

A blue-tinted photograph of a cave entrance. The cave is dark, and the light from the opening illuminates large, jagged rocks inside. The overall mood is mysterious and atmospheric.

Anna

THE

Human

RICHARD SHEKARI

Anna the Human

By Richard Shekari

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He that loves has no fear in him but he who fears is ruled by darkness hence an enemy of light.

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Dedication

To my beloved nephews, Declan J. Agieve and Karston A. Aderinto.

I am Buga.

It was late at night. I gripped my weapon tightly, having heard screams. As I looked around, all I could see was a burning bush; the entire place licked up by flames, the moon light blocked by a thick smoke that mantled the surroundings. All of a sudden, about three of them ran out of the bush with their bodies enshrouded with fire. Something burst into flames, sounding like big drums accompanied by a hissing sound which erupted. The smell of sulphur and burning flesh took my nose hostage but for some reason, I simply stood and watched the horror with my feet grounded defensively.

The invaders took siege of the bush, holding their torches while they continued to set it ablaze. I went closer and saw people being butchered by the invaders. Anyone who jumped out of the burning bush was instantly killed. The sight was awful and it seemed there was nothing I could do.

I also noticed the invaders were bigger in size compared to the ones that were being hunted, burnt and killed. The sound of their voices and cries in the fire weakened my heart. I could not fathom why I was there or why I could not do anything. The attack was merciless, unspeakable and unthinkable.

While I watched, someone ran out of the burning bush and headed toward me, but I could not lift my sword. I just stood there dumbfounded. She walked over to me without a single drop of fear and placed what she carried in my arms, then begged me in a language I did not understand. My hands and body were larger than hers, but the sight of me did not scare her. She looked me straight in the eyes and uttered her request in a most courageous tone. I did not get a good look at her face, for the fire which was the only source of light stood behind her. However, I saw her eyes and noticed that she had no fear of me. I was amazed but she ran away before I could say anything. Then one of the invaders sighted her and chased after her.

The thing she placed in my arms moved a bit, so I used the tip of my sword and unveiled it; the sight was astounding, the light from the moon shone upon it and it smiled confusingly and chuckled. I giggled in return, my mouth wide open in wonder as the two of us continued to look and stare at each other. It was a little human, it clenched my garment and chortled then its eyes turned from happy to sad. It looked me deep in the eye as though it were afraid of me, blinking its eyes repeatedly. I looked around then covered it slowly with the garment that it was wrapped in, turned quickly and started to run.

Feeling amazed and excited at the same time, I kept running. I did not look back and the invaders did not bother themselves with me. As I ran with the little

human, it moved its mouth as though about to cry, I immediately shut it and continued running but it was already too late. One of the invaders had sighted me and launched toward me.

Without a word, he chased me and tried to attack me with two swords. However, as he jumped into the air to strike me I pulled out my sword and pierced it through his heart. He fell to the ground, unable to move. I bent down and took a careful look at him; we had a lot in common, he and I, in terms of body size and the type of clothes we both had on. I wrenched my sword from his chest and stood up, taking a good look at the invader whom I had just killed. I was shaken by what I saw; I seemed to be one of them, they were just like me. I had joined the attack the humans but I did not know why we attacked them, or why I hadn't killed any of the humans yet. The little human moved again, so I turned and continued running.

Not far from where I slayed him, I sighted a body of water and headed straight to it. On reaching it, I put my sword back into the sheath. My instinct told me to plunge into the waters, which I did without any hesitation.

I swam deep underwater until I came across a hole that seemed to be like an entrance to an underwater cave. I moved up through a pool into the cave. The cave had a big space within its belly. I got out of the water and as I placed the little human on the ground I saw a rock much bigger, so I picked the little human and put it on top of the rock. The little human began to cry and I became confused. I removed the garment that covered it and tried to play with it; I made different facial expressions, hoping it would calm the little human down but it cried out loud.

I remained mute and befuddled by the situation, then I heard something moving from behind me. As I turned my back I saw a beautiful human woman in a cage staring at me.

I looked around the cave wondering how she had come to be there. The look she gave me made me feel like she knew who I was.

She slowly bent down in her cage and stared at the little human, then quickly stood up in awe, seeming a little shocked at how I got the little human inside the cave. However, I was more disturbed by how she could have gotten into the cage in the first place. I gave it a quick thought and rapidly took the little human to her; she accepted and embraced it, then gently wiped the dirt and water from its face.

Captivated and astonished by her beauty and how she was so concerned with the welfare of the little human, I stayed there and watched them both. The human woman pointed at some vessels behind me and made a gesture asking me to bring them to her, which I did without hesitation. She gently changed the

cloth the little human was wearing and wrapped it in a dry garment then prepared a more comfortable place and laid it down. However, the little human continued to cry out. She then mixed some liquids from the vessels I gave her, rubbed the mixture around her nipple then picked the little human and dipped her breast in its mouth. It went mute as it sucked and finally, the place was quiet and sweet.

The human woman took her time and checked to see if the little human was injured, but it appeared to be fine. She gave me a strong look of distrust and spoke in a harsh human tongue.

I had no way of telling how she had got into the cave or who had locked her in the cage. She appeared to be much younger than the first human woman who had handed me the little human.

I was trying to make sense of many things in a short time. I could not understand her tongue when she spoke to me, so she made gestures to describe to me what she wanted or was trying to say. I think she considered me a dull one; she would point at me then poke her head twice and nodded, squeezing her mouth in an annoying way.

When the little human started to cry again, she moved away from me and sat on the ground then rubbed more of the liquid around her nipple and fed it, this continued until it belched and shortly yawned before going to sleep.

The human woman smiled and pointed at the small basket behind me. As I went for it, she asked me to bring what was inside but I picked the whole basket. She shook her head in disagreement and directed me to bring just one of the items inside the basket, so I picked out a loaf and handed it to her. She then sent me to bring water from another vessel, which I poured into a small jar and offered it to her.

The human woman smiled and sat in the cage looking at me. I admired her hair and wanted to touch it but I was somehow shy. She then signalled me that it was okay to touch it but instructed me to stroke it gently. I smiled and sat down like a youngling and as I fondled her magnificent soft hair, we both smiled at each other.

I asked her to give me the little human to hold but she made a gesture that it was asleep and I must not disturb its peace. The human woman later instructed me to go get a thick garment for the little human and more food for them both when I returned. She explained to me that the little human was very young and must be wrapped in a much thicker garment to keep it warm or it would fall ill.

She would speak words I could not comprehend, but when I showed no understanding, she would make use of gestures instead.

The human woman was so beautiful and I loved her blue eyes and dark hair. As I moved my hand to touch it again, she shook her head then asked me to leave. I stood up, feeling a bit disappointed like a youngling. I then picked up my sword. Before I jumped into the pool, I turned and looked at her but she ignored me, so I dived deep into the pool and swam away.

By the time I got to the other side, it was already morning. The sun was up and the vultures were everywhere feasting on the flesh of dead humans. I sighted some of the invaders pulling dead human bodies along, cutting up some of the parts and stacking them for transportation. I walked between these invaders holding my sword firmly and nervously but none seemed worried about my presence. There were about six of the invaders who looked older and seemed like the elders amongst them, standing while they examined the body of the invader whom I had killed. They appeared daunted by what lay before them.

I approached them cautiously, holding my sword, and as I got closer, they all bowed their heads to me and revealed the face of the dead invader. I couldn't understand why they had bowed to me neither did I know the dead invader. I kept a firm hold on my sword.

“The Chief will not take this lightly. How can we break such news to him?” said one of the elders.

Finally someone spoke in a language I understood, not like the tongue spoken by that human woman.

“They will pay so dearly for this!” exclaimed another, “Brothers, one or more of us will suffer this, we all know that.”

The six elders stepped aside and had a little chat among themselves. I could tell they were afraid but I chose not to offer any proposal. In accordance with the respect they showed me I decided not to speak unless spoken to, and also kept my reply short and shallow. None of them saw me as a hostile and since they did not suspect any foul play, I began to feel more comfortable.

We marched in line with the rest of the invaders who carried the stacks of human parts from the hunt in several nets. I turned and looked back to make sure that no-one could find out the location of the humans. The dead body of the invader whom I had killed was also carried along. No-one spoke a word, not a song of victory was sung on our way. It felt strange, so I wisely continued to look over my shoulders and my back but instead I saw honour and loyalty in their eyes.

The way they all treated me on our way back home stirred some pride within me. One of them ran to me and walked beside me.

“You seemed so quiet Buga, this is unlike you my brother!” he said.

“Shut your mouth Oden!” retorted one of the invaders.

The one called Oden was getting all nosy and appeared baleful, so I reached out for my sword and tackled him then placed the sword on his neck.

‘Not as quiet as your Mother the day she dropped you, eh brother?’ I said.

The invaders stopped marching and all went silent. I stared at them defensively and they all burst into laughter.

“You mean our Mother, huh, brother?” said the one called Oden as he too laughed and then pinched my stomach.

I gently took my sword off his neck and pretended to laugh maniacally along with them. I gave him a hand and lifted him off the ground. He then hit me lightly on the chest as we continued to march up the mountains. Oden kept pestering me with how he slaughtered the humans and how they screamed as they begged for their lives. I uttered no word and acted as though he inspired me. The good thing was, I understood the tongue they all spoke to me with.

We walked through the giant trees and up the mountains. Along the way, I saw skulls of humans and sights that almost made me puke but I held on while acting strong and bold because the invaders had high respect for me for some reason I did not know. However, the one they called Oden gave me a suspicious look.

“Your garment is wet, my brother,” said the one called Oden.

‘I chased one of them into the waters, but the um...sharks got to him first,’ I replied while still walking.

“Hmm, sharks got to the human Buga chased before Buga got to the human? How great! We go to a battle with our kind, you slaughter thousands but to brag about killing one human, just one human? It’s a null on your list Buga, come on, share with me...ooh unless, unless if your power comes from not-killing the humans or eating flesh! A Purican that doesn’t enjoy the spoils? Hmm!” said Oden.

He kept on talking as we walked up the mountains, his head went flying in the air, well, that was the picture painted in my mind but in reality, the one called Oden was still babbling, I got so fed up with him but I remained silent and smiled nicely.

The Dead Purican Prince

On our arrival, the whole community came out to welcome us home. We marched through the settlement and arrived at the compound of the one whom they called the chief. Some of the invaders stopped at a distance with the dead body of the invader whom I had killed outside the palace.

I watched them gather the human parts and pile them all in one place. After all the invaders gathered, someone came out and examined the goods and went back into the chief's palace. In an instant the chief came out, the invaders then bowed down and I bowed along with them but the chief asked me to stand up. I did so slowly.

One of the six elders broke the news of the dead invader to the chief. He laughed, hoping the elder was trying to tell a joke but after looking into our eyes, he became sad and filled with disbelief.

The body was brought forth and on sighting it, the chief cried out and tore his garment in grief.

"I told this fool to stay back but he insisted on going for the hunt. Where were you when my son was killed?" said the chief as he turned and stared at my direction. I went to my knees and uttered no word.

The chief snatched a sword from one of his guards and rushed toward my position. I held to my sword while on my knees and as I made an attempt to stand up in order to defend myself, while at the same time not exposing my intentions, the chief lifted his sword and decapitated the head of the one who had broke the news to him. The headless body fell right next to me, and the remaining five elders fell to their knees begging for their lives.

"Forgive us, have mercy, oh great one," they spoke out of fear.

"You and your sons shall all pay for this. The first male of each one of you must be buried with my son and your daughters shall bear offspring for me... the one who did not birth a male I shall kill along with the new born," said the chief.

I kept my head low ready to defend myself if threatened.

"Well, he got what he deserved for ignoring the instructions of a dear father. My beloved Puricans, let us inhumate the dead and observe the feast!" he added as he stared down at me and wiped the blood stain on his sword with his garment.

The guards were sent to apprehend the first male offspring of the remaining five elders as ordered by the chief, including the first male of the one that was decapitated. While the guards went to bring them, the rest of the elders pleaded

with the chief who was seated on his throne. The throne was made from human bones and decorated with their skulls on its arms. It was placed on top of a platform made from human skulls, with human limb bones laid over them.

The remaining elders begged for forgiveness but the chief kept a deaf ear to their plea. Some of the Mothers pleaded along but nothing seemed to dissuade the chief. When the guards brought in the sons of the five elders, the chief stood up.

“Well, to forgive...yes...yes I must! To forget? It is the easiest thing for me to do my beloved Puricans. I shall forgive and forget because it is the only way to move on, I shall move on and the Puricans must too, knowing none of these elders and their sons will be around to remind us of this great loss,” said the chief as he gave a sign to the guards.

The guards chopped off the heads of the five remaining elders and the six first male offspring brought before the chief.

“Offer the twelve heads to the oracle, spread their skulls under the foundation of the new temple as soon as the sun hides under the mountains!” added the chief.

The guards packed the heads as ordered and moved away while some carried the headless bodies of the six elders and their offspring to the sacred site where the chief’s son was to be buried. As we walked away, I noticed the Mothers bringing the human parts from the hunt to the kitchen to prepare for the feast.

We walked behind the chief as he led the way to the graveyard, and just as the chief declared; the bodies of the elders and their sons were buried alongside his son. Their graves were displayed to ornament the resting place for the chief’s son, and in accordance to the Purican custom, the relatives of the deceased fetched and ate the sands from the grave of their loved ones who had died in order to corroborate that they had nothing to do with whatever incident that might have led to the demise of their own. It was believed that if the hand of any Purican was stained with the blood of a deceased family member, they would be kissed by death and their corpse would be cut in half and thrown to the vultures.

By the time we got back to the palace, it was already sunset and food was served. I watched them eat and drink. The sight of one eating the cooked or fresh flesh made me vomit. I didn’t know why, but they always laughed at me.

“Son, have some fruits,” said one of the Mothers.

I smiled and as I was about to take a bite, she hit my hand and gave me some water to rinse my hand with.

“I taught you more than that, don’t shame me in the presence of the other Mothers, Buga,” she added disappointingly.

I rinsed my hands and ate the fruits she gave me while she sat beside me. Later, the one called Oden came to us. He addressed the one who served me the fruits as “Mother” and took some fruits too. I noticed that she did not eat the meat either. I wasn’t sure about Oden, even though I saw him eating the fruits with us and from the way he behaved, I could tell that the one who served me the fruit was related to me. It seemed that Oden was my blood brother. My memories began to flash back and forth, then I would readjust when it was clear, and follow the memories with a gentle smile.

The chief’s throne was lifted from its position in the palace to the place where the bonfire was set. The Puricans sat and listened to the chief’s boring speech around the fire that night and different sorts of food and drinks were served. Many rituals were also observed and after a while, the chief was taken back to his palace.

The one Oden called Mother then asked us to go home but as we were about to leave, the chief sent for me. Mother didn’t seem to like the sound of it but she had no choice and as I was about to go, she reminded me to carry my sword. I walked away with the messengers, leaving Mother and Oden.

By the time I arrived, the chief was already drunk and looking upset. I met the six Puricans whom he tearfully ordained as the new elders with oil and ash rubbed on their bodies.

“What do you suggest I do with them, my young and fearsome warrior? I, the great Purican chief, gave them the opportunity to serve the chiefdom and yet, they broke his heart,” questioned the chief.

I looked at the elders and saw sorrow in their eyes, Forgive was the word that came to mind. I did not know that I had said it out loud. “Forgive them? For abandoning my only son? The heir to the Purican throne who was slaughtered by the humans?” said the chief angrily.

“You have already punished the elders, Your Highness!” I said.

“Have I?” he asked.

‘Yes Your Highness, you have ordered their heads be offered to the oracle and be placed under the foundations of the new temple. Their headless bodies have been buried to honour your great son. Your Highness, these are the new elders you’ve assigned to take over,’ I whispered.

He then walked toward me staggering and smiling.

“Oh my, I must have forgot. You know, my young warrior, when you lose something greater than life itself you just wish everything will um...hmmm! Well, why wasn’t he as strong and wise as you?” said the chief, as he turned to the six newly ordained elders.

“Well, you lucky old bones ... I have forgiven. You had better thank Buga, my young warrior here,” he added, before he fell to the ground snoring.

The guards lifted him up to his bedroom as the newly ordained elders thanked me and walked away. I walked into the chief’s bedroom with the guards. He seemed not to be aware of what he had done earlier. Luckily for the new elders, the chief did not order them to be killed before I came. For even while drunk, his orders were taken and executed by his guards without any question.

After a long talk with the chief while he lay on his bed, he raised his hand and told me to go away, so I turned to leave.

“If I do not do that, they will not fear me, my young warrior,” he joked and we both laughed hard.

“Ah! You, you...what can I do without you? You are one of my strongest pillars, Buga! Yes, yes, I must reward you handsomely!” He exclaimed as he lay down and began snoring.

After leaving the palace, I found Mother and Oden waiting for me. We went home together and I told Mother everything that happened. She wasn’t impressed.

“He had no choice but to do as you asked,” Mother said, but I had no idea what she meant.

“I also want you to know that I am tired of being a mother to two old grown Puricans. I want to play with your offspring. Look at the other mothers, they all have play friends!” Mother added as she talked about the many young Purican mates who would die to be my brides. She went on to mention name after name of almost all the young Purican mates whom she would prefer me to bond with. I loved Mother; she was special because she treated me like a youngling all the time. I did not know if it occurred to Mother that I was a great Purican warrior because she never saw me as one. Her words and the way she looked at me brought many good memories flashing through my mind.

That night, while they were asleep, I stole some of Mother’s garments and wrapped them in an animal skin and tied it so air wouldn’t go in. I also packed some more fruits and loaves she made from her kitchen. I took some of the juice which Mother always made from some of the sweetest fruits that she picked.

I ran down the mountains, and after a long walk I arrived at the waters and dived in, making sure nobody had followed me.

The human woman and the little human were asleep, but the woman woke up as soon as she heard the sound of water splashing from the pool. I unpacked the food and gave her the garments too. The human woman used them to cover

herself and wrap the little human. I also gave her the food I brought for them. She then tried to ask me to open the cage, explaining that she would not run. However, I could not take that chance.

The human woman seemed to want to order me around. Maybe I was being too nice to her or maybe she felt I was too weak to resist her. She was right! I thought.

I could not remember how she got there and how I got to know about the underwater cave either, but somehow I believed she was safer in the cave than out there, where she would be hunted and eaten by the Puricans.

The human woman permitted me to play with her hair again and demanded I stay a little longer, but I had to leave because I did not want the Puricans to suspect me of harbouring their dinner. Before I left I made her understand I would come back. She then asked me to bring something to make fire the next time I was to come, because the cave was too cold for the little human. I asked her why she didn't inform me earlier but she only smiled which left me with only one thing to do; I smiled back like a fool. I then looked around for some small rocks to make fire but I found none. I needed two good smooth rocks and some dry grass, barks or garments to make fire for her and the little human. I knew I had to bring it soon so I promised the human woman that I would come with the necessary items. I dived into the pool and because my heart was warmed by her smile the water felt so good and warm.

The next day my brother Oden woke me up by sticking one of his arrowheads in my nostril. It was already noon and I guess I was late for whatever his reason was for waking me up. Oden told me that the young Purican mates were at the stream and we should go see if we could find a mate as Mother had requested. I wasn't interested but he persuaded me and in order to avoid the noise from his rattling mouth, we made a deal on one condition; he would not utter a word till we got to the stream and would not utter a word on our way back as well. Oden agreed but of course, it was like tying a thirsty elephant to a shrub by the pond.

Oden couldn't keep his mouth shut on our way down the stream. I wondered how I got to live under the same roof with such a character. He was shorter than me; his head only coming up to just below my chest. Oden told me that he had been informed that the chief's two daughters were at the stream with no guards. The question was — who would want his mate to be fathered by the chief? He wasn't the type of Purican you would want to have your offspring play with.

While Oden was busy trying to assault my eardrums, we heard Mother's voice calling. I turned and there she was, running down with my sword. Oden shook his head repeatedly.

I walked up to meet Mother. She threw the sword at me angrily and turned to go home. Poor old Mother gasped. The sword was very heavy for her to carry. I picked it up and my brother Oden took over from where he left off.

Mother was always kind and caring to me. There was a great resemblance between Oden and our father, more so than between myself and our father. I could swear it was better to have ten thousand bees buzzing in your ears for two moons than have Oden speak for a day. However, I think I tolerated him because I became fond of him. Oden was so full of life.

It took us a while to get to the stream, but from a distance we overheard the young Purican mates playing in the water. By the time Oden and I got into a good position to watch them, we spotted some individuals hiding in the bushes, who turned out to be Redican scouts. This was no time to think as I watched four Redicans advancing down the stream toward the Purican mates. One of the Redicans slipped and fell, allowing the mates to see him. They suddenly started screaming and began to run out of the water.

Oden suggested that we should go back and call the others. He was afraid but I assured him that I would take the enemies down. The Redicans approached with such malicious intent, chanting gleefully as they ran after the Purican mates. I had to jump from my hiding place and advance. Oden had no choice but to fire his arrows as well. He swiftly shot two Redicans from where he was standing and of course couldn't keep his mouth from bragging about it.

I leaped across the stream, killed two Redicans with my sword and stained the stream with their cruddy blood. I grabbed hold of the fifth Redican and seized his spear, using it to kill the sixth one as I strangled the fifth one under my arm.

It was easy, I dealt with them like the way Mother made breakfast. The rest of the young Purican mates came to meet me, but the chief's daughters pushed their way through and started touching my arm. I stood with great pride before them even though I had no love or lust for any of them. I just wanted to make Mother proud, for she deserved a play friend. However, the chief's daughters were the last mates I would think of bonding with.

By the time all the Purican mates came out of their hiding place, the guards had arrived. They packed the bodies of the six Redicans and burnt them.

"These Redicans knew not who they were up against, eh Buga?" acclaimed one of the guards.

"You've sent thousands of their brothers to the afterlife in one night and yet six fools had the unmitigated effrontery to come against you?" added another as they all laughed.

I didn't bother myself with what they said nor did I allow it get into my head; I just smiled at the young Purican mates and pointed at the shortest among them.

'You, Mother needs a play friend. I will have Mother talk to your Mother,' I said to her.

She smiled back. The chief's daughters were jealous, but I didn't care. She looked good for Mother and I think Mother had mentioned her name to me once before.

We walked home together with all the mates and the guards. By the time we got home, the chief sent for me again. The chief called me his young warrior. I recalled something that happened in the past many moons ago before he was ambushed during the last great hunt; one fateful day, our scouts claimed they sighted some humans and it was not harvest time. Usually, the six elders had to hold a meeting and decide when a hunt is to be launched, but the chief's greed kicked in at the wrong time.

There was enough smoked meat stored but the chief felt it was his duty to lead the hunt and exercise his might with a little display of arrogance, so he ordered only a few guards to follow him. However, they were ambushed. All the guards with him were slaughtered by the Redicans. It was lucky for the chief on that fateful day that my brother and I were fishing, because Mother loved shark meat.

We witnessed all that happened and after they captured the chief, I sent my brother Oden to go warn our elders. I then traced their path, attacked and slaughtered each and every Redican, with the exception of two. Out of the two who survived, I made sure one carried the other, along with a message home.

The chief was impressed as he watched me fight that night and immediately he promised to give me his two daughters. However, I turned him down as I wasn't ready.

There was a rumour that circulated in all the lands because of what had happened that night. It was claimed that the Redicans were setting up a secret army to hunt me down. It was also said that their leader was willing to give a generous reward to anyone who would deliver my heart to him.

We lived up the mountains, we had the sharpest scouts and the strongest of warriors. We were born fighters, we would go down to hunt and climb up the mountains we called home. I believed what I did put more fear into them. That was how the chief and I became close.

I was never trained like the rest; the day the commander of the Purican warriors made an attempt to test my strength and skills was the day his soul kissed the gates of the abyss.

According to what Mother said, the Puricans and the Redicans would never have peace because the Redicans used the humans as slaves and labourers to build their civilisation and raised their great walls, while the Puricans hunted the humans for food.

Hunting the humans for food was breaking down the chain of development for the Redicans. They were a race just like us, and we understood and shared the same tongue, just a tenuous conflict in certain words and matters. Even though the Puricans were a warring race, they consumed but never produced. Unlike the Redicans, who farmed to raise animals and crops, they dug the earth for precious metals and precious stones. The throne of their king was known to be made of precious metals and ornamented with two large red precious stones on its arms. Their settlements were more organised with a great display of luxury and style.

Well, by the time I got to the palace, the chief was flashing his brown teeth. He must have heard the news.

“My young warrior, you have done it again. How can I repay you, eh?” The chief said. “You have saved my beautiful daughters just like you’ve saved me from those filthy Redicans. Imagine the stories your offspring will hear of their great father! My two beautiful daughters are all yours. Take them and make them your brides, Buga! You don’t need to follow the old tradition of the Purican law of bonding, I will give to you a quarter of our mountains to rule as your own!” He was serious and I had a feeling he wouldn’t take my rejection lightly this time.

“Two sunrise from now we shall arrange a ceremony, for you and my beautiful daughters, eh? Chiamira and Yossandra will make fine mothers for your offspring,” he added, smiling.

The chief ordered the aides to bring the finest fruits from the storehouse and asked me to offer it to Mother. I left without saying a word.

I got home on time and tendered the chief’s gifts to Mother but she showed no interest. I don’t know why Mother never liked the chief. Mother had placed food on the table so I ate and after that we all slept. I woke up late at night and secretly packed some items for my human friends and tried my best to avoid being seen by Mother and Oden. I left hurriedly before sun rise.

Never forgot the sword after sunset and even if I did, Mother always brought it to me, that I was sure. I also packed some ropes and sharp tools, while on my way I cut down some bamboo trees and bound them together. Before I dived into the water, I arranged and kept them by the waters.

I got to the underwater cave and met the human woman. She wasn’t looking well. Her skin was changing its colour, but the little human seemed to be fine.

She begged that I free them but I could not do that, as there was no place for them to go out there. I was not sure if she knew about what happened to her kind on the night when I had brought the little human to her. I gave her the food anyway, enough to last her for some time. I did not know what to do with them. I did not know why she was there or how she got there but I didn't want them to leave. I can't afford to let them leave me, I thought. Something made me feel that I should let her go, so I turned and looked at her for a while. As soon as she forced a smile out, I smiled back and dived into the pool.

Not long afterwards, I came back and opened the cage, tied a rope to her wrist and led her through the underwater cave and outside the open grounds. We stayed there until the sun came up. She shivered over the cold from the water but was so amazed to see the light again. The way she stared at the rising sun that morning made me think she worshipped it; the rays from the sun touched her skin and I saw her beauty before the light and was stunned. She looked so happy and wandered around but my attention was more on the surroundings for her safety. Yet, at the same time, I did not want to take my eyes off her. I made sure no one saw us.

Taking her back was not easy but she had no choice and neither did I, so I forced her while she screamed and cried for help.

When I got her back into the underwater cave, she tried to explain to me to always come and take her out to see the sun more often, I could not understand her language but I understood her gesture and when I gazed into her beautiful blue eyes, I saw the sun itself. She was simply amazing, her skin so soft unlike the Purican mates. I had also touched the skin of a Redican mate once when I was a youngling, not a match to the human woman's skin.

Deep within me I knew one day I must let her go but I also knew that letting her go would be the same as killing her with my own hands. My race had almost wiped out her race in all the places we had reached. The Redicans hunted and enslaved her kind, while our race devoured them with no mercy.

I made fire to keep the place warm for them. I also took some time and began to transfer the bamboo trees into the underwater cave then expanded the cage for them. However, she did not look happy. I could tell that all she wanted was to be free, but I knew that out there they would not last.

I tried to make the human woman see that I meant good for her and the little human but she saw me more of a monster than a friend. I could not blame her. She later calmed down and smiled, I then remembered how it all happened; I was out alone searching for fruits when I sighted them from afar. She had been accompanied by two other humans and I had no idea where they came from. I watched them as they stopped to drink from the waters. I doubted if they knew

about the other human settlement not far from the river. While they knelt to drink, some humans from a nearby settlement attacked them and killed the two humans that were with her before I could get to them. The attackers seized the human woman and were about to harm her, when I arrived and scared them away. She fainted at the sight of me, which made it easier for me to transport her to a safe place.

I was shocked to discover that even the humans fought amongst themselves and killed each other. What I saw that day made me feel that the Puricans' unthinkable act against the humans was justified in a way. Do they feed on the flesh of their own kind too? I wondered.

I did not take her far. I had known about the underwater cave for a long time because father used to take me there. I was well aware that the humans in the nearby settlement would soon be attacked as well, so I did what I had to in order to keep her away from harm.

Father took his time to teach me a lot before he was killed. He used to tell me that every great Purican must have a secret in order to survive and also a place they go to when they need peace; a place no one knew. Once such a sanctuary was disclosed, it should be abandoned, for it had been defiled.

“The secret to lifting one's soul to greatness lies in the mystery of conquering darkness by embracing the way of the light!” He used to say.

The Puricans used to transmigrate and only settled in areas with a good supply of food. It was always best to stay close to the source. We always preferred the mountains because it was a good spot for defending against external forces.

Well, I finished the cage expansion and told the human woman I would come back again. She did not hesitate to tell me to bring more food. Before I left I tried to see if she would let me carry the little human. Even though she refused, I tried to understand. She held it and protected it as though it were her own.

The human woman had made some new clothes out of the garments that I had given her the other day, and showed them to me. Later she looked sad staring at the walls in the cave and I could not understand why she wanted to go, so I decided to ignore the expression on her beautiful face.

The Brides

Oden played around and joked a lot with everybody. He was well known and liked by the Purican mates. When I got back, he handed me a new sword, but it was lighter compared to my old sword. I liked the old sword better because it had been used by my father and my father's father.

We had a great bond, my sword and I, but I could not afford to disappoint Oden, so I accepted it and hugged him. However, I would never use the sword he gave me to fight. After that, all he wanted was for us to go chase the Purican mates. He also tried to persuade me to marry the chief's two daughters. As heavy as my sword was, it was swift and sharp and in my arms. The sword was like an extension of my bones and I wielded it with ease.

"It will make us wealthy and in time, all the Puricans will respect us. After the chief dies, we will rule the mountains, Buga, you and I. They fear you, you are a god," he said, "When we um ... I mean, when you rule the mountains, we will transform this place and we shall mine precious stones just like the Redicans and even build a greater kingdom than theirs!"

We headed out to the chief's palace to watch the game; the players would wear head armour plates then run from two extreme ends and knock their heads together. They would repeat it until one of them fainted or died, and the Puricans would cheer such imbecility and ego.

While we watched, my mind was with the human woman. I sighted the chief's two daughters making their way through the crowd toward me so I left. I did not get far before they caught up with me, pushed me to the walls of the palace and began to ask me why I did not find them attractive. They wanted me to take them both as my brides on the same day. It sure was a bad idea.

I could not tell who was crazier, their father the chief, or the demented mates who just didn't want to understand that I would never take them as my brides.

I had always tried to stay away from the chief's daughters but they did not care. Mother did not like them either, even though she badly wanted me to give her a play friend.

The daughters started to cry and soon the chief arrived. Laughing at me, he took a big bite from the large piece of meat in his hand and gestured to me to follow him.

He invited me to his chamber once again and I walked with him without question. He then sent for his two daughters. The chief displayed his swords for me to see and made my ears burn with his war stories and how he was crowned chief by the elders for killing a beast that troubled the mountains after the last

chief died. However, he also made me understand that every Purican must have a secret.

“Your secret is the key to your survival,” he said looking straight into my eyes, “What’s your secret, my young warrior?” he asked again.

I did not say anything.

“This is why I like you Buga. You do not talk, action! Only action, my young warrior. Guess what? I want us to take over the lands of the Redicans and expand our rule, and then give you more than a quarter of the entire lands to govern. Tell me, eh, what do you say? But hey, you must take my daughters as your brides, my young warrior!” He added, as we both laughed and shook hands.

The only thing that truly made me laugh was the sound of the chief’s laughter; he laughed like a sick elephant.

Some of the Puricans wondered how I was able to slay the many thousands whom I sent to the abyss. Most of them believed that maybe it was the no-meat custom I embraced. Some even tried to go on a vegetarian diet like I did, but meat was the true Purican way. What they did not understand was that I had become tired of living and looked for ways to give meaning to my life. Therefore I went about seeking for death in the eyes of my enemies on the battle grounds and in anything that could define my role on earth. I had slain kings and chiefs and heirs to kingdoms ever since I had held my first sword, because I sought to end my own miserable life.

They just did not understand me and neither did I. Mother always smiled at me and said a few words because she knew I wasn’t much of a talker.

They called me Buga. In my tongue, Buga means the destroyer; whatever stood before me, I conquered and whatever stood behind me was but dead. However, when I met the two humans, they totally changed my life from wanting to kill or be killed to appreciating the littlest things in life. Being around the humans excited and thrilled me within.

By that time the chief’s two daughters had arrived. We sat down together and the chief entertained me with beautiful fruits. Soon after the arrival of his daughters, he locked me up with them and laughed as he walked away to go watch the game. As wicked and heartless as he may have seemed, who would have thought it would take him a short period to forget about his dead son? No-one could really tell whether he had truly forgotten about his son, and the new ordained elders still did not seem to enjoy their new position, something which I could understand.

The chief's two daughters were wild mates; they stripped before me and began chasing me around. One of them squeezed some fruits on her skin and ran after me round the table. The guards outside the door laughed as well. I had to find a way out. The chief's daughters were very skilful with their hands.

'Okay! Let us espouse six sunrises from now!' I said.

Yes, those words actually came out of my mouth.

"Oooh! Buga we will make you happy!" They both said in unison.

"But six sunrises is too long for me, that is like twelve moons away, Buga," said Yossandra, as she pushed her body against mine in a tempting manner.

We chatted for a while before I was able to convince them. They were so happy that they ran out of the place without putting their clothes back on. I ran out and straight home I went. I could hear the guards laugh at me.

On reaching home I told Mother what happened, she laughed too.

"Just get me a play friend," she said, "Have you seen your brother Oden? I need to know who has been stealing my fruits and garments. Some of my ropes are missing too, Buga!"

I scratched my head.

'Oden didn't do it Mother, I did,' I answered.

Mother shook her head and walked away without asking why I had stolen them.

"I just hope you do not have a mate and an offspring hidden in a tent somewhere because you have been acting like your father when I conceived your brother!" Mother added, "If you do, Buga, please say it and ... make your old Mother happy, my son!"

I remained mute, shook my head and walked into my room. I decided to rest for a while because I felt exhausted but sleep took over me and I dreamt. In my dream, I saw the human woman escaping from the cage with the little human. While they were running, a beast attacked them and killed the human woman and as it turned to devour the little human... I woke up from sleep. My heart was pounding, so I quickly picked up my sword and headed straight out.

"You're going hunting without me, brother?" asked Oden.

'No brother, I will be back. The chief asked me to do something for him and told me not to let anyone know about it, so stay home and look after Mother!' I replied as I ran.

I didn't follow the usual route because I wanted to avoid anyone becoming suspicious of me. When I got to the waters, I dug in the sand and buried my

sword. If Mother had been there she would have slapped me but like I said; if Mother had been there.

I dived into the waters and on reaching the underwater cave I found the human woman asleep. The cave was quiet but the little human was awake and playing on its own. I moved close to have a good look at it. When it saw me, it smiled and chuckled. While the little human made soft noises, I could hear it blab my name.

“Gagaaa, Boga-Boga, Wuga!” The little human gabbled.

I got excited and then opened the cage gently, so as not to wake the sleeping woman. I slowly moved my hand closer. At the moment when my hand touched its garment, the little human started to laugh, so I gently dragged it closer to me. Before I knew it, the human woman woke up and dashed a sharp object into my arm. It hurt so bad that I gently placed the little human down and quickly moved back, dragging myself away from the cage and managing to lock it. However, I had not secured it properly.

I began to feel dizzy and my vision divided into two. I became confused and lightheaded. While I was trying to get myself on my feet, I watched the human woman use a tool to open the cage. I then checked the small knife which I always kept around my waist and noticed that it was not there. I could not tell what she had coated the sharp object which she had stabbed me with but it made me lose my vision.

Before I lost consciousness, I could see her pick the little human up, wrap it tightly and hold it to her bosom. She then used more garments to tie herself and the little human together. She looked at me and without fear dived into the pool. I crawled my way towards the pool and washed my face but still felt weak. All of a sudden, I could hear my heartbeat slowing and stopping. I saw total darkness. The pain was gone and so were my senses. I could feel my body but was too weak to do anything.

I woke up like a mad beast. My heart was beating heavily and without giving it any thought, I dived into the pool and made my way to the other side. I did not know how long I had been unconscious. Even though some parts of my body still felt numb, I was able to force myself through the water and get out. By the time I dug my sword out of the sand, I could no longer see the human woman.

I saw her footprints on the sand and traced the direction she had followed. I ran through the tall trees and went round in circles but I could still find no sign of them. My heartbeat became heavy but the fear for her safety kept me going. I was angry at her but I had to find her before any Redican or Purican did. As I leaned against a nearby tree to rest, I heard her scream from a distance, so I ran in the direction where her voice was coming from.

I jumped off and landed right behind the human woman. She was already lying on the ground holding the little human. They were surrounded by four of our scouts. When they saw me, the Puricans chanted happily and told me how they had bumped into her and chased her down here. They didn't know what was going on. The human woman then quickly ran behind me. The four Puricans became confused at seeing the human woman seeking my protection. I didn't want to make matters worse so I pushed her to the ground and joined the four scouts laughing. She was filled with fear and I understood the depth of it.

The little human started to cry so I moved away from them and stood behind the Puricans. I waited for the four scouts to advance a few steps ahead of me, then I lifted my sword and struck the two on my right. As their bodies fell to the ground, the first one on my left turned to attack me. However, I was faster; my sword pierced through him and he fell to his knees.

The fourth one dropped his sword and began to run, so I pulled out my sword from the body of the third and flung it at him. It cut his right leg off and he also fell to the ground.

I picked up the sword from one of the dead Puricans and walked majestically toward the fourth and without mercy I thrust it into his stomach. He took his time and looked straight into my eyes wondering. He did not have enough time to ask me why but my spirit heard his spirit questioning me.

He died with his eyes open, still staring at me. I took some time to look into his eyes as well and an inner voice spoke to me.

“What are you doing Buga?”

I ignored the voice, picked up my sword and left the other sword in his body. I turned to the human woman with anger and started to walk fast to where she was lying down. She was panting as she held the little human tight, for she was filled with dread by what she saw. I picked up another sword and lifted it as though to strike her. She cried out. I then lowered my arm, grabbed her and the little human and took them away.

I took them back to the underwater cave, for it was the only choice I had. She cried loudly along the way but I shut down my heart and forced her back. I knew that I was hurting her with the way I handled her, but it was for her own good. It was the best thing to do.

I could tell she regretted leaving the cage. I sat down, still feeling very angry, and thought of fixing the cage in order to put her back in it. However something told me not to. I stood up and broke half of the cage down. Feeling worried, I then sat back down again. The little human began to cry out loud. I then stared at the human woman. She quickly rushed for its food and rubbed it

around her breast and tried to feed it. The little human refused and continued to cry. Tears ran down her cheek as she tried to feed it.

The human woman then came and handed the little human to me. She tried to communicate with me but I refused to talk to her. I wonder if the one that gave me the little human survived the attack, I thought. When I turned and looked into the eyes of the human woman, I became afraid that she might not last long in her current situation. I knew then that she must be set free, but her freedom must come with an assured protection ... from me.

“She doesn’t seem to need you in her life and no matter how much you love her, you must let her go” whispered the voice in my head again.

Head on a Platter

Oden welcomed me with a rather inimical face; Mother too noticed some change in me.

“Some scouts were found dead today, Buga! Four scouts, and not a trace or smell of any Redican to be found around them,” Oden said.

“Well, we should step up our guards, I guess. The Redicans don’t seem to be taking things lightly ... latterly, Brother,” I retorted.

“Their tools are not like ours, oh Brother. Let’s not forget, they hunt to ensnare and enslave, they do not hunt to kill or eat,” Oden said as he stared at me, “Unless ... someone from our land killed them over something they saw or found out, I am just saying.” Oden added.

I hung my sword on the wall and walked toward Oden, looking straight into his eyes.

“What if the chief is behind this? I mean, he is the only Purican with power enough to kill anyone and get away with it. We have all seen and heard the stories. This is a Purican who strangled his own mother and offered her to the gods when he was a youngling just so he’d become great and closer to the gods. I wonder if such a Purican would be remorseful killing his own son, or a few guards for that matter,” he said.

I did not understand where Oden’s mind was directing him. He was impudent. Mother always addressed him as the wise one and from the look in his eyes, I had a feeling he knew more than what he was saying.

“Has Mother told you the chief came looking for you not long before you arrived?” asked Oden.

I replied to him in the negative. Mother then told me that it was true and asked me to go to the palace. I took my sword down from the wall and as I was about to leave, Oden came to me.

“Don’t you think you should wash yourself first, brother? You look like someone who has fought with a beast. You don’t want to appear before the chief like that, even though he is a filthy bastard. Do not forget ... your two biggest admirers are close at hand!” He mocked.

I turned to Mother and she nodded in agreement, so I washed my body first before leaving. I sensed something was wrong. Oden knew more than he expressed, obviously.

When I arrived at the palace, the chief did not waste any time. He sat me down and told me he wanted to attack the Redicans immediately.

“They are making me appear weak before the Puricans, so the game needs to change,” he said, “I know you’re not bothered much about governing, I understand that. But I will need you to do this great task for me. You’re the only one I can count on, Buga”

The chief spoke to me calmly, saying that he wanted me to lead the invasion on the Redicans. The chief told me that he was tired of their small, ignominious attacks on his image and he was becoming impatient. He had made up his mind and wanted us to attack them by nightfall the next day, and so we must leave by the following morning. I listened to his request and uttered no word. He then asked if there was any problem giving me half of the able Puricans to lead against the Redicans, and I told him everything was perfect. He walked to me and held my face in his hands.

“I know this comes so sudden but you are one Purican I’ve never doubted, my young warrior. One day, this throne will be yours, I tell you. It was created for great Puricans like you and I. Bring me the head of their leader in a bag,” he said, looking straight into my eyes.

The pungent smell from his mouth assaulted my senses as he gave a big smile. I smiled back.

‘As you wish, my chief!’ I replied.

Before we set out for the attack, we had to attend a ceremony. Usually before any war or battle, it was the duty of every Purican to attend this ceremony; six nights before any battle or war, our Chief would sit naked at midnight when all the Puricans were assembled in front of the palace. The chief would walk out from his palace and stand bare in the presence of all his subjects, then six of the elders would carry three vessels each filled with human blood and walked to the chief as they chanted the ancient words which only the elders knew. They would stand in a circle around the chief and pour the blood from these vessels on him, enchanting and calling upon the Purican gods.

Rumour had it that any chief who did not perform this ritual would run mad while on the throne and be dethroned by the very foe he waged war upon, so all the chiefs made sure it was readily observed.

We were also taught that the chief was the representative of the gods in this realm and therefore, all Puricans must feed on the humans and drink their blood in order to maintain our position in the realms and in the eyes of the dark lord, whom our elders so much revered.

Ever since I was a youngling I always thought it was a waste of time to attend the ceremony. We used to laugh after the ceremony, as every young Purican described how the chief’s body appeared when seen bare.

The chief ordered that the ceremony be hastened and so it took place the night before we set up for the attack on the Redicans. I had never taken any rites or ceremonies seriously. I had laughed at the oracle and had eaten food in the temple of the gods when I was a youngling. I was the only Purican who never feared the wrath of the gods as claimed by the temple keepers.

I could not remember ever going to the temple to pray or offer any sacrifice. I had hated my life before I met the human woman; it had been purely about fighting, wars and killings, there was no light inside of me. I was just there like the walls, strong but dead inside.

I used to ask Mother why they never performed the rituals during the day.

“Darkness cannot stand before the light.” she would say.

Until now, I had no idea what Mother meant. I had challenged Mother once about the temples and form of worship the Puricans preferred.

“A Purican cannot question nor deny his old ways even if he finds himself dining with serpents, but it is his responsibility to redirect his heart towards the light,” she responded.

The Redicans were closer in resemblance to the humans; their only difference was in size. We were even told that the human ancestors and the Redican ancestors shared the same spirit, whatever that meant.

Maybe that explained why they never killed the humans, but only enslaved them and used them to build their great walls and civilisation. It was even said that some Redican younglings performed such abominations with some humans and mated with them. We were not sure if it happened, but like Mother always said, “There is never lightning without thunder, and if you do not hear the sound it’s probably because you are far from where it strikes!”

The difference between the Redican race and we Puricans was in the hair colour and skin texture; the Redicans had long thin braids of hair radiating from the scalp, unlike the Puricans who kept short rough hair. They were mostly taller and lighter skinned than us but we were broader in chest span which made us fearful and intimidating. However, I was different; I was as tall as the Redicans, with a broader chest and stronger arms. My sword was longer and heavier than the ones regular Purican warlords carried around.

The chief had no doubt that I was the only Purican for the task; to lead the attack and bring the end to the era of the Redican kingdom and entire race if necessary.

After the ceremony was observed, we gathered at the palace and waited for the chief that night. He came forth and told us to go and prepare.

“My beautiful daughters await your return, my young warrior, and I shall give thee a special ceremony,” the chief said, as I made my way out of the palace.

If only he knew I would rather be killed in battle than have his daughters as my mates.

We would journey half the day to get to the Redican land and another half day to get back. How long it would take to study their lands and scout through in order to launch the attack I did not know, but it was clear that we might be gone for a long time. The only problem was I did not want to waste any time, I wanted to get back and visit the human woman.

I had to make sure that she and the little human were safe in my absence and that they had enough food to survive until my return. I could not trust Oden or even Mother with them, so I kept it to myself and never told anyone.

I told Mother I needed more fruits and some garments to go prepare for the battle. I lied to her that I needed to go pray with some Purican warriors in the forest. She did not question me, so she packed enough food and gave me even more than I asked. Oden himself heard about the preparation for the attack on the Redicans and badly wanted to go too but Mother refused. He got mad and excused himself.

“Is there anything I should know, dear son?” Mother asked.

I smiled and kissed her gently on the forehead, packed the items and walked away.

It didn't take me long to get to the underwater cave. I had to explain to the human woman that it may take me days before she would see me next. Luckily for me, she understood. I broke the sword which Oden had given me into two and handed the other half to her along with another smaller one that was light enough to be carried around.

I promised the human woman I would help her locate a safer place when I returned and she smiled happily. She allowed me to carry the little human again and hold it for a while. It was asleep so I made sure I did not wake it up. I stared at it for some time. It looked so cute, and I wondered why my kind never got to see the beauty in the humans and the way being around them warmed the heart. I was always happy around them and they made me smile a lot.

I took my time and made fire to warm the cave for them. The human woman prepared some cooked meal and served me. I tasted it and it was sweet. I asked that she teach me how to prepare it, so that I could go tell Mother how to make it. Of course, I would not let her know about my little secret.

The human woman explained to me that when I came back she would teach me a lot of things. She then stood up and placed her hand on her chest and uttered a

word, she then pointed at the little human and said another word. She made a gesture asking me to repeat after her, which I did in the best way I could.

“Anna!” she said, then looked at me and asked me to repeat what she said.

‘Hannah,’ was my reply.

She laughed hysterically and placed her hand on her chest again, “Anna!” she said.

I opened my mouth and pronounced it just like she did. She was impressed and happily pointed at the little human and said, “Baby!”

I was so excited that I just said, ‘Baby!’

The whole experience was fun for me, so I touched my chest too and said, ‘Buga!’

It wasn’t hard for her to pronounce it the first time. She was so happy, but at times her smiles would melt and she would sigh heavily as though her mind were somewhere else.

Anna sat next to me and after a while she tried to explain something; she picked up some stones and placed them in front of me and then fetched some water in her hands and poured it on the stones. The water washed away the stones but I still did not understand her. She then asked me to come close to the pool which I did. She ran and picked up one vessel and floated it on the water then picked up those same stones and laid them on the ground next to the pool. She picked up three stones and put them in the vessel. When she pushed it away, it sailed. She then fetched more water and poured it on the remaining stones on the ground in front of me. She continued to do that until the stones got washed away and sank into the pool.

I guessed she wanted me to create a boat for the three of us to escape, but when I explained to her if that was what she wanted she shouted, “No!” angrily.

We did not understand each other very well over that issue and she was getting mad at me. Anna explained that she could not stay in the cave forever; she needed to go away or water would fill in the underwater cave and kill her and Baby. I then explained to her that it was impossible for water to fall from the roof, because the underwater cave was safe under all conditions and seasons, but Anna looked at me like someone who had no idea what she meant.

After eating together we all fell asleep, and I dreamt again. In my dream I saw myself on top of a big ship with a huge black bird hovering above me. It descended with great speed and attacked me, and while trying to run from it, I fell into the ocean and drowned.

I opened my eyes quickly and looked around, rolling my eyes from side to side. As I made an attempt to get up, I realised that Anna was lying on one side of my chest with Baby on the other. They were both peacefully asleep, so I smiled and went back to sleep.

I had a good rest that night, sweeter than all the good sleeps I've had combined. When we woke up, I handed Baby back to Anna and when I was about to leave, Anna asked if she could hold me. I agreed without any waste of time and she hugged me. It felt warm even though she was little and I became more passionate toward her. Her head was around my navel while she stood. I looked down at her and gazed into her beautiful eyes and also understood that my size at that time did not intimidate her. She took my hand and buried her head in it. I had to leave, so I pushed her off me gently and walked to the pool, turned and looked at her and she smiled at me. She then uttered the word "Anna!" and tapped her chest.

I repeated the same word in question and pointed at my chest too, she laughed and nodded, mentioned the same word again and touched her chest then turned to me and asked me who I was.

I laughed, "Buga!" I responded, keeping my head up with such great pride.

"Anna," she said again pointing at herself. "Buga!" she added pointing at me.

I nodded like a fool and we both laughed. Baby started making some noise and as she turned to go to it, I saw someone swimming under the pool coming towards me. I drew my sword and took a step back. I warned Anna to keep quiet. I could tell that the one coming could see me but he kept coming anyway, so I raised my sword ready to attack and as the head of the encroacher came up above the water, I saw Oden.

Oden looked at me and lifted his hand so that I could help him up. I then moved back. He looked around and saw Anna and Baby. Oden quickly pulled out his sword to attack them but I blocked him. He stared at me as though calculating on how to get around me to the humans, but I stood between them and made sure he had no choice but to stand down.

"You fool, you harboured ... humans? You are such a fool. The chief must hear this," he protested.

Oden called me a traitor, then he raised his sword once more, but I snatched it and pushed him to the ground. He stood up and quickly dived into the pool and without thinking twice, I dived in and chased after him.

As soon as Oden got out of the water on the other side, he started running toward the mountains. He did not want to wait nor hear anything I had to say. I

chased after him but he was faster, so I took a short cut up the mountains and blocked Oden on the road.

I tried to explain to him but the look in his eyes told me that there was no way of stopping him from exposing my acts. Oden pulled out a dagger and attacked me with it, cutting me on the hand. I dropped my sword on the ground and tried to get into terms with Oden but he was not willing to be reasoned with. I followed him around and tried to explain things to him.

I had already moved from where my sword was and went down on my knees, begging him to understand. Oden's foot was close to my sword. He then picked it and faced me.

"You are such a fool. How did you think the chief's son found out about the little human you were carrying during the last hunt?" said Oden.

I could not believe that he had known it all along.

"Not only did you kill the chief's son, you hid these humans and have been feeding them? You are not a Purican warrior, Buga, you are a Purican disgrace!" he said as he charged towards me.

I dodged his first strike and fell to the ground. He was able to cut me on the side of the stomach but it was not deep. Oden stumbled and fell. I ran to the edge of the cliff to save him and he was right there, holding a small root from one of the nearby trees that had weaved its way through the rocks. I tried to reach out to Oden, but instead of giving me his hand, he made several attempts to strike me with my own sword. The root snapped and he fell off the cliff.

I watched my brother fall, screaming my name and holding my sword. Crying and filled with rage at the same time, I got up and ran home quickly.

As soon as I got back, I saw that the chief and his guards were at my house. I dared not say a word about what happened and used my left hand to cover the small cut in my stomach which Oden had given me. I went to my room, dug out another sword from underneath my bed, then went along with the chief to his palace.

There was no time to waste. The chief said very little, leaving it up to me. All the warriors were well equipped for the battle. More than a thousand armed Puricans were placed under my command. We then set out on foot for the land of the Redicans.

The Sun Sets on the Redicans

Our strategy was to divide ourselves into four groups and then attack from the four walls surrounding the Redican lands. As slave owners, the Redicans had handlers who trained the humans in different tasks required of them. Father once told me that the Redicans usually spent most of their effort in building and developing their civilisation and they hoped to reach the skies someday. However, those were dreams yet to be set in motion, or so we thought.

They had made heavy foundations at the foot of their lands, but with thousands of my Purican brothers, I knew this day marked the end for the Redicans. We marched forward without fear.

The Redicans were more civilised compared to the Puricans. They never made an attempt to wage an all-out war against the Puricans but our chief believed that the small-scale attacks by their scouts might have meant something deeper than we had thought. He feared that if he did not cripple them in time, he wouldn't have anything left to rule, and most importantly, they were cutting short our food supply.

His orders were: slaughter the entire Redican bloodline, capture the humans they kept as slaves and slaughter them as well, or return them for food. In other words, wipe out the Redicans and bring the food home.

It used to be very easy for the Puricans to catch the humans before the Redicans began hunting them because the humans loved staying in comfortable and secure places mostly near springs, in valleys, beautiful forests, or beneath mountains. Their settlements could be detected easily because they were fond of dancing, singing and playing drums at night. Midnight was always best since it was natural that they would be tired after going about their daily activities and needed to rest.

Most of the humans hunted by the Puricans were killed in their sleep. Before they had a chance to wake up, their headless bodies would be thrashing around and dying. We would then gather them and pile them up for transportation.

My work mainly consisted of protecting my people against others of our kind from different kingdoms and chiefdoms. The Puricans rarely questioned why I never raised my sword against the humans.

Mother believed that our race feared the humans would soon grow strong and become too powerful to be stopped from taking over all the territories. The best plan was to consider them as food and means of survival. However, she did not know the reason why the Redicans refused to eat humans.

I thought that both the Puricans and the Redicans felt threatened by the growing population of the humans, along with their great strength and power from within, so the best thing was to reduce their size and strength to nothing before it became too late.

The Redicans did not idolise war and seldom attacked the Puricans, especially in the process of hunting the humans. However, both sides believed that the other side was affecting its growth and development, so the clash was inevitable.

The elders said that in the days of old, some Puricans were captured and enslaved by the Redicans and only a few escaped. No-one knew what happened to the rest. Until this day we had no evidence that it was true. However, I had never cared about history or all the silly stories and tales. My mind was on the mission. I just wanted to fight, and most importantly conquer the Redicans at that time in order to go back to Anna.

We arrived late after sunset and not as planned but it did not affect our strategy; we were to attack when their lights go off but it seemed they had a fete which lasted through the night.

We heard songs and drum beats from where we staged ourselves. They were all gathered around the central of the settlement which appeared to be their king's palace. We watched them dancing; noticing that the Redicans danced like the humans. This made us wonder whether it was true that they shared some ancestral spirit and had interbred.

Their activity was taking too much time, and it was already past midnight. We needed to make sure the fight ended before sunrise. It was said that they had a weapon that used the sun's rays and could burn any intruder once they pointed it at someone. These weapons were said to be mounted on the four sides of the walls that covered their land and were heavily guarded.

We knew that the surprise night attack would be the best in order to minimise casualties on our side. But I was growing impatient, maybe the best time to attack them would be while the celebration was still on, because it appeared that they were intoxicated and almost all of them were gathered in the same place. I turned to my fellow Puricans and told them that we should launch the attack while the celebration was still going on. After I had explained my reasons to them, they agreed with me, so I sent out six others to go warn the other Puricans that they should strike; two to each separate group just in case one could not make it to deliver the message.

I took a few from my group and approached the wall. There we climbed up and slaughtered the guards in charge of the weapon on that side of the enclosure.

We could not wait for the others, so we began to crawl in slowly, slaying all those whom we encountered as we went.

We swept them as we moved. All I wanted was to get my hands on their king. We could hear commotion amidst them and many of them began to run, so we knew they must have sensed our presence or that one of our groups had entered from another side. The Redicans were caught off guard and unprepared for war. We took down their sun-ray weapons with ease and rained terror upon them, the battle continuing until dawn.

We set their houses on fire as we pounced on them, pulling down their pillars. I secretly tried my best to open all the cages where the humans were kept so they'd escape and not be captured. However, few of them were killed as well by both the Redicans and the Puricans in the course of the attack. We reduced the number of the Redicans to nothing as I faced their warriors and shamed them all. We left no stone unturned.

It was a gift. I was so great in battle that I slew thousands, thus giving the impression that my Purican brothers were invincible and that I was invisible.

After making sure all were wiped out, we advanced to the king's palace and entered his compound. I told the others to stay behind, for that was my major task, to take him down alone and deliver his head to our chief.

Their king refused to run; he stayed and watched his entire kingdom fall, and no-one was spared. When I entered his chamber, he was all alone and I saw him seated on his throne, singing as he sipped a drink from his big shiny cup. He did not appear to be bothered by my presence.

"Come in Buga!" said the king as he admired the golden rings on his fingers.

I walked slowly towards him, looking around, prepared to kill anyone who might come out. However, I saw no-one, cowards they were.

"My own are either dead or have escaped," he added as he pointed to a chair for me to sit. I grabbed the heavy chair made of bronze and dragged it close to his throne, causing it to screech. I made my way and placed it right before his golden throne and sat down staring into his eyes. He was an old Redican, older than all our elders and he had no fear of me in him.

His face was old and wrinkled, strong large eyes like a beast still filled with pride. He smiled at me. Even though I knew he was too old and too weak to face me, a deep sense of fright stirred in me as he stared into my eyes.

"Many, many moons ago the oracle foretold that this kingdom could only be brought to its knees by its own! But that was even before I made the gravest mistake of my life!" he said.

I did not know what he meant but he had no place to run to, so I decided to stay and listen to him talk.

“When I was told that hundreds of guards were slaughtered by one Purican few moons back, I buried my head in the ashes and cried that day. I cannot remember how your Mother looked that day but I and my Redican brothers were so young and wild. All we wanted to do was just to go hunting with our fathers. Then two of my brothers decided to take a different route that day, which we did, leaving the fathers. We didn’t know how it happened but we came across these young beautiful Purican mates by the stream and my brothers caught one of them and forced me to ... well, they forced me. At first I refused but later, because I didn’t want them to call me a coward, I did as expected. I happened to be the youngest ... and dumbest. It was later that they laughed at me and told me that no Redican had ever slept with a Purican before. They laughed so hard that I could not stand it and I could not let them tarnish my name. So while on our way back to the lands, I killed them both,” said the Redican king.

I did not understand what he was trying to say so I stood up holding my sword. The Redican king smiled at me.

“Son, sit down!” he said.

I giggled and sat down, thinking that it was a sneaky move to deceive or delay me over my mission. However, the look on the king’s face surprised me. The king had a mixture of fear and joy in his eyes.

“I know nothing can stop you from doing what you were destined to, but I also believe that you have the right to know who fathered you. I highly doubt that your spirit would permit you to taste human blood, my son ... so tell me, do you feed on human flesh like the rest of your half-brothers?” asked the Redican king.

I interrupted him with a slice of my sword and beheaded him. His body fell to its knees, then to the ground as his head rolled over the side. I untied the bag which was wrapped around my waist, picked up his head and dropped it in the bag. Before I closed the bag, I peeked into it and his red eyes were still wide open as though he were still alive. I fastened it and tied the bag back on my waist and then picked up one of the fruits which had fallen from his table and gave it a big bite as I walked away.

I didn’t want to think about what he had said, knowing that someone under threat would say or do anything to escape death, especially the Redicans, such cowards they were. Nothing can come between me and Mother, for she was special.

The Redican king had said what he wanted to say and I had done what I needed to do.

I left everything he said right there in his throne room where his headless body lay, never to think of it again nor let it bother me. Maybe that was the warrior's way. I was born strong and wild. Even though my only weakness was compassion for the humans, I was still strong, a strong Purican warrior.

We decided to leave some of our Purican brothers behind to guard the conquered kingdom and wait for our chief's command on what to do next. They had a lot of work to do; pile up all the dead and burn them. By the time the sun was up, only the Puricans were left standing. The humans had fled and probably some Redicans but we spared none that crossed our path in that kingdom.

Tempest

Even though the sky was filled with thick dark clouds, all of the Puricans celebrated with us and welcomed us, not minding the looks of the heavy rain that might pour down upon us soon. The season of the rain was far from coming but it seemed the gods were pleased so may decide to bless us with rain anytime soon, I thought.

The weather looked so threatening, such as I had never seen before, with such heavy winds. I walked with my chest up holding the bag, and in the bag was the head of the great Redican king as promised. I knew the chief would be pleased with his gift; I gave him a kingdom and the head as he required.

We received a warm welcome from all the Purican mates and the mothers celebrated on seeing us. We had lost some good fighters but we had conquered the Redicans and that was all that mattered. The blood of our dear Purican brothers was not shed in vain. The Redican land had finally become our territory so with such great pride we marched straight to the palace to offer the gifts and news to the chief.

I did not notice Mother in the crowds; maybe she was busy preparing a meal for me or possibly worried, wondering where Oden had wandered off to.

In my heart I was disturbed, more disturbed and concerned about Anna and Baby. All I wanted was to hand over to the chief what he demanded of me and find my way out. I missed Anna.

All the newly ordained elders were outside. They welcomed us in and walked with us to the chief's compound as thunder and lightning sparked the skies. They set up a big table that could host about eighty Puricans with all kinds of food displayed on the table; pork hung on sticks and many fruits on the table too.

As I approached the table, I noticed two things covered with garments on my left not far from the table and some oil buckets by the walls. The chief was seated already eating a chunk of roasted pork and imbibing the brew from a big jar in front of him. However, he was not drunk. He smiled on seeing me, chanted my name and stood up to welcome me, still biting his pork and gulping down his brew. He sighed, belched and dropped the cup on the table, threw the pork on the ground and wiped his hand on his garment, smiling while looking at me.

“I’ve never really enjoyed the taste of their flesh ... humans! If it wasn’t for the gods and the fear of the one our power and protection comes, nothing would make me thirst for their smutty blood,” said the chief, “My young warrior,

you've come, you are back! I knew only you could do it. What would the Puricans do without you, eh, my young warrior? What would a great chief like I do without you?" he added as he walked up to me and hugged me.

"This must be my gift, eh? I shall hang this alongside the rest and will make another stick for the head of the king of the next kingdom we shall conquer! As peaceful as the Adaganians maybe, I think this is a sign from the gods that we are powerful enough to pay a visit to their great valleys," he added as he snatched the bag from my hand and threw it on the table. It landed on the fruits.

"I hate songs but I think I will make sure our new anthem heralds your name, Buga." he enunciated.

I grinned and sighed trying not to allow praises from his tongue to elevate my spirit.

"Hmm, this is a delicious moment for me, Buga! The flesh left on that head I must taste. Taste I must! Yes!" he said as he clapped his hands.

Two of his guards left the compound and entered into one of the rooms in the palace. He clapped his hands again and more guards assembled themselves around us. They were well-armed. I turned and looked around. I was not sure if this was how to welcome any warrior.

"You know, I have been thinking ... I want to have another throne made for me. I am tired of sitting on these ... despicable bones," he said, scratching his buttocks and picking his nose with the same finger.

"I want it made from the finest precious stones, decorated as befitting the great chief that I am, with the skulls of my two greatest enemies as footstools. Anytime I sit on it I will be constantly reminded that I am above those who made my nights shaky," he said as he placed his hands on my shoulders.

"I've never tested you, my young warrior, I've never for once doubted your strength and might and most of all, your loyalty. Now, this is what I call trust, eh? You've earned the trust of your very great chief and that is why I will do anything to make sure you are worthy of my two beautiful daughters. Anything!" he said.

His daughters came out all dressed beautifully, but as they were about to rush towards me, the chief raised his hand and told them to halt. He then clapped his hands twice. The two guards who had left earlier came out, carrying someone who was laid on a moveable bed made of tree branches.

The two guards kept the bed between us. The chief then asked them to leave, so they walked away and joined the other guards.

The chief walked around, looking at me as though puzzled. He stroked his rough beard gently and was lost in thought for a long time.

“Guess who we’ve found this morning beneath the mountains, my young warrior? Your brother! All broken, shattered and in pain. My guards brought him here and we tried to treat his wounds but they were so severe that we could not save him.” said the chief.

I slowly squatted and reached for the garment that covered the face of the one brought on the bed. It was Oden.

“Your brother is dead, my young warrior, but ... but before he died, he said something rather disturbing about ... a human in some underwater cave. I told him he was lying. I was so mad I almost choked him to death because his words were so ... so unwise. Well, he is dead anyway, but then I thought, what if he was right? I mean, he reminded me that you have never slayed a human before. I don’t have any problem with the choices any Purican makes about their diet. I had wanted to go down the mountains myself and check this ... underwater ... cave your brother talked about, but I said no, no! I must test my young warrior and prove that your dead brother was wrong. We need to prove them wrong, my young warrior, that you would not harm my own or your own... for any human.”

The chief was serious; the look on his face was clear that he did not believe anything that Oden had told him before he died. He then walked away and unveiled the two things on my left, covered with garments, which I had noticed earlier. The first was a human man tied up on his knees and the second was Mother, also tied up.

I ran to Mother with intentions of untying her, but the Chief spoke with strong hostility.

“Don’t you dare, Buga! I said it is just a test! So calm down, here ... eh?” he said as he handed me a sword, “I want you to prove to the Puricans that you are indeed a true warrior, our own warrior! I will mention the names of the four past chiefs and you must decide with your own sword who should live between these two, before I mention the last of the four chiefs. If you do not kill one of them, I shall kill both myself! I shall kill your Mother, Buga, and I swear on my future beautiful throne if you do not, I shall have your bones crushed under the rocks!” he said as he turned away from me.

Immediately he mentioned the name of the first Purican chief, I looked into Mother’s eyes and saw her tears. I could tell her tears were not for what I was asked to do; her tears were for Oden. Maybe she was disappointed with me but she would not understand, none of them would understand, I thought.

The chief mentioned the name of the second chief. I quickly moved and approached the human, closed my eyes and lifted my sword high and made the journey painless for the human man.

“I told them you were innocent! I told them you are for us and not for the humans but they did not believe me. I knew you’d do anything to save what you love most, Buga. Indeed, I am pleased with you . . . indeed I am,” said the chief as he walked to me.

He relieved me of the sword with a smile on his face, walked and stood in front of Mother.

“The Puricans will never have a great leader like me, my true name says it all. I have sent two of my guards to find that underwater cave and bring my dinner to me. You’d do anything to save what you love, and you proved that by killing my only son? I also told them you are a fool,” he then lifted the sword and cut off Mother’s head, “Kill him and bring me his head!” he shouted to the guards.

I cried out and became mad at myself as the guards made a run toward me, pulling out their swords for slaughter.

I rushed the first flock, broke their arms, got hold of two swords and made sure that their heads kissed the earth. I wanted to get to the chief but more guards made their way in and tried to subdue me. I was in tears while I fought and I even bit the ears and necks of the ones I held.

Blood and dead bodies were everywhere. I had lost my mind. The food on the table was painted with their blood. The thought of Mother made me more furious and voracious as I slaughtered them, but I knew I had to get away from the palace or be killed, so I rushed for the oil and randomly spilled it all over the place. I also poured it on some of the guards. I grabbed a torch and lit the place, then continued to strike them one after the other leaving their corpses behind me. I killed all who stood before me and ran down the mountains. I could hear the chief shouting at them to chase after me; he sounded both angry and disappointed.

By the time I was halfway down the mountains, rain started to fall. The sky was filled with thunder and lightning. I knew I had to get to Anna and Baby before it was too late.

There was nobody on the way, not a single Purican. Maybe they had reached and captured Anna, I thought, but the more I thought about it the faster I ran. I didn’t care if anyone was following me. I got to the waters and dived in.

While under the water and approaching the pool, I could see traces of blood in the water and a body floating. I got out of the pool and saw Anna holding Baby.

I saw the body of one guard in the pool and another lying on the ground. A sharp object had been stuck in his left eye, going right through him and sticking out of the back of his head.

Anna was frightened when she saw me, so I had to calm her down and explain to her that we must leave before the rest of the guards arrive.

Anna fastened Baby on her back with a garment. I picked up another sword which lay on the ground near the dead guard and instructed Anna to follow my lead.

I dived into the pool and while under the water I turned to see if she was behind me. She quickly dived in with Baby on her back. I stopped swimming and held her hand. I drew her close enough to see her face under the water, noticing tears in those beautiful eyes. I then smiled to make her understand that everything was going to be alright. Baby opened his eyes and smiled as bubbles came out of his mouth. We swam away.

We got to the other side and luckily for us, there was no sign of any Puricans. I pulled Anna out and directed her on where to follow. However, her attention was more on trying to revive Baby, so she stopped. She shook Baby and breathed into his mouth, but Baby was motionless. Anna was worried and confused as she breathed air into Baby's mouth and stroked his chest gently. Baby coughed and Anna smiled and jumped for joy. Baby cried and coughed. Anna ran into the bush and I followed them, looking back and making sure no one was following us.

As we walked away from the Purican settlement, Anna became exhausted. However, I insisted that we should keep moving.

We needed to get to a safe place. I knew of somewhere, but she insisted that I should allow her to guide us. Because she was familiar with the area, I followed her lead.

After walking a long distance, Anna led us to another cave up the mountain and we decided to rest there. The rain had stopped falling but the sky was still filled with dark clouds and it was already approaching nightfall.

Anna seemed to be familiar with where we were. I left the cave to go find something for Anna to eat. However, I could not get any food, so I returned empty handed. Anna only smiled. I noticed that while I had been gone, she had already smashed some rocks and made fire to keep herself and Baby warm. I asked her where she got the material to make fire and so she pointed deep into the cave. Why isn't she afraid of the place? I wondered.

We sat down in silence and by the time the fire burned itself out, we had fallen asleep. A howl whistled in through the cave entrance.

The Guardian

Anna yelled and tugged on my garments, trying to wake me up. I responded by reaching out for my sword. She was holding Baby and a beam of light cut through the cave entrance. She continued tugging on my garments, asking me to follow her, so I did.

I led us out of the cave, wondering what had scared her. If only she could hear my heartbeat. Baby made playful sounds and chuckled as we made our way out.

The sun almost blinded me so I shielded my eyes against it with my left hand, while holding my sword in my right. By the time I had a clear view, I could see about a thousand corpses lying outside the cave. Dead bodies of many Puricans were scattered around. I walked slowly and cautiously through the corpses because I was not sure if it was real or a trick.

I asked Anna to stay back. Instead she used her leg to push one of the bodies which lay nearby. It was lifeless, and so I examined the bodies which were closest to me.

They had all been slaughtered during the night. No sign of sword or arrow wounds could be seen on their bodies, only teeth marks. It appeared as though some wild beasts had attacked them. I saw claw-marks and deep canine cuts in their lifeless bodies. Some of the faces had been so badly mauled that they were unrecognisable.

I looked around carefully. Baby chuckled out loud, then we heard a creature growl from a distance; the sound echoing all around. Anna was shaken, so I led us back into the cave. Later, I went back outside, gathered some of the dead bodies, piled them up and covered the entrance to the cave with them, leaving a small opening at the top for light and air to come through. I found it amazing that Baby kept laughing.

I cut off a piece of my garment and wrapped it round the tip of my sword. I made fire and lit the piece of cloth which was on the sword. Holding it in front of me, I advanced into the deepest part of the cave, as I was curious to see what might be in there.

Anna carried the still laughing Baby and followed me along. The cave walls were covered with precious stones that glittered and shone as they reflected the light from the torch. Anna reached out and touched the precious stones on the walls. The colours were reflected on her face like rainbows. I saw her magnificent smile again. It warmed my heart and I smiled back at her.

While we were admiring the precious shiny stones on the walls of the cave, Anna began to sing a sweet song, unlike anything I had ever heard before. I stood there listening and watching as her voice filled the cave and the beautiful colourful lights from the stones shone on her face and the walls of the cave. I was lost in the moment; my heart felt so warm and I smiled. I felt as light as a feather; such feelings I had never felt before.

Her voice was like hearing the stars speak for the first time at night. It was as though there were other humans singing along with her. Maybe it was the sound of her voice bouncing off the walls or maybe I was spellbound by her beauty and voice. It seemed as though the precious stones sang along with her. I quickly shook my head, dispelling the notion, thinking it was lunacy.

While I was mystified and hypnotised by the sweet tone of her beautiful voice, a breeze blew through the cave. I noticed that something had pushed the pile of corpses away from the entrance. I told Anna not to move and I ran back to check what it was, keeping a firm hold on my sword.

On reaching the place where we had slept, I discovered that the fire had been put out.

With great caution, I approached the entrance and to my amazement, I saw some fruits in a small basket outside the cave. I had a careful look around before making a move. I saw no one, but I heard Anna's footsteps behind me. She squatted and started eating what she could lay her hands on from the basket.

Anna ate like a wild creature and quickly dragged the basket into the cave on her own. I decided to stay outside for a while and study the surroundings, looking for a possible way of escape if it became necessary. I rolled the corpses away from the cave, and then cut and gathered some branches from a nearby tree. I used them to block the entrance to the cave again.

By the time I returned to the cave, Anna had fed Baby and was playing with him. She did not appear to care who had moved the bodies. I saw that she had kept the basket.

I sat down, still wondering about the mystery. Anna brought Baby to me and placed him in my hands. She then picked up some stones and placed them in front of me.

Anna sat before me and tried to explain what she had previously told me while we had been in the underwater cave. This time she poured sand on the stones instead of water. I still could not understand, for she had made me even more confused.

Anna was deep in thought for a while, then she stood up and rushed into the cave, returning with some precious stones. She then emptied the fruits from the

basket, gathered some sand and poured it on the ground then placed the basket on top of the sand. She gathered more stones and placed them together with the precious stones. After that, she selected all the precious stones and placed them in the basket. She poured the sand over the basket and the stones, at the same time pushing the basket away from the stones on the ground. While she continued moving the basket away, she poured more sand on the other stones and as they were buried by the sand, Anna fell to the ground and played dead.

Anna stayed motionless until I touched her. She asked if I could understand what she was trying to say to me. I giggled, pointed a finger at her, saying 'Anna!' Then pointed the same finger at myself. 'Buga' I added.

She became so mad at me, gnashing her teeth then pointing her finger at my head, explaining to me that I had a small brain. She touched my heart and expressed that it was big; small brain big heart.

I laughed and she nodded.

'Buga!' I said again as I continued laughing.

I realised that she was trying to tell me to make a ship so that we could run away from all these troubles. I knew how to swim but no-one had ever taught me how to make a canoe or a ship. Even if I were to make one, where would we run to? So I explained to her that it requires many hands to make a canoe or a ship and I lacked the necessary skills to make such a craft. She ignored me and blew a raspberry.

The earth is big, we can go anywhere and settle there. I can protect Anna and Baby from a thousand flying spears and a thousand swords. I am Buga! The drums of war do not make any sound when I pass.

We spent another night in the cave, and whoever had left the basket the day earlier decided to supply another the next morning. We didn't know who was showing such generosity and kindness to us.

This time around, Anna packed up the fruits and explained to me that we must carry them along on our journey. I suggested that we should stay at the cave a while longer, but she refused. She insisted that we should leave right at that moment. I then agreed to leave. Before we left, she rushed into the cave and fetched some of the precious stones to take with her.

We left the cave and started to walk away. As on the previous day, we could hear a beast growling from afar, the sound echoing all around us.

We stopped for a little while, but Anna was anxious to get going, so we set off again. I followed her, holding my sword in one hand and the basket of fruits with the other. While we walked, I kept a careful lookout for any signs of trouble.

It was a long walk from the cave to the place where Anna was leading us. After we had covered a certain distance, Anna asked if we could rest. We heard thunder and we could see lightning from afar. She handed Baby to me and explained that she would need to bathe when we got to a river. Baby began to cry so she took him back and kissed him. We ate some fruits and got back on our feet as the cloud thickened.

Not far from where we had last rested, I heard movement coming from behind us. I rushed to catch up with Anna. She had gone on ahead, singing to herself while she walked. I covered her mouth, dragged her and Baby away from the path which we were taking. We were lucky to find a good hiding place.

I placed the basket on the ground and held Anna with my left hand, my sword clenched to my right. Anna was in front of me holding Baby. I was taller and broader than her. She looked up straight into my eyes and smiled. I took a quick glance at her and Baby before resuming my surveillance.

Thousands of Puricans marched past us. Anna did not make any sound, but Baby smiled and chuckled. I used my finger to cover his mouth. Anna angrily removed it from Baby's face and Baby chuckled again.

The Puricans did not see or hear us. They were heavily armed and their weapons clunked as they marched by. We waited there until the last one of them had gone past us. I could not see the chief among them. Then Baby chuckled again and as we were about to move out, more Puricans came by, this time the chief was among them. All were on foot and armed to the teeth. As soon as I sighted the chief, I remembered Mother and what he did to her. My body began to shake. They were not many; I could take them down and kill the chief with ease.

The chief commanded his guards to halt, then he turned to where we were and decided to micturate. He walked toward us and pulled it out right before us. Baby smiled wide and was about to laugh, so Anna covered Baby's mouth with her hand and stared into his eyes. I used my hand to block Anna's view as well.

The chief urinated right in front of us but did not notice that we were there. When he was done, he spat on his urine. He farted as he wiped his mouth. He picked out something from in between his teeth and continued walking. His guards followed him.

Baby then pushed Anna's hand off his mouth, took a strange look at Anna and chuckled again.

We were both panting. Anna could tell that I was enraged at the one who stood before us, even though she did not know what actually happened or what I had lost in trying to protect her and Baby. As I looked in her eyes, I saw sincere gratitude.

It seemed as though she felt that this was going to be the end for us both, so she took the little time we had left to show her appreciation with just one look. She had no hope that we would survive. My nerves calmed and I bent my head low as they passed. It looked like the entire tribe of Puricans were out looking for us. I would get my rough hands on the chief's neck someday.

After they had all gone, Anna turned and faced me. She had tears in her eyes. I wiped her tears with my other hand and we waited for a while before leaving the hiding place.

Anna later explained to me that we needed to take a different path. She was right even though I had no idea where she was taking us.

We changed course through the valleys and up over the hills in the cold. Baby was well covered and only Anna's face was exposed to the harsh conditions. As for me, I was on alert and thinking of Mother. The thought of killing the chief warmed me constantly and gave me courage to go on. The thought of taking his life was my only opium. I know we will cross paths soon and even if we don't, I shall make it my duty to find him and rip his heart out when this all ends! I thought.

Maybe his heart would be the first meat I'd taste. I could imagine its taste and the joy it would bring to know I that would be swallowing the heart of my greatest foe.

When we got to a certain place, Anna began to sing again. Her song sounded beautiful as she walked through the forest and didn't show any sign of exhaustion. I could not understand the words of her song but I loved her voice. I imagined myself swimming under water and hearing such a voice guiding me. She sang so beautifully and Baby continued to chuckle as we walked.

The clouds above us had cleared and the sun warmed us a bit. However, on one side of the sky, the clouds appeared to be thick with the threat of oncoming rain.

Anna saw a particular small tree and explained to me that we should rest for a while. She instructed me to dig under the tree for roots, which I did.

She gathered some big leaves and laid them on the ground and used the same leaves to construct a covering for Baby which looked like a small temporary house.

I had never seen such plant before but it looked like fruit, so I broke it in half and decided to take a bite. However, I quickly spat it out of my mouth.

Anna laughed at me. Maybe the humans and my kind need different varieties of food to survive. Of course, my kind hunted her kind for food, I worried.

Anna handed Baby to me, so I gave her what I had uprooted and waited to see what she would do with it. She laughed at me again as she dug the earth to

create a hole big enough for the root to fit in. She placed the root inside the hole and covered it with sand. She gathered some dry stems and some shrubs then placed them on top of the hole and lit it.

She stood up and walked to a nearby stream. I wanted to follow her but I had to stay to look after Baby.

I heard a splash and thought that she had jumped into the water to escape. I rushed for my sword and went down the stream but I found her singing and playing happily as if she were in the water with someone else. By the time she saw me, she invited me but I declined and walked back with Baby.

Anna later came and checked the fire. After some time she quenched it and unearthed the root which she had buried. She peeled it and served it to me. I first watched her eat before I took a bite of it. It tasted good, not as it did when I bit it fresh and so I yearned for more of it. After eating, we both went down the stream and drank from it.

Anna fetched some leaves, stuck them to some sticks and made a small span covering. Anna strapped Baby to her back and used the covering like a roof above their heads to shield themselves from the sun and the rain.

Anna amazed me with her intuition and how she would improvise quickly. She led the way, confident that she knew where we were headed. I just followed her.

We covered a long distance before we arrived at a place that looked like an abandoned human settlement. I made an attempt to warn Anna but she kept moving. I had a bad feeling about the place so I called out and she stopped, turned and smiled, insisting that we should keep walking.

She proved to be stubborn. As I took the next step, my right foot landed on a trap and I was swept off my feet. Before I could do anything, something hit me on the back of the head and I fell to the ground.

Friends and Foes

My name echoed in the dark and the sound of Anna's voice brought me back to my senses. I woke up and found myself on the ground bound in a big net. I saw many humans pointing their spears and lances at me.

They looked scared and terrified by my size and I smelled fear in them as I looked around for Anna. I shouted her name and all the humans fell silent. Intimidated by my voice, they all took a step back. Anna was being held by two humans, but I could not see Baby with her. I became irate and started to look around in search of Baby.

It was a big cave with many lit torches hanging from the walls. I made a thorough search, but still did not see Baby. I looked at Anna as she pushed her way through the humans. She then knelt down and held me while she cried.

I tried to free myself from the net. When the humans saw that I was struggling to get free, they tied a rope to the net and suspended me with my head facing downwards and pulled the net so that it became tighter.

The rope tied to the net was also attached to another long, thick rope which was nailed to the outside wall of the cave. It was a very big cave with a wide entrance.

The humans seized Anna and one of them ran into the cave and yelled something which I could not understand. Then another human pulled a different rope which lifted me up a bit more. I watched while the rest of them rushed out of the cave.

It was easy for them to drag me along with the rope. They moved me out of the cave and into the light. It was chaotic and I heard humans shouting at the peak of their voices. I did not know what they were saying. I was way above them and there were so many of them, like grains of sand. I had never seen such a great number of beings in one gathering.

I looked down from above and noticed that the other end of the rope was tied to a giant old tree outside the cave. If I were to cut the ropes that tied me and free myself from the net, I knew that the fall would kill me. I had no idea where I was but I knew who had caught me, so I needed to improvise fast.

Anna looked helpless and seemed to be in danger from where I hung. Lightning could be seen from a distance and the sound of thunder clapped continuously, accompanied by heavy winds but not a drop of rain kissed the ground.

From above I sighted many humans beneath me, shouting and holding sticks, arrows, lances, spears and even tiny swords. I saw Baby in the hands of another

human woman, so I shouted at Anna and pointed to the woman who was carrying Baby.

The humans were too many. Have they all gathered to see me and probably watch me humiliated and killed? I pondered.

Anna sighted Baby too so she kicked the one who held her. She then rushed towards Baby then snatched him from the human woman, attacking her fiercely like a wildcat.

I used my teeth to untie my hands. When the humans saw that I was free and was trying to struggle out of the net, they began to shoot their spears at me and missed. I became wild and yelled at them from above. I jumped and landed on the ground with my two feet, supporting my body with my hands, then rolled over and knocked many of them down the slope.

I picked up their spears, finding them to be too small for me. I knew they were too many, but I had to scare them off. I roared as I headed towards Anna and Baby. However, by the time I got to them, a human man had placed a knife on her neck and threatened to kill her if I moved any closer. The human man was trembling. Some of the humans ran away, but the rest of them surrounded me, holding their spears.

The clouds began to thicken and it thundered terribly. It looked like a heavy downpour was about to occur and the wind was blowing atrociously, bringing with it a great storm.

Another human woman approached me from amongst them, unarmed. She was older and I recognised her even with her half burnt face. After a careful look, I realised she was the one who had handed Baby to me during the night of the attack on the humans. She smiled at me with tears in her eyes, then spoke to the rest of the humans. They immediately lowered their arms.

I threw the spears away as the human woman walked toward Anna. She got to Anna and reached out her hands to take Baby from Anna. Anna protested but I yelled at her for the first time and made her understand that Baby belonged to the other human woman. However, Anna began to shed tears and held Baby tighter.

Anna just could not hand over Baby to the human woman and the two of them began to cry.

Eventually, Anna managed to give Baby to the other human woman, but Baby cried out loud. The human woman tried to breastfeed him in order to stop him from crying but Baby's voice overrode the storms and everybody fell silent. Anna then rushed and snatched Baby from the human woman. Baby chuckled.

I smiled as I watched Anna laughing. She could not look into the eyes of the human woman who owned Baby. From what I observed, it was obvious the human woman who owned Baby had no choice but to let Anna held Baby.

While we were all watching the drama between Anna and the human woman, some human men arrived. As soon as the one who looked like their leader saw me, he ordered the rest and all of a sudden they threw nets at me and attacked me.

They tied ropes to my legs and continued to throw themselves on me. I struggled but it was too late, they had successfully trapped me once again. I did not want to harm them. They dragged me back into the cave again.

The bad human leader walked into the cave and ordered Anna and Baby to be brought to him. He spoke to Anna in a tongue I could not understand but he did not harm her and she seemed to be familiar with him.

The bad human leader called out three of his human men and sent them out on horseback. Then he asked for food and water to be brought for Anna. However, she insisted that they attend to me first.

Most of the humans gathered around the entrance to the cave to watch us, murmuring amongst themselves. Food was offered to us but as I was still tied up, Anna first fed me, then herself.

After a while, the human woman who owned Baby walked in and sat down. She watched Anna, admiring the closeness between her and Baby. She was touched by what she witnessed.

The bad human leader sat down and kept staring at me. I wondered what was going on in his mind and what he would do to me as he continued to gaze.

Not long after that, I heard the sound of horses galloping, coming from outside the cave. The three human men sent out by their leader had come back and one of them whispered something into his ears. With his eyes still focused on me, he ordered them again and they walked out.

The three human men returned with two other human men; an older human man whose beard was grey with age and a younger handsome looking human man. The two that came had finer garments compared to the humans who had ensnared me.

The younger one rushed towards Anna. On seeing her, tears formed in his eyes, then he hugged and kissed her. She started to cry and he wiped her tears as they continued kissing.

The older grey-bearded human carried a staff. He and the bad human leader had a long talk. It looked like he was trying to convince the bad human leader of something. The grey-bearded one would talk and point upwards in a forthright

manner. However, the bad human leader would just shake his head in disagreement.

The bad human leader again ordered more food for the two human men who had come for Anna, but the older grey-bearded human man rejected the offer.

Anna then spoke to the old bearded one and pointed at me. He stood up and walked slowly over to me, bending down and looking at me without fear. He stared at me for a while, then raised his right hand and touched my forehead. He then spoke to me in my own tongue.

“What are you called, young one?” he asked.

At first I thought my mind was playing tricks on me, until he asked me again.

‘Buga,’ I responded sedately.

He then told me that Anna had informed him that I had saved her life. She would not forgive him if he did not make sure I was set free. I asked him who he was but he ignored me and after a long stare, he stood up and went back to Anna. He whispered something to her and she began to cry. Anna fell to her knees begging. A little while later, she turned to the younger human man who had accompanied the old bearded one.

The young human man agreed to talk to the older one, but when he tried to explain something to him, the old bearded one’s attention was focused on the sound of thunder outside. It seemed as though he just wanted them to leave, for he appeared to be agitated and in a hurry.

The old bearded one then quickly turned to the bad human leader and spoke to him while pointing at me. The leader refused and became furious. The old bearded one just turned and started to walk away. Anna and the young human man followed him while continuing to beg.

She then pulled out something which was wrapped in a tiny garment and showed it to the old bearded one. He stopped and stared at her then took it and returned to the bad human leader.

The old bearded one emptied the tiny piece of garment onto the table. It had contained some of the precious stones which Anna picked up from the cave where the beast had guarded us. The old bearded one gazed in silence. The bad human leader bit his lower lip and his thumb lightly, before calling out and ordering the three human men to untie me.

The old bearded one looked at me once more then quickly turned away and started to walk off in a hurry.

After I had been set free, Anna smiled joyfully and invited me to follow them. The old bearded one mounted a white horse. Anna held Baby and rode on a

black horse with the young human man. She instructed me to come with them. She searched for the other human woman who owned Baby among the crowds. The two of them smiled at each other and the other human woman bid Anna and Baby farewell with tears in her eyes. Baby chuckled. The sky was getting darker as we moved away from the human settlement.

I had no idea where we were going but I followed them on foot as they rode their horses. Anna continued to look back to check if I was still following.

It began to rain heavily. From behind us we heard an outburst coming from the human camp. They began pursuing us. The horses ran fast and I ran faster myself, taking shortcuts in order to catch up with them through the thick trees. We were in a dense forest surrounded by many hills. There was a furious commotion that rose behind us, approaching from the human settlement. The bad human leader must have ordered the humans to bring us back, I thought.

We got to an open field and I saw a heavy giant ship supported by large logs. Many humans came out from the forest and ran toward the ship. They were approaching from all around, making chaotic noises, screaming and yelling. Their voices rose like a great roar.

The old bearded one continued to charge his horse ahead, followed by the one Anna rode. Her attention was on me and she continued to look back to check if I was still with them. I had already caught up with them and was running beside the black horse.

The clouds became darker and it thundered louder than I had ever heard before, while lightning struck continuously. I heard someone shouting my name from the surrounding hills. I looked to my left and saw thousands of Puricans descending from the higher grounds to where the giant ship stood. They were led by the chief. Anna noticed them too so she called the attention of the young human man.

I stretched my hand out to touch her while running, she stretched hers out too and our fingers touched. At that moment I felt like it was the end and I might never see Anna again. I knew I had to do something about the Puricans before they got to Anna.

Anna screamed my name, probably trying to hinder me from doing anything hasty. I saw a spear strapped to the side of the black horse and pulled it out. The younger human man looked at me while continuing to ride his horse at a fast pace. I gave him the sign to go ahead. He smiled, nodded and slashed the horse hard, making it run faster. I turned and faced the Puricans who were running toward us. I took a turn and charged straight at the Purican chief. Water started to come out from the ground. He saw me coming and screamed my name. I called him by his birth name, 'Duwekah!' meaning, "The end!"

The Puricans realised that water was rising from the ground, so they scattered in confusion, along with the humans. Strange, heavy sounds of water and waves clashing came from all over the earth, approaching the giant ship.

I had never seen the sea so angry. Water rose from the ground. None of us alive had ever seen what was unfolding, nor had I ever heard of such dreadful events.

The sight was terrible and most of the humans scattered in fear and some of them were carried away by the waves. I had never seen humans gathered in one place like they were on that day. The waters rose from all round the giant ship and shot up high like the mountains. I sighted the old bearded one on his horse with his hand raised up as if he were using his staff to clear the wind and water ahead of him. I turned at the very moment when the Purican chief raised his sword from afar and charged, together with some of his loyalists. I turned again to see if Anna had reached the giant ship. At that moment, I understood that this was exactly what she had been trying to explain to me all this time.

Everything she had said and explained made sense; choosing precious stones and putting them in the basket and the rain destroying the other stones. Anna had known about the heavy downpour and that was why she had been trying to make sure that we arrived in time to escape the flood. It was never about me making a ship for us to escape; it was all about the giant ship which the humans had built.

I kicked the first Purican who approached me and dodged the chief's sword, before lifting him off the ground with my left hand. I shoved him up against a big tree and thrust the spear through his mouth so hard that it stuck in the tree. I left him hanging there then turned to the next Purican who attacked me, seized his sword and cut off the chief's head. His headless body fell to its knees and collapsed on the ground. At that moment I found peace, seeing his head stuck to the tree. By that time, the two horses had made their way into the giant ship. I saw the doors to the giant ship being locked as water swept me off my feet.

The wave was heavy and the current too violent for me to swim with ease, so I stopped struggling and let it carry me along. By the time I was able to surface above the water, there was nothing but total chaos. I sighted the giant ship being shaken violently by the current, and I could see some humans falling from its deck. I did not know how they got on top of it but they were washed away as the giant ship tried to settle under the pressure from the violent storm.

I saw trees, humans, animals, Redicans, Adaganians and Puricans scattered all around, screaming and crying for help, both above and below the water. Those who could not swim were dragging anyone they could lay their hands on down below. Thunder and lightning continued to strike the water violently, killing

anyone in its path. I felt terrified. The water level kept going up as the heavy downpour continued from the skies. Lightning struck the waters and travelled through them, striking whatever lay in its path. I sighted a tree floating and I grabbed. However, a big wave tossed me and the tree against the giant ship. The tree knocked me against the side of the giant ship, I lost consciousness.

I was later awakened by a cold breeze. I opened my eyes and looked up at the sky. It was so clear and the sun was up. My vision became clearer and I managed to stand up. I found myself on top of the roof of the giant ship. I looked around and the entire earth was filled with water. I could not see any Puricans, humans or animals in the waters. I then looked up at the skies for the black bird from my dream, but it was not there.

The ship was sailing calmly and my stomach was empty. I had never felt as hungry as I did on that day. I stamped on the roof with my feet to let them know that I was up there. However, no-one answered.

The ship rocked, so I had to find a good position to lie down or I might fall off into the waters. I was amazed by the beautiful sight of the clear skies. However, there was no sign of land nor any sign of life; just water and the beautiful skies. Despite the calm, my mind was troubled by the images of the huge black bird from my dream.

My health was deteriorating. I could tell I might not survive long, but I had to hold on and stay strong. I had survived worse but never faced such a serious illness. I felt cold and I was coughing hard. I could feel the weight of my heart and lungs but I was a Purican warrior. Death held no fear for me and that was why I survived to this day. I had stared death in the eyes too many times and charged against it. I did all and conquered all simply because I had no fear of dying. Death and I were familiar with each other because I saw it in my reflection whenever I looked into a river or stream.

“How did you get up here?” inquired an angry voice.

I stood up and saw the old bearded one pointing his staff at me. Behind him were other humans who must have climbed up through an open hatch in the roof of the giant ship.

“I said, how did you get here?” asked the old bearded one again.

‘I do not know ... I am thirsty!’ I replied.

He lowered his staff and asked someone to bring food and medicine. He sat down and looked around, clearly not comfortable with my presence.

“You were not part of the plan!” he added.

‘What plan?’ I asked.

He laughed and spread his arms.

“This ... this whole plan of His” He pointed at the surrounding waters.

I then asked him to whose plan he was referring. In reply, he pointed up at the sky. My heart almost leaped as I looked up at the sky, thinking I would see the huge black bird from my dream. However, I saw no one. I was also worried about not seeing any sign of life and how deep water was. I wanted to ask the old bearded one many questions.

“Save your energy, Buga,” he said.

They served me water and food. While I was attacking the food, Anna came to us. She looked so happy to see me again. She hugged me tight. Later, she spoke to the old bearded one and told him how grateful she was.

After I had finished eating, the old bearded one mixed some herbs and asked me to drink the mixture. I did but it was so bitter. He then rubbed some of it around my face and chest.

“This should keep your soul in your body for a while, but you must be strong,” he added.

The old bearded one smiled and ordered some garments to be brought to me, which he then used to wrap me with. I felt so much better.

The old bearded one became an interpreter because I could understand him. I asked about Baby and he told me that Baby was too young to be brought up because of the conditions on top of the giant ship. He said Baby was doing just fine. The old bearded one explained to me that Baby is a term humans use to refer to a very young child who has not yet begun to walk or talk. I never knew Baby was not a name so we both laughed at my stupidity. I asked him if Anna had picked a name for the child yet. He smiled and told me Anna named the child after me. I was so excited that tears of joy rolled down my face. I again asked the old bearded one how he got to build such a giant ship, and he laughed.

“It is not a ship, it is called an ark!” he said, smiling sympathetically.

I then asked him about his story but he was more interested in mine and so he begged me to tell him more about myself and how I encountered Anna. I smiled at him, lowered my head and looked at my hands, noticing that they had turned pale. I chuckled to lighten up the mood and cleared my throat.

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Appreciation.

Hi, thank you for reading my book. If you enjoyed it, won't you please take a moment to leave me a review?

Thanks!

Richard Shekari.

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