang over the taffrail, soaking Moichi where he labored with a tangle of loose and shattered tackle. On his knees, he shouted a warning to those down below as the water roared across the mid-deck. It was then that Moichi felt the underlying power of the storm, and he knew that this was no ordinary tempest that periodically whirled through the eastern stretches of the Iskael Sea. For an instant, his mind seemed aware of something beyond the storm, yet quite a part of it, almost – and this was almost laughable – a kind of malevolent presence, as if the typhoon itself were alive. But that was quite impossible, he told himself, and went on with his frantic

duties.

To make matters worse, the *Tsubasa* was no ordinary ship on which he had learned the art of navigation and sailing; it was a Bujun vessel – a gift from Moichi's bond-brother, the legendary Dai-San, who had saved the world of man from the Dolman and the invading forces of Chaos in the Kaifeng, the final cataclysmic battle that signaled the end of the Ages of Darkness and Necromancy.

The *Tsubasa* was like all things Bujun – that remote island chain the Dai-San had visited – delicate and mysterious as the mist that enshrouded its shores. The Bujun were reclusive, master warriors who preferred their own company. Many tales existed regarding the Bujun. One such insisted that they roamed through the skies astride great horned and winged dragons called Kaer'n.

Though Moichi was a master navigator, he had yet to fully grasp the intricacies and peculiarities of this magnificent, superbly constructed Bujun vessel. As he rose, dizzy, blowing seawater from his nostrils, he cursed the impatience that had led him to set out for home too soon and with an improper crew. He staggered down the companionway to the mid-deck like an over-confident wrestler who, having stepped into the ring, was only now realizing the hidden reserves that lay behind the obvious strength of sinew of his opponent.

He risked a glance upward. There was no horizon. Instead, scudding clouds like angry bruises dipped to meet the rising sea, creating an almost seamless whole, a vast, writhing beast within whose belly the ship rocked and yawed dangerously. In every groan from the seasoned *kyoki*-wood timbers, from every pitch the ship took in the ever darkening swells, from the precarious bowing of the masts before the shrieking, gyring winds, his senses picked up the beginnings of the *Tsubasa*'s death throes.

God bear witness, he berated himself, this would not have happened if I'd not been so involved with the belowdecks. Aufeya! Even now his thoughts betrayed him, straying to the silkiness of her creamy skin, the look of longing and love filling her copper eyes, the pleasure – sometimes gentle, other times fierce – of their nights together in the captain's cabin.

Dammit, no! Moichi had been born to be master of the seas: a navigator. And now, as captain of his own ship, he had at last achieved a lifelong dream. No storm, unnatural or no, would rip his neck from beneath his bootsoles. Oh no, he vowed, gripping the railing to regain his balance. By the Oruboros, the great sea spirit who guides all mariners, I will not allow it!

The roiling clouds above his head mangled the murky periwinkle daylight into patches of shifting, menacing shadow that raced across the ship's foundering flanks as if they were working in concert with the angry sea in trying to pull it under.

The fittings howled in protest and the *Tsubasa* again shipped water dangerously. On Moichi's shouted orders men ran, stumbling, toward the bilges, manning overworked emergency pumps. But the wind was rising, sudden violent gusts like the claws of some evil-tempered beast making the tying of the sails almost impossible. Moichi tried to shout further instructions to his crew but the storm cried him down hysterically.

The ship canted over, almost capsizing, and Moichi turned, heading back aft to the tiller. He was halfway up the companionway when he heard a cracking from over his head like the sundering of a roofbeam. He did not have to look up to know that the mizzen mast – the thinnest of the clipper's three masts – had been bent past its breaking point and had splintered.

He launched himself up the companionway and raced across the shuddering deck. Unmindful of the treacherous footing, he shoved men out of the way of the hardwood as it came crashing down in a bird's nest of rigging and tackle. Nevertheless, one of the cross-trees struck the first mate across his face, his flesh gashed open as he reeled backward, arms flailing in a vain attempt to right himself.

Moichi lunged after him, stretching to his full limit, slipping, then catching himself. His powerful

fingers encircled the mate's wrist as a combination of his own momentum and the violent motion of the ship sent the man arcing over the side rail.

With a shriek, he disappeared, and Moichi was dragged several heart-stopping feet after him across the deck. He fetched up against the side with a rib-jolting blow. Half-dazed he held on, gritting his teeth with the effort, his muscles bulging, veins popping in lightning streaks.

He peered over the side, his face filled with seafoam and rain. He saw the mate's mouth twisted in terror, his eyes staring wildly. Blood ran off him like pink rain.

'Hold on! I have you now!' Moichi shouted into the storm as he gathered his strength to bring the mate up onto the deck. But just then, the *Tsubasa* lurched sickeningly, sending the side they were on plummeting downward into the thrashing sea. My God, Moichi thought, it's dark down here. Like the underside of the world.

And with just an indifferent flick of its bulk the ocean took his mate from him, tearing his hair from Moichi's. The man's mouth opened in a silent shriek as the water in great black swirls lifted him into its embrace, up, up, and then, quite suddenly, sucking him into itself, down and away.

There had been absolutely no sensation of him slipping away, no intimation of what was to come. One moment Moichi had him firmly in tow, the next instant there was nothing to hold on to, just the chill wetness all around, moaning and pitching as if in agony.

God of my father, Moichi thought, I have never seen the sea like this.

His head came up and he squinted through the typhoon, thinking, No! By the Oruboros, this is too much!

But in truth his ears had not deceived him. They were picking up a vibration rather than a true sound – a horrid, bone-chilling rumbling that reverberated through his body and buzzed evilly in his brain.

With a bellow of rage, Moichi stormed the high poop deck and, shouting mingled instructions and encouragements to the young, petrified tillerman, brought his own brawny weight to bear on the protesting steering mechanism. It would not budge.

He raced to the railing, leaped down onto the mid-deck, gesticulating as he picked himself up and ran for the mainmast. 'Raise the mains'!' he cried. 'Raise the mains'!'

No one reacted. The best of them knew only to trim all sail, batten down all hatches and tackle in order to ride out a storm. Raising sail in the face of foul weather was unthinkable. What their captain was asking of them was sheer madness.

'Move,' Moichi shouted, 'or we'll all be dead men, lying at the bottom of the sea and food for the big fish!'

As if to underscore his words all light left the world. In the unnatural blackness the men turned away. There came a shriek among them; or perhaps it was the infernal typhoon itself, laughing at its height at the puny creatures who dared ride its coruscating back.

No matter. They all saw it at once: the *tsunami*. The towering wavefront, black and purple, had risen up behind them, traveling at a fast rate, growing and curling with every split second until it had formed a massive fortress wall threatening to engulf them. The pressure drop was palpable, a gale rushing in their ears, a pounding in the heads. The crew stood paralyzed, staring helplessly at the advent of their doom.

Only Moichi was in motion, striding among them, screaming in their ears, shoving them this way and that. And still the building *tsunami* transfixed them. Then one among them came to life, moving to the mainmast, hauling with all his slight weight, his dark almond eyes sliding from Moichi's face to the rapidly unfurling sheet. It was the lone Bujun among them, a man who had kept to himself completely throughout the voyage that Moichi could not even recall his name.

‘The Oruboros curse you!’ Moichi shouted as he and the Bujun struggled with the mainsail. ‘You’ do as I say or die!’

Perhaps they felt the proximity of their deaths or perhaps it was the example of the grim-faced Bujun hauling mightily on the rigging that galvanized them. In any event, they threw off their stupor and bent to their task, moving as one to deploy the flapping mainsail, which moaned in protest as it was raised into the brunt of the storm.

Now Moichi left the Bujun to work them, and he returned to the high poop deck, bounding toward the ashen-faced tillerman. ‘Into the wind!’ he shouted into the man’s tense face. ‘By God and all that is holy, we’ll be swamped in a moment if you can’t do it!’

Moichi would not turn around, but he could feel the approach of the *tsunami*, feeling its vibration dark and deadly, rushing closer as each precious second raced by.

Bug-eyed in terror, the tillerman cried, ‘You’re mad! You’ll turn us right into the path of the wavefront! We’ll be sucked down for sure!’

In desperation, Moichi threw the tillerman aside and, lifting his head, called for the Bujun. The mainsail was up and bowed, catching the lashing wind. If only the Bujun cloth would not rip in the typhoon’s violence.

The small, almond-eyed man bounded up the companionway, and the instant his hands gripped the tiller, Moichi could feel the ship respond. He looked hard into the Bujun’s eyes, saw only murderous concentration as the man fought with him to turn the *Tsubasa* fully into the wind before the filling mainsail capsized them.

Behind them, the *tsunami* was rushing at them, building even higher, creaming and bubbling like a cauldron at its serpentine crest. Moichi risked a glance over his shoulder. The wavefront was the deepest black within the enormous cradle of its rising bulk.

Sweating like beasts of burden, digging their heels into the slick deck boards, Moichi and the slick Bujun dragged on the recalcitrant tiller. The violent sea had the *Tsubasa* and it did not want to give her up. Grunting with their effort, their lungs hot bellows, they heaved on the tiller, and slowly and agonizingly slowly the craft began to give grudging way, shifting through the water, fighting the wind, the wildly fluctuating cross-currents and the relentless tide. Turning to port, always to port, the two men struggled, their teeth ground together, their shoulder muscles bunched, their chests expanding like sails full out.

But now their world was filled with the rumble of the *tsunami* over and above the wail of the storm, and Moichi knew that it was possible they had left it too late, that the mainsail full out would not provide enough extra speed to allow them to cleave the wavefront, that they would all go down broken like the timbers that would splinter all around them. He did not want to end up like seaweed adrift on the tides.

‘By God, put your soul into it, lad!’ he cried into the Bujun’s ear. ‘Everything you have now! Everything!’

The Bujun trembled with the vehemence of the typhoon and the words spat out by this great bearlike demon at his side. He had signed on to the *Tsubasa* to escape the endless gloom of Sha’angh’s narrow crooked streets, its double-dealing, lice-ridden merchants, its evil-eyed provocateurs, its sleazy arms dealers. It had been a mistake to leave his island home, to come to this seething continent of man. To sail a Bujun vessel had seemed the perfect escape from Sha’angh’s madness. Now he was trapped in this sea-drenched coffin! As he hauled on the tiller his white lips trembled in a prayer that had, until this moment, been only half-remembered.

But no prayer could dispel the terrible onrush of the *tsunami*. It rode triumphantly above the sirens

shriek of the typhoon, a sound out of all nature, a vibration rattling his clenched teeth, causing the short hairs to stand on the back of his neck, making his drenched flesh crawl. Still, his half-numbed brain registered the exhortations of his captain who stood side by side with him, who needed his strength to turn the ship fully into the wind. This sense of intimacy, of comradeship was new to the Bujun, and he felt it a pleasurable and compelling sensation. No one had ever needed him before, and he was bound and determined to deliver up his very soul to his captain if that were what was asked of him. Shoulder to the groaning tiller, he redoubled his efforts, grunting like a rutting animal.

The *tsunami* was a living being pursuing them like the hand of God, rolling and roaring like a giant in agony, an unstoppable mailed fist bent on demolishing them all.

Down on the mid-deck, men tying off the last of the mainsail's singing lines felt cold sweat snaking down their rigid spines. They fell to their knees where they were, vomiting and urinating without volition. Others cried or simply prayed to gods they no longer believed in, returning unconsciously to the ways of their forebears that they had once ridiculed for their piousness. They cried for succor, no longer believing in their innate power as men, pleading with these long-dead gods to deliver them by miracle.

Above them, Moichi shouted, 'Now!' in the Bujun's ear. 'Now, now, now, by the Oruboros!' And they fought the tiller, fought the raging seas and gusting gale as Moichi willed them further to port, bending his mind as well as his muscles to the near impossible task.

Now that special bond between captain and ship was springing up between them, and he called upon the *Tsubasa*, his ship, speaking silently to her in the universal language of the sea. He cajoled her, cursed her, caressed her and beat her, threatening her with an eternity of rot at the bottom of the sea.

And all the while he could feel the presence of the onrushing *tsunami*, its crest widening, higher now than the tallest buildings of his memory, even those great arcane pyramids he and the Dai-Sa when he had been called Ronin, had ascended in the land of the Majapan.

I survived the horror of Xich Chich, Moichi thought, defeating gods more powerful than any other element. I fought in the Kai-feng, the war against Chaos's agent, the dreaded Dolman. I destroyed the monster Diablura in the land of the Opal Moon, resisted the deadly magical lure of the Firemask, outfoxed the sorceress Sardonyx, defeating her at her own diabolical game. I survived it all. I will not die here, so close to home, in my own element! By God, I own the seas!

He raised his head to the lightning-flecked clouds. He felt the proximity of another spirit, the conjunction of their power, battling the howling elements all around them, and he grinned, loving the whip of the wind, the briny smell of the sea, and always the titanic struggle the ocean put to you in order to prove your ultimate worth.

His heart beat fast and strong, and his spirit expanded, directing itself along the sleek flanks of his new ship, pointing its sharp upswept prow toward the wall of water that was now almost upon them. And, for the first time, he appreciated the Bujun craft's design. His own ships would have wallowed in a wave trough but the *Tsubasa's* sleek shape sliced through the waves. The mainsail was almost full out and he could feel a corresponding quickening of their speed. They were almost there. But the wavefront had also picked up momentum as it drew strength from the heart of the typhoon, the flailing arms of the gale, the deepening surge of the sea itself deep down where light itself was forever banished.

The *tsunami* was all they could see now, their entire universe, and Moichi knew that the ship still had several meters to go. It had been a desperate gamble, trying to cleave through the wavefront with speed and nerve, a long-odds bet at best. They had run out of time.

The Bujun was trembling in fear and effort beside him. Moichi felt it almost as if it were his own

and he murmured, 'Come on, lad, don't fail me now! It's just the two of us and the *Tsubasa* against this leviathan!'

Inwardly, for just a moment as he stared into the heart of the *tsunami*, Moichi felt his resolve begin to crumble, for surely there was no way through this cyclopean madness. He had been a fool to attempt this run at it.

Then he felt movement beside him, heard the Bujun's call like a distant sea bird's in his ear, 'She's coming to, Captain. Helm's answering fully. The wind's directly aft!'

All doubts vanished. 'Double and redouble!' Moichi shouted, immensely grateful for the Bujun's courage and resolve. 'Keep the helm steady, mate! If we're blown off course even a few degrees we'll be lost! Our bow must strike the wavefront dead on!'

The sound of the *tsunami* was like the rending of the earth's mantle. It shuddered the deck, rattled and chattered the men's teeth, making them weep with fear and loathing.

'Bastard!' Moichi called at the curling black wall of water. 'I'll beat you yet! My time's not come, and surely not by your evil hand!' And with immeasurable effort, the two men held the helm steady as they met the onrushing wavefront, towering over them to an impossible height so that even Moichi's soul expanded to its limits, felt the chill tendrils of fear writhing in his belly. 'The time of truth has come, lad!'

The *Tsubasa* sliced into the wavefront. Walls of wind-whipped water rose above them until the sea seemed a part of the raging sky, replacing it altogether. They were within the *tsunami*, their fate now linked with its elemental and unpredictable power. Its energy was unendurable – it was like being inside a massive hive of bees stirred by an intruder to a frenzy. Then the sides of the wavebody seemed to glass over, to deepen in color and depth. What was happening?

God of my father, Moichi prayed. This is truly the face of death. For within the *tsunami*'s very heart he discerned what could only be termed a female face, elemental, to be sure, its features shifting like currents, sliding away into shadow and reappearing slightly altered as if each heartbeat, each moment in time brought it a new aspect.

It was like looking into the face of a god. It was dominated by great lidless eyes and a lipless mouth. It was a face of unmitigated rage, so shocking in its intensity that Moichi felt the breath sucked from him as if all the air had been withdrawn from this place. He also had the impression of an immeasurable age, so that for the first time in his life the concept of eternity was given form and substance.

Then he felt the bosom of the sea buck and judder beneath their tortured keel as if a gigantic hand from the depths had risen and grasped it. The ship, as if possessed, shot forward, as the howling wind filled the mainsail to bursting. The *Tsubasa*'s high bow lifted upward to meet the creaming crest of the wavefront now beginning to tumble over them with an ominous tearing sound. Moichi and the Bujun almost had their arms torn out of their sockets as the helm tried to pull this way and that. But the two men held the *Tsubasa* fast to its course, and with an astonishing burst of speed, the Bujun continued to slice through the whirling maelstrom before them.

Moichi felt rather than heard the Bujun praying as the clipper, trembling, dipped precipitously into the trough of terrifying depth. For long breathless moments their world was stark green and obsidian black, the curve of the vast wavebody filled their ears, their heads and bodies with an alien din.

Gargantuan shapes slid through the depths on either side of them, far from the surface high above, moving and twisting in a silent display none had ever seen before or could even have imagined.

How long they plowed through the aqueous gorge was impossible to judge, and at last, directly ahead of them, the first patch of deep blue appeared, so small at first that many took it to be a part

the roaring sea. Gradually, it widened, seeming to bring them out of their watery tomb, and at length they felt the ship rising to meet it, as if in concert with the changing tide below them.

Grinning hugely, Moichi spared an instant to clap the Bujun on the back. Then he swiftly returned both hands to the helm as the *Tsubasa* wavered a bit in the still treacherous cross-currents, the aftermath of the ferocious typhoon.

‘Softly, now,’ Moichi whispered in the Bujun’s ear, ‘the *tsunami*’s behind us but this gale can still do us in.’ Between them they kept a tight rein on the ship’s course. ‘Listen to the wind in the sheers and take care to read the pattern of its changes. If we get broadside to it with the mains’l filled, we’ll go down like a stone.’

The Bujun’s grip on the helm remained firm, his knuckles white with the pressure. He concentrated on the job given him, tracking the gusty wind expertly, making incremental course corrections as needed. In no time at all, he was nearly anticipating the gale.

Seeing this, Moichi nodded to himself. That Bujun had more guts in the crunch than all of the scurvy crew combined. Glancing upward, he noticed that the blue sky was gone. In its place, thick, glowering thunderheads, dark with rain, rippled across the clogged sky, dipping down to meet the gray-green ocean. Lightning forked and licked, yellow-pink, blinding him momentarily.

With that the downpour began anew. Moichi glanced around. The *Tsubasa* was already lying low in the water, her scuppers blocked with twisted masses of sea grape and wrack.

‘What do you think,’ he asked the Bujun, ‘if I ask for all sail to be set will this ship take it?’

The Bujun looked into his face and nodded. ‘She’ll take anything you put her to, Captain. Of that you can be assured.’

Moichi nodded and, turning toward the crew on the deck below, called for all sail to be set. They needed all speed now in order not to ship more water and risk a high wave pulling them under.

One of the mates, a glum-faced giant with an oily drooping mustache and some years’ sea experience, mounted the companionway.

‘You’re not thinkin’ o’ fillin’ the yards in this foul weather, Cap’n,’ he growled. It was not a question.

‘We’ll go under if we don’t raise the sails,’ Moichi said, not bothering to look at the mate as he directed the crew to clear the last of the debris over the side.

‘You’re wrong, Cap’n. We’ll surely go under if we do set sail.’ He was close enough now to smell the rum on his breath. ‘That god-rotting demon wave was an omen. We’ll do nothing now but ride out the storm.’

Moichi swung at him. ‘Look at how low we sit. With this heavy rain and the scuppers clogged we’ll be sunk inside a watch. You’ll follow my orders, by God!’

‘I warn you,’ the mate said, ‘do not tempt the gods further.’

‘I said set all sail,’ Moichi said in a menacing tone.

The mate did not back down, but pulled agitatedly at his oily mustache. He nodded his head in the Bujun’s direction. ‘It’s he who gave the order, isn’t it? That Bujun bastard. I heard stories of how they sail their damned ships.’ The mate spat, a heavy yellow gob of saliva. ‘This is no time t’be takin’ the advice of a rotting Bujun.’

‘I am the captain of this vessel,’ Moichi said, knowing he had to restore his sovereignty immediately, ‘and you will obey my orders.’

‘But why should I, Cap’n?’ The mate raised his arms wide. ‘Why should any of us? You saw it as well as anyone, I reckon.’

‘Shut up!’ Moichi thundered. ‘Or I’ll give your job to the Bujun!’

The big mate spat again and tried to laugh; it came out as a moan. ‘Well, who cares a whit now, eh? ~~This is a damned voyage and you’ve murdered us all, in any case.~~’ Unable to tolerate the heat from Moichi’s glare, he turned to the men, his voice raised in a hoarse shout. ‘Ye all saw it plain as day, I warrant. The face in the wave. All gods curse the day I set foot on this miserable alien ship!’

‘I told you to shut your yap!’ Moichi shouted, hauling the big man all the way up the companionway.

‘Too late, Cap’n, it’s happened. The moment all seafaring men dread. We’ve all looked into Miira’s Mirror! We’re all dead men now! You can’t deny the legend! We’re doomed!’

Moichi slammed his huge fist into the mate’s greasy face, sending him reeling down the companionway, tumbling head over heels. He was about to descend after him when he saw that the door to his cabin was open. Aufeya had emerged. Unused to the rigors of the sea, she should have been white-faced and weak, but she seemed to have weathered the typhoon without ill effect. How long had she been standing there? Moichi wondered. Long enough to have heard the rantings of the mate? By God, he prayed not. She looked at him, making the sign of the Palliate. She was Daluzan – a people whose culture, like Moichi’s, was intimately bound up with their religion.

‘Set all sail!’ Moichi bellowed. ‘Snap to it, mates! All those thinking otherwise will find a watery grave, this I swear, for I’ll tolerate no mutiny aboard the *Tsubasa!*’

The crew snapped to, breaking out the sheets as quickly as they could. But while all about him was frenzied activity, Aufeya stood her ground, her long red hair whipping her shoulders and cheeks, her copper-colored eyes glancing back and forth from the supine mate to Moichi’s stern gaze.

He could see the curiosity in her face, and the fear. Aufeya came from a people who were over-credulous and superstitious. And she had witnessed her own demon – the Diablura – come to vivid and terrifying life, almost destroying her. To her, the world of sorcery and devils had not entirely passed into oblivion. Moichi knew now that she had overheard the mate’s warning regarding Miira’s Mirror, and he cursed the man all over again.

He was descending toward her, when a sudden burst of rain obscured his vision. The wind howled and the ship heeled dizzyingly to port. Moichi was knocked over the railing of the stair, crashing onto the mid-deck. He was up on his feet in an instant, shaking off the sparks behind his eyes, the pain in his shoulder and hip. He shouted instructions to the men tying down the mainsail. It was then that he realized he did not see Aufeya.

He broke off his tirade, rushing to the port rail. He could just see a hand, small and pale, the white knuckles gripping hard the lower wooden railing. He reached down, saw Aufeya’s face, pinched with fear, her eyes wide and staring, her long copper hair whipping around her face and neck.

‘Aufeya! Hold on, I have you!’

As his fingers closed over her wrist, the ship lurched again to port and the angry sea rose up as if it were a beast with a will of its own. It smashed against the hull of the Bujun ship, inundating Aufeya completely.

At that instant, Moichi felt a tugging, an added weight that almost pulled his arm from its socket. He knew that it was impossible, but it was as if something from the deep was trying to pull Aufeya under.

Then the ship rose upward on the breast of a swell and the wave receded, bringing Aufeya back to him. She was drenched and gasping, her thick hair clinging to her like sea grape. She coughed, spewing seawater, and reaching down with his other hand, he began to haul her upward.

The ship dove down again into a trough, the rain beating at them like hail and it was as if a kind of shadow fell over them as the sea rose up her hips, chest and shoulders until it appeared to tower over

them. It was then that some inner tingling caused Moichi to look up into the blue-gray underside of the wave. In its shifting depths he saw again the eerie primordial face, filled with rage. The slash of mouth appeared to open and he heard a rumbling as of distant thunder.

He shook his head as if to clear his ears of water, but it did no good. He heard the rumbling again breaking apart and re-forming into what could only be construed as words:

I WANT HER. I MUST HAVE HER.

What, he thought wildly, am I hearing?

IT IS MIIRA'S WISH.

Miira!

DEFY ME AT YOUR PERIL!

The water was rising, lapping up over Aufeya's mouth and nose. She was struggling now, clearly terrified. And with good reason. In a moment, she would drown.

With an extreme effort of will, Moichi looked away from the sorcerous face, concentrating on the task at hand. He was Aufeya's only chance at life, and he had only moments within which to act. Already a larger wave was forming, heading toward them. The ship was beginning to climb the next crest and Moichi knew this was his last shot at saving Aufeya from a watery grave.

He pressed his knees against the side timbers, hauled upwards, using all the strength in his legs, back and arms. Muscles popped, corded tendons pulled his skin this way and that. He could feel Miira dragging against him, fierce in her determination. But Moichi was more determined. He called upon the strength of his bond-brother, the Dai-San, and slowly, painfully slowly, he drew Aufeya toward him, until as the ship crested the wave, he brought her, gasping and shivering over the rail to his side.

He had one last glimpse of that rage-stained face in the sea, then it broke apart into ten thousand shards, the wave crashed harmlessly against the hull of the ship, and was gone in white plumes along the ship's wake.

MIIRA'S MIRROR

Of course, Aufeya had heard the voice.

And, of course, he had to tell her about Miira's Mirror. He had no choice. They had come too close to Miira – or something that called itself Miira – for him to be able to do otherwise.

He had spent several hours seeing to the ship, but in truth the magnificent prowess of the *Buju* ensured that what damage had occurred was minor. Again, he marveled that such a slight-looking vessel could so courageously weather such an evil storm, and he thanked the Dai-San all over again for his gift, for he was certain that no ordinary ship would have survived.

In the end, he left what remained to be done to the tillerman, whose name was Arasomu, and who had now elevated to first mate. He climbed the crosstrees of the mainmast like a monkey. At its tip, he tested the wind and tasted the sweet smell of the ocean's marker that meant fair winds. Back on deck he broke out his navigator's instruments and, fixing on the shining constellations of the stars, calculated their position. He relayed all this information and his instructions to Arasomu. Confident that the weather had turned for good and that within hours they would be back on course for Iskael, he went belowdeck to his cabin, where Aufeya was waiting for him.

He told her the legend of Miira's Mirror as she lay in their berth, swathed in warming blankets while the *Tsubasa* rode a tranquil sea and lightly gusting trade winds beneath a star-filled night sky toward Iskael. Just her nose and eyes peeped out from beneath the blankets and she seemed, with her wild hair and copper eyes, to be no more than a small child readying herself to hear a night-time tale before sleep.

Miira, it is said by seamen the world over, was a woman of exceeding grace and beauty (Moic began). She lived in Syrinx, a land far, far away on the other side of the Mountain Sin'hai, on the edge of what is said, of a stony abyss that plunged into the very heart of this planet. Her people, I think, must have died out long ago.

These people were political animals. Power meant everything, and intrigue was second nature to them. Miira's husband was a vice-minister in a government rife with internecine warfare.

At the time of the birth of Miira's son, her husband, Bnak, was engaged in a potentially explosive power struggle with the leader of the main opposition movement. He was a staunch loyalist, and he dedicated himself to battling those who sought to overthrow the reform-minded regime.

Again and again Bnak would uncover plots against the highest government officials and he would take measures to thwart them because his sources were numerous and he was as exceedingly clever as Miira was beautiful.

Now you may well ask, if Bnak was so clever and possessed of so much power in a power-oriented society why had he not risen to full ministerial rank? The answer is as simple as it is distressing.

Miira was Shinju.

The Shinju were the indigenous people of this land. Centuries before, Bnak's people had swe

across a vast, turbulent ocean on a mission of expansion. They found the Shinju's land and had straightaway sought to colonize it. In the process, they decimated the Shinju, driving what was left of them into the bleak, desolate highlands. There Bnak's people left them, to die of starvation and the elements, or so they thought. The Shinju were as tough as they were resourceful and they survived like the sure-footed mountain goats, whose thick winter coats they sheared, processed and wove into fantastic garments that were as light as air and as warm as a blazing fire.

As a young man Bnak had a penchant for anthropology and he spent two years in the highlands among the Shinju conducting his studies. It was here that he met Miira and fell in love with her. Her people would never have allowed her to court him, let alone marry outside her race had they not come to know Bnak and to appreciate his special qualities. For his part, Bnak had never shared nor even understood his people's abiding antipathy and scorn for the Shinju. He knew they were not inferior. Quite the contrary, in fact. He discovered that in many ways his own people would never fathom, the Shinju possessed far more knowledge and wisdom. They were simply not a warlike race.

Though it would have been far easier for Bnak to have stayed with Miira among the Shinju, he was no coward. He chose to return to the capital and to work from within to change the laws regarding the Shinju, to help educate his people about Miira's people. The reformers were his best hope. No other faction would even have given him a minor post. And Miira, at her intuitive best, agreed to help him in any way she could.

That Miira was beautiful beyond compare or as graceful as a lark descending from the heart of the sun, that she was cleverer than most men, meant nothing to the ministers who ruled the land; in their minds, Miira and all her people were inferior. Though they readily admitted Bnak's cleverness and exploited it and all his assets to their benefit, yet they mocked him behind his back, made disparaging remarks about Miira and refused every promotion that was his due. In short, they made pretense of listening to his impassioned treatises on the Shinju and then dismissed them as if they were the ravings of a lunatic.

Still, Bnak, loyal to the end, continued on their behalf.

As for Miira, she went about her life as if the scorn of these men and their high-born wives meant nothing to her. That is, on the outside. On the inside, (here Moichi shrugged) who can say? Though she was by no means a vain woman, Miira used her Shinju mirror to make up her face each morning. Now it was her husband's habit to sit with her and watch her at it. The very early morning was their quiet time, and because Bnak often did not return from his work until midnight or later it was here that the peace of those deeply and truly in love descended over them.

'You are the most beautiful,' Bnak would tell Miira in a voice filled with wonder. 'Each morning you grow more so. And do you know that your reflection is beautiful ... and different. There is somehow, a purity of image I can see that comes from the deepest part of you. It is as if when I stare at you in the mirror I see you as a young girl, untouched and unmarked by time, care or worry.'

Bnak would tell her this so often that quite soon it had become a ritual. But no matter how often he said it Miira made no reply. She would merely smile the soft and dreamy smile she allowed only him to see, the smile he had seen while he was on his sojourn among the Shinju.

Three months after a son was born to Miira, Bnak's enemies invaded their villa in the gray and dismal hour before dawn. They slew the guards Bnak had posted and stole the infant from his crib in the small room adjacent to where his parents slept.

They offered Bnak a choice. Either he could resign his post and leave the capital with his son safe in his arms or he could have the infant delivered blue-faced and lifeless at his doorstep.

Now Bnak knew what would happen to the government should he be forced to flee the city. The

plots would multiply until those who sought to take his place would be overwhelmed. The governmental leaders would be slain, the city – the entire nation for that matter – would be thrown into turmoil and confusion. Rivers of blood would run through the capital and the gods only knew where or when they would stop.

To stay and fight for reform or to flee and see all that he had worked for crumble to dust and blood. This was no decision that he could make on his own. So he did what he always did with questions knotty and of high import: he consulted Miira.

Though she was beside herself with grief, still she counseled him to follow the dictates of his heart. ('I often wonder,' Moichi said, interrupting the tale briefly, 'whether she was intuitive enough to have known that Bnak's goal of a united country was but an unattainable dream of a man of good heart and soul.') 'My heart and your heart are one, Miira,' Bnak said with tears in his eyes. 'Tell me what I should do.'

'What does your heart say?' she asked, holding his hands. She looked deep into his eyes now with that purity he had come to know so well. 'The truth now.'

'Loyalty is everything to me. That's the truth of it, beloved,' he said. 'If I betray them, if I betray my loyalty, then I am no man. I am nothing.'

Miira was unsurprised. This purity of purpose was what she loved best about him, what reminded her most of the best of her own people. 'Do as you will, husband,' she said with a voice like the tolling of a bell, 'for I fear either way our son is lost to us for ever.'

She meant, of course, that their son's abductors had no intention of letting him live. They were desperate men, desiring power above all else. What was the life of one infant – especially a half-breed – to them? Less than nothing. They would, Miira feared, simply take pleasure in his death.

Bnak clapped his fists over his ears but it was too late – the bitter truth was branded into his brain and he could do naught else but to follow Miira's advice and do what he would. He had to forget his son ever existed, wipe all the precious memories away. Start over.

Could he carry out such a heinous but requisite task?

He knew he must.

He defied his enemies, the enemies of the state. He remained loyal, he remained a man. But at what price?

The next morning, as they had threatened, their son appeared at the gateway to their villa, strangled with a blue cord.

After the requisite three day mourning period, Bnak returned to his duties at the ministry. He pulled in all the favors he had been hoarding for years and the directive went out across the length and breadth of the capital: find the abductors, the murderers.

But on his way home that night he was ambushed, his guards slain, and he was brutally murdered. At almost the same instant life was seeping out of him, men invaded his villa, looking for Miira. They found only empty rooms.

In another quarter of the capital, the chief ministers were assaulted in their bed chambers. Blood flowed in the streets, as Bnak had feared. Chaos reigned as the old was destroyed and the new sought to solidify its power in the corridors of the ministry and in the streets. Thousands died; the capital was turned into an abattoir as the loyalists battled the insurgents.

During those dark weeks of brutal warfare and death, Miira rose each morning in the cave at the northernmost outskirts of the city to tend to the wounded men and the women who had been beaten and raped. She no longer had the time nor the desire to make up her face, and yet, out of habit, she continued to look at her reflection in her Shinju mirror. She did this mainly to keep the memory of

Bnak alive. In the moment just before he was ambushed, she had been pulled out of sleep by a harsh shriek that, upon awakening, she knew existed only in her Shinju mind. In that shriek was carried the crosstown assault and imminent death of her husband. Also, the hastening bootsoles on the streets along which their villa was set. She had leapt out of bed, grabbed clothes, money and her mirror and had fled the villa by a secret passage just moments before it was invaded by those sent to kill her.

Now, in the cave of war, she looked daily upon her reflection. It was a wholly different image that greeted her. It had been frequently said that there was a kind of magic running through the Shinju. Rumors still surfaced, now and again, but no civilized man believed them, of course. Why would they? If the Shinju actually possessed magical powers would Bnak's people have been able to invade their land, slaughter them, take what had once been theirs?

And yet had anyone else been present to gaze into Miira's mirror they might have had grave second thoughts. For her reflection no longer bore the imprimatur of her husband's love. Bnak was dead; the son, as well. Miira's heart was cold, gray ash. Her normally calm and flexible spirit had become the dark adamantine jewel of fury.

Even as she tended the wounded and dying, counseled the psychologically battered, she burned for vengeance. And, staring into her mirror at what was reflected there, she knew what she must do to dissolve that dark jewel, though she had vowed never to do so and to break the vow meant certain death that she must die.

As Bnak's enemies had done so cleverly before her, Miira now made a comprehensive diary of the new regime's comings and goings. She listed all the key ministers and, after their names, the times of the day when they were inside the ministry building.

After a month of this diligent detective work, she sat down to evaluate her copious notes. By that time the worst of the fighting had subsided to sporadic outbreaks among the last remnants of the die-hard loyalists. The stranglehold of the new regime was all but complete. There was, she discovered, the hour of midnight when all the ministers met in council. Midnight, she thought, putting aside her diary. The hour of Bnak's death.

How she slipped past the phalanxes of guards is anyone's guess. In any event, no one saw her enter the ministry; no one saw her inside until she appeared within the central chamber of state and by then it was too late.

She passed around the great oval table at which her enemies sat, sleek and self-satisfied. Those murderers. There was still time to turn back, to forego vengeance. But her mind was filled with memories of Bnak and of her baby. And she broke her sacred vow.

She used her power; the power of the Shinju, for all the rumors were quite correct. As she passed behind each minister, she placed her mirror before them, and each had no choice but to look at his image reflected there.

What they saw no man, perhaps, can say. But I suspect it was different for each of them. One by one, they clawed the air as if phantasms were assailing them. Their faces twisted grotesquely in horror and dread. They fouled themselves abysmally; some wept uncontrollably in their death throes.

And when the last of the ministers had died, Miira too, looked deep into her mirror and, it is said, died on the spot (Moichi concluded).

Aufeya, who had been sitting up in the berth for some time now, her own aches and fears forgotten as she became more and more enthralled with the tale, said, 'Is this story true? It is so fantastic. Terrible and fantastic.'

'Aye, it is that, but though it makes a gripping tale I doubt its veracity.'

Aufeya seemed lost in thought for some time. Then she threw the bedclothes off and, padding about

the cabin, began to dress. 'I want to go on deck,' she said. 'I'm stifling in here and dawn is breaking over the water. I want to see it. It has been a long, fearful night.'

Even in this early hour there was much activity on deck. Arasomu checked in briefly with Moichi. He had made two slight course corrections during his watch. According to the information that Moichi had provided him he believed they would sight the shore of Iskael before noon. The skies were fair with scattered ribbons of high wispy cloud, and the wind was freshening out of the northwest quarter. It was ideal weather.

'I find it curious,' Aufeya said when they were alone, 'that you hold no truck with superstition yet you are a mariner and mariners are a powerfully superstitious lot.' She tossed her head, glad to be above-deck in fine weather. 'In fact, I've heard you call upon the Oruboros even though you believe in the One God.'

Moichi shook his head. 'I call upon him, no. I curse him on occasion because one does not speak of the God of my people in that way. Just as one does not call upon Him to change the wind or ensure success in business. He is not like the tiny gods of smoke and stone other people kneel before. He is the universe; he is everything. He lives; He provides for His people. But He does not grant petty favors like some desert jinn out of legend.'

Aufeya smiled. 'And the Oruboros does.'

He noted the mocking tone in her voice. 'The Oruboros, the great ancient sea serpent, once lived Aufeya. In another time his power was great, indeed.'

'You talk about him as if he no longer exists.'

Moichi looked down at her, not knowing whether this was some game she was playing, needling him with her disbelief. Not for the first time, he was struck by how little he really knew her. 'Ronald slew the Oruboros when he was transformed into the Dai-San.'

At the mention of Moichi's bond-brother Aufeya dropped her amused look. She knew full well how important this already mythical figure was to him. 'But I don't really understand who – or what – the Dai-San is,' she said.

Now Moichi smiled. 'Does anyone, really?' His tawny eyes were misty with remembrance. 'Aufeya, what adventures we two shared.' His eyes cleared as he tried to explain the unexplainable. 'He was once a man, not unlike me, perhaps. But his fate lay in another direction. On Ama-no-mori, he was transformed by ancient Bujun sorcery that was part of a grand design. Pulled apart, then reassembled, he was compelled to ride the back of the Oruboros, to slay this venerable creature which he held dear so that he might be reborn as the Dai-San.'

'Dai-San,' Aufeya repeated. 'That name is of a language unfamiliar to me.'

'As it is to most. It is Bujun.'

'But the Dai-San is not Bujun.'

Moichi shrugged. 'Ama-no-mori has become his adoptive country. It was there that his transformation began.'

Aufeya's eyes were huge. 'Is he really more than mortal man?'

'In the time of magic from which he was born anything is possible.'

'Even the legend of Miira's Mirror?'

She had him and he knew it. For a moment his brows knit darkly, then he burst out into deep booming laughter. 'Perhaps. But I believe the age of magic died when the Dai-San defeated the Dolman. This is the age of mankind.'

'And what of Sardonyx?' Aufeya demanded. 'Was she not the most powerful sorceress?'

Moichi considered this highly charged topic carefully, as he always did with her. Sardonyx, who

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