

FIVE



After their silence the people ate. They began to find that tiredness lay on them like mist. There was a blankness of Ha and Mal in the overhang. The fire still burned and the food was good; but a sick weariness fell on them. One by one they curled up in the space between the fire and the rock and fell asleep. The old woman went to the recess and brought wood. She built up the fire until it roared like the water. She collected what was left of the food and placed it out of harm's reach in the recesses. Then she squatted by the mound of earth where Mal had been and looked out over the water.

The people did not dream very often, but while the light of the dawn brightened over them they were beset by a throng of phantoms from the other place. The old woman could see out of the corner of her eye how they were enmeshed, exalted and tormented. Nil was talking. Lok's left hand was scrabbling up a handful of dirt. Muttered words, inarticulate cries of pleasure and fear were coming from them all. The old woman did nothing but gazed steadily at a picture of her own. Birds began to cry and the sparrows dropped down and pecked about the terrace. Lok flung out a hand suddenly that struck her thigh.

When the water was already glittering she stood up

and brought wood from the recesses. The fire welcomed the wood with a noisy crackle. She stood close by it, looking down.

"Now, is like when the fire flew away and ate up all the trees."

Lok's hand was too near the fire. She bent down and moved it back to his face. He rolled right over and cried out.

Lok was running. The scent of the other was pursuing him and he could not get away. It was night and the scent had paws and a cat's teeth. He was on the island where he had never been. The fall roared by on either side. He was running along the bank, knowing that presently he would drop from exhaustion and the other would have him. He fell and there was an eternity of struggle. But the strings that bound him to the people were still there. Pulled by his desperate need they were coming, walking, running easily over the water, borne inevitably by necessity. The other was gone and the people were all about him. He could not see them clearly for the darkness but knew who they were. They came in, closer and closer, not as they would come into the oven-hang, recognizing home and being free of the whole space; they drove in until they were being joined to him, body to body. They shared a body as they shared a picture. Lok was safe.

Liku woke up. The little Oa had fallen from her shoulder and she took it up. She yawned, saw the old woman and said that she was hungry. The old woman went to a recess and brought her the last of the liver. The new one was playing with Nil's hair. He pulled it, swung on it and she was awake and whimpering again. Fa sat up,

Lok rolled back again and nearly went into the fire. He leapt away from it chattering. He saw the others and talked to them foolishly.

"I was asleep."

The people went down to the water, drank and eased themselves. When they came back there was the feeling of much to be said in the overhang and they left two places empty as though one day those who had sat there might come back again. Nil suckled the new one and combed out her curls with her fingers.

The old woman turned from the fire and spoke to them.

"Now there is Lok."

He looked at her blankly. Fa bent her head. The old woman came to him, took him firmly by the hand and led him to one side. Here was the Mal place. She made Lok sit down, his back against the rock, his hams in the smooth earthen dip that Mal had worn. The strangeness of this overcame Lok. He looked sideways at the water, then back at the people and laughed. There were eyes everywhere, and they waited for him. He was at the head of the procession not at the back of it, and every picture went right out of his head. The blood made his face hot and he pressed his hands over his eyes. He looked through his fingers at the women, at Liku, then down at the mound where the body of Mal was buried. He wished urgently to talk to Mal, to wait quietly before him to be told what to do. But no voice came from the mound and no picture. He grasped at the first picture that came into his head.

"I dreamed. The other was chasing me. Then we were together."

Nil lifted the new one on her breast.
"I dreamed. Ha lay with me and with Fa. Lok lay with Fa and with me."

She began to whimper. The old woman made a gesture that startled and silenced her.

"A man for pictures. A woman for Oa. Ha and Mal have gone. Now there is Lok."

Lok's voice came out small, like Liku's.

"To-day we shall hunt for food."

The old woman waited pitilessly. There was still food piled in the recess, though little enough was left. What people would hunt for food when they were not hungry and there was food left to eat?

Fa squatted forward. While she was speaking some of the confusion died away in Lok's head. He did not listen to Fa.

"I have a picture. The other is hunting for food and the people are hunting——"

She looked the old woman daringly in the eye.

"Then the people are hungry."

Nil rubbed her back against the rock.

"That is a bad picture."

The old woman shouted over them.

"Now there is Lok!"

Lok remembered. He took his hands from his face.

"I have seen the other. He is on the island. He jumps from rock to rock. He climbs in the trees. He is dark. He changes shape like a bear in a cave."

The people looked outward to the island. It was full of sunlight and a mist of green leaves. Lok called them back.

"And I followed his scent. He was there"—and he

pointed to the roof of the overhang so that they all looked up—"he stayed and watched us. He is like a cat and he is not like a cat. He is also like, like——"

The pictures went out of his head for a while. He scratched himself under the mouth. There were so many things to be said. He wished he could ask Mal what it was that joined a picture to a picture so that the last of many came out of the first.

"Perhaps Ha is not in the river. Perhaps he is on the island with the other. Ha was a mighty jumper."

The people looked along the terrace to the place where the detached rocks of the island swept in towards the bank. Nil pulled the new one from her breast and let him crawl on the earth. The water fell from her eyes.

"That is a good picture."

"I will speak with the other. How can he be always on the island? I will hunt for a new scent."

Fa was tapping her palm against her mouth.

"Perhaps he came out of the island. Like out of a woman. Or out of the fall."

"I do not see this picture."

Now Lok found how easy it was to speak words to others who would heed them. There need not even be a picture with the words.

"Fa will look for a scent and Nil and Liku and the new one——"

The old woman would not interrupt him. She seized a great bough instead and hurled it into the fire. Lok sprang to his feet with a cry, and then was silent. The old woman spoke for him.

"Lok will not want Liku to go. There is no man. Let Fa and Lok go. This is what Lok says,"

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He looked at her in bewilderment and her eyes told him nothing. He began to shake his head.

"Yes," he said, "Yes."

Fa and Lok ran together to the end of the terrace. "Do not tell the old woman that you have seen the ice women."

"When I came down the mountain on the trail of other she did not see me."

He remembered the old woman's face. "Who can tell what she sees or does not see?"

"Do not tell her."

He tried to explain.

"I have seen the other. He and I, we crawled over the mountain-side and we stalked the people."

Fa stopped and they looked at the gap between the island rock and the terrace. She pointed.

"Could even Ha jump that?"

Lok pondered the gap. The confined waters swirled and sent a tail of glistening streaks down the river. Eddies broke out of the green surface in humps. Lok began to mime his pictures.

"With the scent of other I am other. I creep like a cat. I am frightened and greedy. I am strong." He broke out of the mime and ran rapidly past Fa, then turned and faced her. "Now I am Ha and the other. I am strong."

"I do not see this picture."

"The other is on the island——"

He spread his arms as wide as he could. He flapped them like a bird. Fa grinned and then laughed. Lok laughed too, more and more delightedly to be approved. He ran round on the terrace, quacking like a duck, and

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Fa laughed at him. He was about to run flapping back to the overhang to share this joke with the people when he remembered. He skidded and stopped.

"Now there is Lok."

"Find the other, Lok, and speak to him."

This reminded him of the scent. He began to nose round on the rock. No rain had fallen and the scent was very faint. He remembered the mixture of scents on the cliff over the fall.

"Come."

They ran back along the terrace past the overhang. Liku shouted to them and held up the little Oa. Lok crept round the corner and felt the touch of Fa's body on his back.

"The log killed Mal."

He turned back to her, and twitched his ears in surprise.

"I mean the log that was not there. It killed Mal."

He opened his mouth, prepared to debate but she pushed at him.

"On."

They could not miss seeing the signs of the other immediately. His smoke was rising from the middle of the island. There were many trees on the island and some of them leaned out till their branches dipped and the people could not see the shore. There were thick bushes among the trees, growing in unvisited profusion so that the rock soil was covered thick and had as many leaves as it could hold. The smoke rose in a dense coil that spread and faded. There was no doubt about it. The other had a fire and he must use logs so thick and wet that the people themselves could never have lifted them.

Fa and Lok considered the smoke without finding any picture they could share. There was smoke on the island, there was another man on the island. There was nothing in life as a point of reference.

At last Fa turned away and Lok saw that she was shivering.

"Why?"

"I am afraid."

He thought about this.
"I shall go down to the forest. That is nearest to the smoke."

"I do not want to go."

"Return to the overhang. Now there is Lok."

Fa looked again at the island. Then suddenly she was writhing herself round the corner and was gone.

Lok flitted down the cliff through the pictures of the people until he came to the place where the forest began. Here the river was only to be seen occasionally for the bushes not only hung out over where the bank had been, but the water had risen so that many bushes stood with their feet in it. Where the ground was low were incursions of water over drowning grass. The trees stood on higher ground and Lok's feet made a pattern that expressed both his horror of water and his desire to see the new man or the new people. The nearer he came to the part of the shore opposite the smoke the more his excitement grew. Now he even dared water above his ankles, shuddering and prancing through it. When he found that he could not see the river or get close to it he ground his teeth and struck to the right and floundered. There was mire under the water and the bleached points of bulbs. Normally his feet would have seized these and handed

them up to him but now they were nothing but a brief firmness against his shuddering skin. There was a whole covert of bushes dimmed with buds between him and the river. He began to put his faith in handfuls of boughs which came together and sagged under his weight, so that he swayed terrifyingly forward off his feet. There was really not enough strength in the sappy branches to bear him unless he sprawled spread-eagled among buds and thorns. Then he saw that there was water under him, not a handful over brown mud but deeper water into which the stems of the bushes sank out of sight. He swayed down and the bushes began to escape from his grip; he glimpsed a shining expanse at eye-level so that he cried out and scrambled with a sort of anguished levitation back to the safe, unpleasant mire. There was no way here to the river for any people but the busy moorhens. He hurried away downstream, circling into the forest where the ground was firmer and came out in the open space by the dead tree. He went down to the little earthen cliff where the deep water came swirling in: but across the water the smoke still rose out of a mystery of trees and undergrowth. A picture came into his head of the other climbing the birch tree and peering through the gap. He hurried away along the trail where the scent of the people still hung faintly until he was by the marsh water, but the new log across it had gone. The tree on which he had swung Liku was still there on the other side of the water. He looked about him and settled on a beech tree that grew so huge he might think the clouds were really caught in its branches. He seized a bough and ran up it quickly. The bole divided and there was rainwater lying in the crutch. He went up the thicker

bough hand after foot until he could feel the grave movement of the tree itself beneath the wind and his weight. The buds were not yet out but in their green thousands they were an obscurity like tears in the eyes so that Lok felt impatient with them. He swung higher still until he was in the very crown, then began to bend and wrench away the branches between himself and the island. Now he looked down through a hole that altered shape every moment as the swarming buds bowed or swung sideways. The hole contained part of the island.

There were buds everywhere on the island too, drifts of them like clouds of bright green smoke. They drifted all along the shore and the larger trees beyond were like puffs rising vertically then rolling out. The background to all this greenness was the black of trunks and branches and there was no earth. But there was a bright eye where the fire blazed at the base of the real smoke and it twinkled and winked at him as the branches moved across it. Concentrating on the fire he could at last see the earth near it, very brown and firmer than the earth near this side of the river. It must be full of bulbs and fallen nuts and grubs and fungi. There was undoubtedly good food there for the other to eat.

The fire blinked sharply. Lok blinked back. The fire had blinked, not because of the boughs but because someone had moved in front of it, someone as dark as the branches.

Lok shook the top of the beech tree.

"Hóé man!"

The fire blinked twice. Suddenly Lok understood from these passings that there was more than one person. The heady excitement of the scent came to him again. He

shook the top of the tree as though he would break it off.

"Hoé new people!"

A great strength entered into Lok. He could have flown across the invisible water between them. He dared a desperate acrobatic in the thin boughs of the beech top, then shouted as loudly as he could.

"New people! New people!"

Suddenly he froze in the swaying branches. The new people had heard him. He could see by the blinking of the fire and the shaking of the thick bushes that they would come into sight. The fire twinkled again, but a track among the green smoke began to twist and sway down towards the river. He could hear branches cracking. He leaned out.

Then there was nothing more. The green smoke steadied or pulsed gently under the wind. The fire twinkled.

So still was Lok that he began to hear the noise of the fall, ponderous, unending. The grip which held his mind to the new people began to loosen. Other pictures came into his head.

"New people! Where is Ha?"

A spray of green down by the water's edge quivered. Lok looked closely. He followed the suggestions of twigs down to the main stem and screwed up the skin in the hollows of his eyes. There was a forearm or perhaps an upper arm across the bough and it was dark and hairy. The spray of green quivered again and the dark arm vanished. Lok blinked the water out of his eyes. A new picture of Ha on the island came to him, Ha with a bear, Ha in danger.

"Ha! Where are you?"

The bushes on the other bank shook and twisted. A trail of movement showed in them, moving quickly from the bank back among the trees. The fire blinked again. Then the flames vanished and a great cloud of white smoke shot up through the green, the base thinned, disappeared, the white cloud rose slowly, turning inside out as it went. Lok leaned foolishly sideways to look round the trees and bushes. The urgency gripped him. He swung himself down the branches till he could see the next tree down river. He leapt at a branch, was on it, and moving like a red squirrel from tree to tree. Then he ran up a trunk again, tore branches away and peered down. The roar of the fall was a little dulled now and he could see the columns of spray. They brooded over the upper end of the island so that the trees there were obscured. He let his eye run from them down the island to where the bushes had moved and the fire blinked. He could see, though not clearly, into an open space among the trees. The reek from the dead fire still hung over it, slowly dispersing. There were no people in sight but he could see where the bushes had been broken and a track of torn earth made between the shore and the open space.

At the inner end of this track, tree-trunks, huge, dead things with the decay of years about them, had gathered themselves together. He inspected the logs, his mouth hanging open and a free hand pressed flat on top of his head. Why should the people bring all this food—he could see the pale fungi clear across the river—and the useless wood with it? They were people without pictures in their heads. Then he saw that there was a dirty smudge in the earth where the fire had been and logs as huge had been used to build it. Without any warning fear flooded

into him, fear as complete and unreasoning as Mal's when he had seen the fire burning the forest in his dream. And because he was one of the people, tied to them with a thousand invisible strings, his fear was for the people. He began to quake. The lips writhed back from his teeth, he could not see clearly. He heard his voice crying out through a roaring noise in his ears.

"Ha! Where are you? Where are you?"

Someone thick-legged ran clumsily across the clearing and disappeared. The fire stayed dead and the bushes were combed by a breeze from down river and then were quite still.

Desperately:

"Where are you?"

Lok's ears spoke to Lok.
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So concerned was he with the island that he paid no attention to his ears for a time. He clung swaying gently in the tree-top while the fall grumbled at him and the space on the island remained empty. Then he heard. There were people coming, not on the other side of the water but on this side, far off. They were coming down from the overhang, their steps careless on the stones. He could hear their speech and it made him laugh. The sounds made a picture in his head of interlacing shapes, thin, and complex, voluble and silly, not like the long curve of a hawk's cry, but tangled like line weed on the beach after a storm, muddled as water. This laugh-sound advanced through the trees towards the river. The same sort of laugh-sound began to rise on the island, so that it flitted back and forth across the water. Lok half-fell, half-

scrambled down the tree and was on the trail. He ran along it through the ancient smell of the people. The laugh-sound was close by the river bank. Lok reached the place where the log had lain across water. He had to climb a tree, swing and drop down before he was on the trail again. Then among the laugh-sound on this side of the river Liku began to scream. She was not screaming in anger or in fear or in pain, but screaming with that mindless and dreadful panic she might have shown at the slow advance of a snake. Lok spurted, his hair bristling. Need to get at that screaming threw him off the trail and he floundered. The screaming tore him inside. It was not like the screaming of Fa when she was bearing the baby that died, or the mourning of Nil when Mal was burned; it was like the noise the horse makes when the cat sinks its curved teeth into the neck and hangs there, sucking blood. Lok was screaming himself without knowing it and fighting with thorns. And his senses told him through the screaming that Liku was doing what no man and no woman could do. She was moving away across the river. Lok was still fighting with bushes when the screaming stopped. Now he could hear the laugh-noise again and the new one mewing. He burst the bushes and was out in the open by the dead tree. The clearing round the trunk stank of other and Liku and fear. Across the water there was a great bowing and ducking and swishing of green sprays. He caught a glimpse of Liku's red head and the new one on a dark, hairy shoulder. He jumped up and down and shouted.

"Liku! Liku!"

The green drifts twitched together and the people on the island disappeared. Lok ran up and down along the

river-bank under the dead tree with its nest of ivy. He was so close to the water that he thrust chunks of earth out that went splash into the current.

"Liku! Liku!"

The bushes twitched again. Lok steadied by the tree and gazed. A head and a chest faced him, half-hidden. There were white bone things behind the leaves and hair. The man had white bone things above his eyes and under the mouth so that his face was longer than a face should be. The man turned sideways in the bushes and looked at Lok along his shoulder. A stick rose upright and there was a lump of bone in the middle. Lok peered at the stick and the lump of bone and the small eyes in the bone things over the face. Suddenly Lok understood that the man was holding the stick out to him but neither he nor Lok could reach across the river. He would have laughed if it were not for the echo of the screaming in his head. The stick began to grow shorter at both ends. Then it shot out to full length again.

The dead tree by Lok's ear acquired a voice.

"Clop!"

His ears twitched and he turned to the tree. By his face there had grown a twig: a twig that smelt of other, and of goose, and of the bitter berries that Lok's stomach told him he must not eat. This twig had a white bone at the end. There were hooks in the bone and sticky brown stuff hung in the crooks. His nose examined this stuff and did not like it. He smelled along the shaft of the twig. The leaves on the twig were red feathers and reminded him of goose. He was lost in a generalized astonishment and excitement. He shouted at the green drifts across the glittering water and heard Liku crying out in answer but

could not catch the words. They were cut off suddenly as though someone had clapped a hand over her mouth. He rushed to the edge of the water and came back. On either side of the open bank the bushes grew thickly in the flood; they waded out until at their farthest some of the leaves were opening under water; and these bushes leaned over.

The echo of Liku's voice in his head sent him trembling at this perilous way of bushes towards the island. He dashed at them where normally they would have been rooted on dry land and his feet splashed. He threw himself forward and grabbed at the branches with hands and feet. He shouted:

"I am coming!"

Half-lying, half-crawling, grinning all the time with fear he moved out over the river. He could see the wetness down there, mysterious and pierced everywhere by the dark and bending stems. There was no place that would support his whole weight. He had to spread it not only through all his limbs and body but be always in two places, moving as the boughs gave. The water under him darkened. There were ripples on the surface behind each bough, weed caught and fluttering lengthwise, random flashes of the sun below and above. He came to the last tall bushes that were half-drowned and hung over the bed of the river itself. For a moment he saw a stretch of water and the island. He glimpsed the pillars of spray by the fall, saw the rocks of the cliff. Then, because he no longer moved, the branches began to bend under him. They swayed outwards and down so that his head was lower than his feet. He sank, gibbering, and the water rose, bringing a Lok-face with it. There was a

tremble of light over the Lok-face but he could see the teeth. Below the teeth, a weed-tail was moving backwards and forwards, more than the length of a man each time. But everything else under the teeth and the ripple was remote and dark. A breeze blew along the river and the bushes swayed gently sideways. His hands and feet gripped painfully of themselves and every muscle of his body was knotted. He ceased to think of the old people or the new people. He experienced Lok, upside down over deep water with a twig to save him.

Lok had never been so near the middle of water before. There was a skin on it and under the skin specks of dark stuff rose towards the surface, turned over and over, floated in circles or sank away out of sight. There were stones down there that glimmered greenly and wavered in the water. Regularly the weed-tail eclipsed and revealed them. The breeze died away; the bushes bowed and lifted rhythmically as the weed-tail, so that the shining skin moved to and from his face. Pictures had gone from his head. Even fear was a dullness like the ache of hunger. Each hand and foot clung implacably to a sheaf of branches and the teeth grimed in the water.

The weed-tail was shortening. The green tip was with-drawing up river. There was a darkness that was con-suming the other end. The darkness became a thing of complex shape, of sluggish and dreamlike movement. Like the specks of dirt, it turned over but not aimlessly. It was touching near the root of the weed-tail, bending the tail, turning over, rolling up the tail towards him. The arms moved a little and the eyes shone as dully as the stones. They revolved with the body, gazing at the surface, at the width of deep water and the hidden bot-

tom with no trace of life or speculation. A skein of weed drew across the face and the eyes did not blink. The body turned with the same smooth and heavy motion as the river itself until its back was towards him rising along the weed-tail. The head turned towards him with dreamlike slowness, rose in the water, came towards his face.

Lok had always been awed by the old woman though she was his mother. She lived too near the great Oa in heart and head for a man to look upon her without dread. She knew so much, she had lived so long, she felt things they could only guess at, she was the woman. Though she wrapped them all in her understanding and compas-sion there was sometimes a remote stillness in what she did that left them humble and abashed. Therefore they loved her and dreaded her without fear, and they dropped their eyes before her. But now Lok saw her face to face and eye to eye, close. She was ignoring the injurieis to her body, her mouth was open, the tongue show-ing and the specks of dirt were circling slowly in and out as though it had been nothing but a hole in a stone. Her eyes swept across the bushes, across his face, looked through him without seeing him, rolled away and were gone.