

Quest of the Gazolba

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The crown of the kings of Ustaim was fashioned from the rarest materials that could be procured anywhere. Its circlet was of gold mined from a huge meteor that fell in the isle of Cyntrom, shaking the isle with calamitous earthquake; and the gold was harder and brighter than any native gold of earth. It was set with thirteen jewels, unmatched even in fable, that starred the circlet with strange, unquiet fires and lusters dreadful as the eyes of the basilisk.

More wonderful than all else, however, was the stuffed gazolba-bird that topped the crown, gripping the circlet with its steely claws just above the wearer's brow, and towering with splendid plumage of green, violet and vermillion. Its beak was like polished brass, its eyes were like small dark garnets in silver sockets. Seven lacy blood-red quills arose from its black-dappled head; and a white tail fell down in a spreading fan like the beams of some white sun behind the circle.

The bird was the last of its kind, according to the sailors who had slain it in an almost legendary isle beyond Sotar, far to the east. For nine generations it had decked the crown of Ustaim; and the kings looked upon it as the sacred emblem of their fortunes, whose loss would be followed by grave disaster.

Euvoran, the son of Karpoom, was the crown's ninth wearer. He had worn it superbly for two years and ten months, following the death of Karpoom from a surfeit of stuffed eels and jellied salamanders' eggs. On all public occasions it had graced the brow of the young king, conferring upon him a great majesty in the eyes of the beholders. Also, it had served to conceal the sad increase of an early baldness.

In the late autumn of the third year of his reign, Euvoran rose from a breakfast including twelve courses and twelve wines. As was his custom, he went immediately to the hall of justice, whose windows looked out across the city of Aramoam toward the orient seas.

Being well fortified by his breakfast, Euvoran felt himself prepared to unravel the most tangled skeins of law and crime, and to mete swift punishment to all malefactors. Beside his throne's right arm there stood an executioner leaning on a huge mace with a leaden head. Often with this mace, the bones of heinous offenders were broken, or their brains were spilt in the king's presence on a floor strewn with black sand. At the throne's left arm a torturer busied himself with the screws and pullies of certain fearful instruments, testing them repeatedly.

On that morning the city constables brought before Euvoran only a few petty thieves and vagrants. There were no cases of felony such as would have warranted the wielding of the mace

or the use of boot and rack. The king, who had looked forward to a pleasant session, was disappointed.

“Away with these mackerel!” he roared, and his crown shook with indignation, and the tall gazolba-bird on the crown appeared to nod and bow. “They pollute my presence. Give each one a hundred strokes of the hardwood briar on the bare sole of each foot, and forget not the heels.”

Before the court-officers could obey him, two belated constables entered the hall of justice, haling between them a most peculiar individual with the long-handled, many-pointed hooks used in Aramoam for the apprehending of suspected criminals. Though the hooks were seemingly embedded in his flesh as well as in his filthy rags, the prisoner bounded continually aloft like a goat, and his captors were obliged to follow him in these lively and undignified saltations, so that the three presented the appearance of acrobats.

With one last flying leap in which the officers were drawn through the air like the tails of a kite, the queer personage came to a pause before Euvoran. The king regarded him in amazement and was not prepossessed by the extreme suppleness with which he bowed to the floor, causing his captors, who had not yet recovered their equilibrium, to sprawl at full length in the royal presence.

“Ha! what have we now?” said the king in an ominous voice.

“Sire, ’tis another vagabond,” replied the breathless officers. “He would have passed through Aramoam in the fashion that you behold, without stopping, and without even lessening the height of his saltations, if we had not arrested him.”

“Such behavior is highly suspicious,” growled Euvoran. “Prisoner, declare your name, your birth and occupation, and the infamous crimes of which beyond doubt you are guilty.”

The captive, who was cross-eyed, appeared to include Euvoran, the mace-bearer, and the torturer and his instruments all in a single glance. His nose, ears and other features possessed unnatural mobility, and he grimaced continually, making his unclean beard toss and curl like sea-weed on a whirlpool. He was ill-favored to an extravagant degree.

“I’m a necromancer,” he replied in, a tone that set Euvoran’s teeth on edge like the grating of metal upon glass. “I was born in that realm where the dawn and the sunset meet, and the moon is equal in brightness to the sun.”

“Ha! a necromancer,” snorted the king. “Do you not know that necromancy is a capital crime in Ustaim? We shall find means to dissuade you from such infamous practises.”

At a sign from Euvoran the officers drew the captive toward the instruments of torture. To their surprise he allowed himself to be chained supinely on an iron rack. The torturer began to work the levers and the rack lengthened little by little with a surly grinding, till it seemed that the prisoner's joints would be torn apart. Inch by inch was added to his stature; yet he appeared to feel no discomfort. To the stupefaction of all present, it soon became plain that his arms, legs and body were more extensible than the rack itself: for the frame was now drawn to its limit.

All were silent, viewing a thing so monstrous. Euvoran rose from his throne and went over to the rack, as if doubting his own eyes. The prisoner said to him:

"You would do well to release me, O King Euvoran."

"Say you so?" the king cried out in a rage. "We have other ways of dealing with felons in Ustaim."

He made a sign to the executioner, who came forward quickly, raising his leaden-headed mace.

"On your own head be it," said the necromancer, and he rose instantly from the rack, breaking the bonds that held him as if they had been chains of grass. Then, towering to a dreadful height which the wrenchings of the rack had given him, he pointed his long forefinger at the king's crown. Simultaneously he uttered a foreign word that was shrill and eldritch as the crying of fowl that pass over toward unknown shores in the night.

As if in answer to that word, there was a loud, sudden flapping of wings above Euvoran's head, and the king felt that his head was strangely lightened and bare. A shadow fell upon him, and he, and all others present, saw above them in the air the stuffed gazolba-bird, which had been killed more than two hundred years before by seafaring men in a remote island. The wings of the bird, a living splendor, were outspread for flight, and it carried still in its claws the jeweled circlet of the crown.

Balancing, it hung for a little over the throne, while the king watched it in awe and consternation. Then, with a great whirring, its white tail outspread like the beams of a flying sun, it flew swiftly through the open palace-portals and passed eastward from Aramoam into the morning light.

After it the necromancer followed with goatish leapings, and no man tried to deter him. Those who saw him swore that he went north along the ocean strand, while the bird flew seaward, as if homing to the half-fabulous isle of its nativity. The necromancer was seen no more in Ustaim. But the crew of a merchant galley, landing later in Aramoam, told how the gazolba-bird had passed over them in mid-ocean, still flying toward the uncharted coasts of

dawn. And they said that the gold crown, with its thirteen unmatched gems, was still carried by the bird.

King Euvoran, so weirdly bereft, with his baldness rudely bared to the gaze of thieves and vagrants, was as one on whom the gods have sent down a sudden bolt. It seemed to him that his royalty had flown with that crown which was the emblem of his fathers. Moreover the thing was against nature, annulling all laws: since never before, in history or fable, had a dead bird taken flight from the kingdom of Ustaim.

Indeed, the loss was a dire calamity. Donning a voluminous turban of purple silk, Euvoran held council with his ministers regarding the state dilemma that had thus arisen. The ministers were no less troubled and perplexed than Euvoran, since neither the bird nor the circlet could be replaced. In the meanwhile this irreparable misfortune was rumored throughout Ustaim. The land became filled with doubt and confusion, and some of the people murmured against Euvoran, saying that no man could be their rightful ruler without the gazolba-crown.

Then, as was the custom of the kings in any national crisis, Euvoran went to the temple in which dwelt the god Geol, the chief deity of Ustaim. Alone, with bare head and unshod feet as was ordained by priestly law, he entered the dim adytum. Here the image of Geol, pot-bellied, and made of earth-brown faience, reclined eternally on its back and seemed to watch the motes in a beam of sunlight from the slotted wall. Dropping prone in the dust that had gathered about the idol through ages, the king gave homage and implored an oracle to illuminate and guide him in his need. Presently a voice issued from the god's navel, like a subterranean rumbling:

"Go forth, and seek the gazolba in those isles that lie below the orient sun. There, on the far coasts of dawn, thou shalt again behold the living bird which is the symbol and the fortune of thy dynasty. And there, with thy own hand, thou shalt slay the bird."

Euvoran felt greatly comforted, since the utterances of the god were thought infallible. It seemed that the oracle implied in plain terms that he should recover the lost crown of Ustaim with its avian superstructure

Returning to the palace, he sent for the captains of his proudest galleys of war which lay at anchor in the tranquil harbor, and ordered them to prepare immediately for a long voyage.

When all was made ready, King Euvoran went aboard the flagship which was a towering trireme with oars of beef-wood and stout sails dyed in saffron and scarlet. A long banner flamed at the masthead, bearing the gazolba-bird in its natural colors on a field of cobalt. The rowers and sailors were giant Negroes, and the soldiers who manned the vessel were

fierce mercenaries from desert kingdoms. Going aboard, the king took with him certain of his concubines, his jesters and musicians, as well as an ample stock of rare foods and liquors, so that he should lack for nothing.

Also, mindful of the prophecy of Geol, he armed himself with a longbow and a quiver filled with hawk-feathered arrows. And he carried a sling of lion-skin and a blow-gun of black bamboo from which tiny poisoned darts were discharged.

It seemed that the gods favored the voyage. A wind blew strongly from the west, and the fleet, numbering fifteen vessels, was borne with bellying sails toward the risen sun. The farewell shoutings of Euvoran's people on the wharves were soon stilled by distance; and Aramoam's marble houses on its palmy hills were lost in a floundering bank of azure.

Trusting in the oracle of Geol, who had never failed his fathers, the king made merry as was his custom. Reclining beneath a canopy on the poop of the trireme, he swilled from an emerald beaker the wines and brandies that had lain in his palace vaults, storing the warmth of long sunken suns. He laughed at the ribaldries of his fools, and his women diverted him with harlotries older than Rome or Atlantis. But always he kept at hand, beside his couch, the weapons with which he hoped to hunt and slay again the gazolba.

Auspicious winds blew steadily, and the fleet sped onward with the great black oarsmen singing and the gorgeous sails flapping loudly. After a fortnight they came to Sotar, whose low-lying coast of cassia and sago barred the sea for a hundred miles in Loithe, the chief port, they paused to inquire for the gazolba-bird. There were rumors that the bird had passed above Sotar; and some of the people said that a cunning sorcerer named Iffibos had captured it with his spells and had shut it in a cage. Hearing this the king landed in Loithe and went with certain of his captains and soldiers to visit Iffibos, who lived in a mountain valley at the island's core.

It was a tedious journey. Euvoran was much annoyed by the huge and vicious gnats of Sotar, who failed to respect royalty and were always insinuating themselves under his turban. When, after much delay in the deep jungles, they came to the crag-perched house of Iffibos, he found that the bird was merely one of the bright-plumaged vultures peculiar to that region, which Iffibos had tamed for his own amusement. The king returned to Loithe, declining somewhat rudely the invitation of the sorcerer, who wished to show him the unusual feats of falconry to which he had trained the vulture. In Loithe the king tarried no longer than was necessary for the laying aboard of fifty jars of that fine cocoanut arrack in which Sotar excels all other orient lands.

Then the ships of Euvoran sailed beyond Sotar and came after thirty days to the seldom-visited isle of Tosk, whose people are more akin to monkeys than to men. Euvoran asked the people for news of the gazolba and received only an apish chattering in reply. He ordered

his men-at-arms to catch some of these savage islanders and crucify them on the coco-palms for their incivility. Then [the] men-at-arms pursued the nimble people of Tosk for a full day without catching even one of them. So the king contented himself by crucifying two of the men-at-arms for their failure to obey him.

Beyond Tosk, which was the usual limit of voyaging from Ustaim the vessels entered the Ilozian Sea and began to touch at partly mythic shores and islands charted only in story. But nowhere could the voyagers find a single feather such as had formed the gazolba's plumage; and the quaint people of those isles had never seen the bird.

However, the king saw many flocks of unknown, bright-winged fowl that went over his galleys, passing between the unmapped islets. Landing often, he practiced his archery on lorikeets and lyre-birds and boobies, or stalked the golden cockatoos with his blowgun.

The voyagers drove into mornings crossed by gilded lories, and noontides where rose flamingoes went before them to lost, inviolate strands. The stars changed above them, and under the alien Signs they heard the melancholy cry of swans that flew southward, fleeing the winter of undiscovered realms and seeking the summer in trackless worlds.

They held speech with fabulous men who wore for mantles the tail plumes of the roc, trailing far on the earth behind them. They spoke with people whose bodies were covered with a down like that of new-hatched fowl, and others whose flesh was studded as if with pin-feathers.

At noon, early in the fourth month of the voyage, a new and unheard of shore ascended from the deep. It curved for many miles, with sheltered harbors and crags and low-lying wooded valleys. As the galleys hove toward it, Euvoran saw that stone towers rose on some of the highest crags. But in the haven below them there were no ships at anchor nor boats moving; and the shore of the haven was a wilderness of green trees and grass.

Entering the haven, the voyagers descried no sign of man, other than the crag-reared towers.

The place, however, was full of an extraordinary number and variety of birds. They ranged in size from little tits and passerines to creatures of greater wing-spread than eagle or condor. They circled over the ships in coveys and great, motley flocks, seeming to be both curious and wary. King Euvoran thought that here was a likely haunt in which to track down the gazolba. Arming himself for the chase, he went ashore with several of his men in a small boat.

The birds, even the largest, were plainly timid and inoffensive. When Euvoran landed on the beach, the very trees appeared to take flight, so numerous were the fowl that soared and

flew inland or sought the rocks that rose beyond bow-shot. None remained of the multitude visible shortly before; and the king was somewhat annoyed, since he did not wish to leave without bringing down a trophy of his skill. He thought the birds' behavior curious on account of the solitude; for there were no paths except those made by forest animals. The woods were wild, the meadows untilled; and the towers were seemingly desolate, with sea-fowl and land-fowl flying in and out of their windows.

The king and his men combed the deserted woods and came to a steep slope, covered with bushes and dwarf cedars, whose upper incline approached the tallest tower. At the slope's bottom Euvoran saw a small owl that slept in one of the cedars, as if unaware of the commotion made by the other birds in their flight. He trained an arrow and shot down the owl, though ordinarily he would have spared a prey so paltry.

He was about to pick up the fallen owl, when one of his men cried out in alarm. Turning his head as he stooped, the king beheld a brace of colossal birds, larger than any he had yet discerned, that came down from the tower like falling thunderbolts. Before he could fit another arrow to the string, they were upon him, making a loud roar with their drumming wings, and beating him instantly to the ground.

Then, before his men could rally to assist him, one of the great birds fastened its claws in the cape of the king's mantle and carried him away toward the tower on the crag as easily as a falcon carrying a young hare. The king had dropped his longbow under the birds' onset, and the blow-gun had been shaken loose from his girdle, and all his darts and arrows were spilled. No weapon remained to him, except a small needle-sharp dagger, and this he could not use to any purpose in mid-air.

Swiftly he neared the tower, with the wings of his captor flapping thunderously above him, and a flock of lesser fowl circling about him and shrieking as if in derision. A sickness came upon him because of the height to which he had been carried, and giddily he saw the tower walls sink past him with windows wide as doorways. Then, as he began to retch in his sickness, he was borne in through one of the windows and was dropped rudely on the floor of a spacious chamber.

He sprawled at full length on his face, while the floor seemed to pitch beneath him like a vessel's deck in storm. Recovering somewhat from his vertigo, Euvoran raised himself to a sitting position. Before him, on a sort of dais between posts of black jasper, was a monstrous perch of gold and ivory. Upon it sat a most gigantic and uncommon bird, eyeing Euvoran disdainfully, as an emperor might eye some gutter-snipe that his palace guards have haled before him.

The bird's plumage was Tyrian purple, and his beak was like a pickaxe of pale bronze darkening greenly toward the point. He clutched the perch with talons longer than the

armored fingers of a warrior. His head was adorned with amber and turquoise quills like a many-pointed crown. About his long, unfeathered neck, rough as the scaled skin of a dragon, he wore a singular necklace composed of human heads and the heads of various feral beasts, such as the weasel, the stoat, the wildcat and the fox, all of which had been reduced to a common size and were no bigger than ground nuts.

Euvoran was terrified by the aspect of this fowl. His alarm was not lessened when he saw that many other great birds were sitting about the chamber on lower and less costly perches, like peers of the realm in their sovereign's presence.

Now to his confoundment the huge Tyrian-feathered bird addressed him in human speech, with a harsh but majestic voice:

“Too boldly thou hast intruded on the peace of Ornava, isle that is sacred to the birds; and wantonly thou hast slain one of my subjects. For I am the monarch of all birds that fly, walk, wade or swim, and I hold my capital in Ornava. Justice shall be done upon thee for thy crime. But if thou hast aught to say in thy defense, I will give thee hearing now. I do not wish that even the vilest vermin should accuse me of inequity.

Blustering, though afraid at heart, Euvoran gave answer:

“I came hither seeking the gazolba, which adorned my crown in Ustaim, and was feloniously reft from me with the crown through the spell of a lawless necromancer. I am Euvoran, King of Ustaim, and I bow down to no bird, not even the mightiest of that species.”

The ruler of the birds, seeming amazed and indignant, questioned Euvoran sharply concerning the gazolba. Learning that this bird had been killed by sailors and afterwards stuffed, and that the sole purpose of Euvoran in his voyage was to catch and kill it a second time and re-stuff it if necessary, the ruler cried angrily:

“This helpeth not thy case but showeth thee guilty of a two-fold crime and a thing wholly against nature. In my tower, as is right and proper, I keep the bodies of men that my taxidermists have stuffed for me; but it is not allowable that men should do thus to birds. In retribution I shall commit thee presently to my taxidermists. Truly, a stuffed king will enhance my collection.”

Snapping his great beak, the bird-monarch turned to Euvoran's guards:

“Away with this vermin. Shut it in the man-cage and keep a strict watch.”

Euvoran, urged by the pecking of his guards, was compelled to climb a sloping ladder with rungs of teak that led to a room above in the tower's top. In the center of this room stood a

bamboo cage capacious enough for six men. The birds drove Euvoran into the cage and bolted its door upon him with their claws. One of them remained beside the cage, eyeing him vigilantly through the bars; and the other flew out through a window and did not return.

The king sat down on a litter of straw, which was all that the cage provided for his comfort. Despair lay heavy upon him, and it seemed that his plight was both dreadful and ignominious. The things that had happened to him were monstrous beyond imagining. It was monstrous that a bird should speak with human speech, should dwell in royal state with servitors to do his will and the pomp and power of a king.

And monstrous above all was the doom that the bird-monarch had decreed for Euvoran.

After a while, as he pondered dismally, water and raw grain were set before him in earthen vessels by fowls that came and departed in silence. Still later, as the day drew toward sunset, he heard men shouting and birds shrieking below the tower; and together with these noises came clashings as of weapons and thuddings as of boulders loosened from the crag. Euvoran knew that his men were assailing the place in an effort to rescue him. The noises mounted, and there were cries of people wounded and a shrilling of harpies in battle. But presently the clamor ebbed away, the shoutings grew faint, and Euvoran knew that his men had failed to take the tower.

Hopeless, he sat with bowed head while the sun went down, gilding the bars of his cage through a western window. Soon after sunset a night guard came in to relieve the day-flying fowl who watched the captive king. The newcomer was a nyctalops with glowing yellow eyes. He stood taller than Euvoran, and was formed and feathered like a great burly owl. Euvoran was uncomfortably aware of the bird's eyes, burning upon him more vigilantly and balefully as the dusk deepened.

The moon rose, a little past the full, and poured its spectral quicksilver into the room. It paled the eyes of the bird, so that they seemed less watchful and formidable. Euvoran took heart and conceived a desperate scheme.

His avian captors, thinking all his weapons lost, had neglected to remove from his girdle the small needle-tipped dagger. He gripped the hilt stealthily under his mantle and pretended a sudden illness, groaning and tossing and throwing himself convulsively against the bars. The nyctalops came nearer, curious to learn what ailed the king; and stooping, he leaned his owlsh head between the bars above Euvoran. And the king, feigning a more violent convulsion, drew his dagger from its sheath and struck quickly at the outstretched throat of the bird.

The thrust went home, piercing the deepest vein. The bird's squawking was choked by his

own blood; and he fell, flapping noisily, so, that Euvoran feared that the tower's occupants would be wakened by the sound. But it seemed that his fears were groundless, for nothing stirred in the chambers below; and soon the flappings ceased and the nyctalops lay still in a great heap of ruffled feathers.

The king shot back the bolts of the latticed bamboo door with little difficulty. Going to the head of the teakwood ladder, he peered down into the room beneath, and saw that the bird-king slept in the moonlight on his gold and ivory perch, with his terrible pickaxe [sic] beak under his wing. Euvoran feared to descend, lest the ruler should awake and see him. Also, it occurred to him that the tower's lower stories might well be guarded by such fowl as the nocturnal creature he had killed.

His despair returned, but being of a crafty bent, Euvoran conceived another scheme. With much labor, using the dagger, he skinned the slain nyctalops and cleaned the blood from its plumage as best he could. Then he wrapped himself in the skin with the head of the night-bird rearing above his own head, and eyeholes in its burly throat through which he could look out amid the feathers. The skin fitted him well enough because of his pigeon-breast and pot-belly; and his spindle shanks were hidden behind the bird's thick-feathered legs as he walked.

He descended the ladder, treading cautiously and making little noise, lest the ruler of the birds should awaken and detect his imposture. The ruler was all alone, and he slept without stirring while Euvoran reached the floor and crossed the chamber stealthily to another ladder, leading to the next room below.

In this room there were many huge birds asleep on perches, and the king could hardly breathe for terror as he passed among them. Some of the birds moved a little and chirped drowsily, as if aware of his presence; but none challenged him.

He went down to a third room, and was startled to find within it the standing figures of many men, some in the garb of sailors, and others clothed like merchants, and others nude and painted with bright ores like savages. A deathly stillness was upon them all. Remembering that which the bird ruler had told him, Euvoran divined that they were persons who had been captured like himself and had been slain by the birds and preserved through avian taxidermy. Trembling, he passed down to another room, which was full of stuffed cats and tigers and serpents and various other enemies of bird-kind.

The room below this was the tower's ground story, and its windows and portals were guarded by several gigantic night-fowl similar to the one whose skin Euvoran wore. They eyed him alertly with their fiery golden orbs and greeted him with the soft whoo-whooping of owls. Euvoran's knees knocked together behind the bird-shanks; but imitating the sound in reply, he passed unmolested among the guards.

Reaching an open portal, he saw the moonlit rock of the crag below him. Still mindful of the birds that watched him, he hopped down from the door-sill like a fowl and found his way precariously from ledge to ledge, till he reached the slope at whose bottom he had killed the little owl. Here the descent became easier, and he soon came to the woods around the harbor.

Before he could enter the woods, there was a shrill singing of arrows around him, and the king was wounded slightly by one of the arrows. He roared out in anger and dropped the mantling bird-skin. The arrows ceased, and Euvoran was greeted by a great shouting from his own men, who were returning to assail the tower by night. Learning this, he soon forgave the jeopardy in which they had placed him.

Boarding his flagship, he ordered his captains to set sail immediately. Knowing the baleful power of the bird-monarch, he was apprehensive of pursuit; and he thought it well to place a wide interval of sea between Ornava and his vessels before dawn, when his escape would be discovered. The galleys drew from the tranquil harbor, and rounding a southern promontory, they went due east below the moon.

Euvoran, sitting in his cabin, ate abundantly to make up for his fasting in the man-cage. And he drank a whole gallon of palm-wine and a jarful of the potent pale-gold arrack of Sotar.

Halfway between midnight and morning, when the isle of Ornava had fallen far behind, the steersmen saw a wall of ebon cloud that rushed swiftly upward across the westering moon. Higher it climbed, spreading and toppling, till the storm overtook Euvoran's fleet and drove it on through weltering, unstarred chaos. The ships were borne far apart in the gloom; and at daybreak the king's trireme was alone in a headlong tumult of waves and clouds. The mast was shattered, the oars were lost or broken; and the vessel was a toy for the tempest.

For three days and nights, without glimmer of sun or star through the boiling murk, the vessel was hurled onward as if caught in a cataract pouring relentlessly toward the world's verge. Early on the fourth day the clouds began to break a little; but the wind still blew like a hurricane from hell.

Then, looming darkly through spray and vapor, a strange land arose with beetling rocks and precipices. Though the broken oars had now been replaced, the helmsman and rowers were powerless to turn the doomed ship from its course. With a mighty crashing of its carven beak, and a terrible rending of timbers, it struck on a low, foam-hidden reef. Its lower decks were flooded quickly, and the vessel began to founder, with the poop tilting sharply and more sharply, and water frothing at the lee bulwarks.

Euvaran lashed himself with ropes to an empty wine-barrel and cast himself from the sloping deck. Those of his men who were not already drowned in the hold or swept overboard, leaped after him into that raging sea. Many clung to broken spars or casks or planks. But some were drawn under in the seething maelstroms, and others were beaten to death on the jagged rocks. And of all the ship's company, the king alone was cast ashore with life unquenched within him.

Half-drowned and senseless, Euvaran lay where the surf had spewed him on a shelving beach. Soon the gale forgot its violence and the billows came in with falling crests. The clouds went over in pearly fleeces; and the sun, climbing above the rocks, shone down upon Euvaran. He, still dazed from the sea's buffeting, heard dimly and as if in dream the shrilling of some unknown bird. Opening his eyes, he saw between himself and the sun, poising on spread wings, that varicolored glory of plumes and feathers which he knew as the gazolba. Crying again with a voice harsh and shrill as that of the peacock, the bird hung above him for a moment and then flew inland through a rift amid the crags.

Forgetful of all his hardships and the loss of his proud galleys, the king unbound himself in haste from the barrel; and rising giddily, he followed the bird. It seemed to him that the fulfillment of the oracle of Geol was now at hand. And hopefully he armed himself with a cudgel of driftwood and gathered heavy pebbles from the beach as he pursued the gazolba.

Beyond the cleft in the crags, he found a sequestered valley with quiet-flowing springs, and exotic trees, and fragrant shrubs in blossom. Here, from bough to bough before his astounded eyes, there darted great numbers fowl that wore the gaudy plumage of the gazolba. Among them, he could not distinguish the one he had followed, supposing it the avian superstructure of his lost crown. The multitude of these birds was beyond his comprehension: since he and all his people had thought the stuffed bird unique throughout the world. And it came to him that his fathers had been deceived by the sailors who had slain the bird in a remote isle, swearing later that it was the last of all its kind.

Wrath and confusion filled him. But Euvaran knew that a single bird from the flock would still stand as the emblem of his royalty in Ustaim and would justify his quest among the far orient isles. With a valiant hurling of sticks and stones, he tried to bring down one of the gazolbas. But always, as he chased them, the birds flew before him from tree to tree with a horrid shrieking and a flurry of splendid plumes. And at length, by his own good aim or a chance cast, the king brought down a gazolba.

As he went to retrieve the fallen bird, he saw a man in tattered, uncouth garments, armed with a rude bow, and carrying over his shoulder a brace of gazolbas tied together at the feet with wiry grass. The man wore for headgear the skin and feathers of the same fowl. He came toward Euvaran, shouting indistinctly through his tangled beard. The king, surprised and furious, cried loudly:

“Vile serf, how darest thou to kill the bird that is sacred to the kings of Ustaim? And knowest thou not that only the kings may wear the bird for headgear? I, who am King Euvoran, shall hold thee to accounting for these deeds.”

Eyeing Euvoran, the man laughed long and derisively as if he found much to amuse him in the king’s aspect. Indeed, Euvoran presented a spectacle far from kingly: for his garments were much bedraggled and were stiff and stained with drying seawater; and his turban had been snatched away by the waves, baring his baldness. When the man had done laughing, he said:

“Truly, this is the first and only jest that I have heard in nine years, and my laughter must be forgiven. Nine years ago I was shipwrecked on this isle. I am Naz Obbamar, a sea captain from the far southwestern land called Ullotroi, and the sole member of my ship’s company that survived and came safe to shore. In all those years I have held speech with no man, since the isle is remote from the maritime routes and has no people except the birds.

“As for your questions, they are readily answered. I kill these fowl to avert the pangs of hunger, since there is little else on the isle for sustenance apart from roots and berries. And I wear on my head the skin and feathers of the fowl because the sea stole my tarboosh when it flung me upon this strand. I know nothing of the strange laws that you mention; and moreover your kingship is a matter that concerns me little, since the isle is kingless. You and I are alone, and I am the stronger of the two and the better armed. Therefore be well advised, O King Euvoran. Since you have slain yourself a bird, I counsel you to pick up the bird and come with me. Truly, it may be that I can help you in the matter of spitting and broiling this fowl.”

The wrath of Euvoran sank within him like a flame that fails for want of oil. Clearly he saw the plight to which his voyage had brought him in the end; and bitterly he discerned the irony that was hidden in Geol’s oracle. He knew that the wreckage of his fleet was scattered among lost islands or blown into seas unvoyageable. And it came to him that never again should he see the marble houses of Aramoam, nor administer the dooms of law in the justice hall, nor wear the gazolba-crown amid the plaudits of his people. Being not wholly bereft of reason, he bowed to his destiny, saying:

“Naz Obbamar, there is sense in what you have said. Therefore lead on.”

Laden with the spoils of the chase, Euvoran and Naz Obbamar followed a trail into the isle’s interior. Here, in a rocky hill, Naz Obbamar had chosen a roomy cave for his abode. The captain made a fire of dry cedar boughs and showed the king how to pluck his fowl and broil it over the fire, turning it slowly on a spit of green camphor-wood.

Euvaran, who was famished, found the meat of the gazolba far from unpalatable, though somewhat lean and strongly flavored. After they had eaten, Naz Obbamar brought out from the cave a rough jar of the island clay containing wine he had made from certain berries. He and Euvaran drank from the jar by turns and told each other the tale of their adventures and forgot a while their desolate fate.

After that they shared the isle of gazolbas, hunting and eating the birds as their hunger decreed. Sometimes, for a great delicacy, they killed some other fowl that was more rarely met on the isle, though common enough, perhaps, in Ustaim or Ullotroi. And King Euvaran made himself a headdress from the skin and plumes of the gazolbas, even as Naz Obbamar had done.

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