



## Zé and the Amulet

by Chico Kidd

The man was lashed to a table. A cloth which had been draped over his face had slipped to one side, revealing one terrified eye and a mouth open on a scream. Under the light of a single lantern, three men in tall hats were watching a fourth, who was beginning to drill into the prisoner's chest using a hand bit.

*He uttered a low moan, which became a resounding shriek, as he felt the shining steel cut his flesh.*

Once upon a time, and not very long ago at that, he'd enjoyed the battered pulp magazines and ancient penny dreadfuls from O'Rourke's apparently inexhaustible library. But now he had to admit that most of them seemed pretty tame. Although admittedly they were, still, more interesting than volumes entitled *Manual of Seamanship* and the like.

*My father can see ghosts. My little sister can see ghosts. Even my mother can read minds. And what can I do? Nada.*

He wasn't being entirely fair on himself, he knew. But it was still difficult not to feel a bit inadequate. Under the circumstances.

Also, it wasn't strictly true. Not if the dreams he'd been having in recent weeks were anything to go by.

This is José da Silva, fourteen and three months, since he is Portuguese you say his name with a soft *J* like the French and not in the Spanish way as Felipe does when he wants to annoy his fellow 'prentice, although you will not need to since everyone shortens it to Zé, sitting on his bunk with his chin resting on his left knee and his right foot tucked behind his left heel, hands clasped round his left ankle, pretending to study but in reality reading a lurid story entitled *Signors of the Night* in a magazine older than he is.

Junior apprentice on a three-masted barque, as he quickly discovered when he joined *Isabella*, means schoolwork as well as climbing rigging, mending sails, peeling potatoes, cleaning the bilges and generally being everyone's dogsbody even when your father is the skipper of the ship and just a few yards away lies the port of Alexandria with all its attendant stinks and excitements.

A drop of sweat ran to the end of his nose and plopped onto the yellowed absorbent paper of the old magazine he was reading, but he hardly noticed it.

She was stalking him in his dreams.

She was nothing like anything in the sensational literature he'd read. She was nothing like the witches he knew. She was nothing, in fact, like anyone he'd ever met.

And that was pretty scary, really. Because apart from that, where on earth could she have come from?

Zé hugged his knee and rubbed his sweaty face against his hand, shifting uncomfortably on the bunk.

It wasn't that they were nightmares. Far from it. But he was still young enough to be embarrassed by them. He thought he'd probably die rather than mention the topic to anyone. Well, not *die*, obviously. But even the thought of talking to Fil', who was nearest his age — forget it.

Still, given his choice of reading matter, he couldn't help wondering about succubi. Not that the stories always got their facts right. And the pictures, well, the drawings of the hero of *Wagner the Were-wolf* were *much* too small. And not nearly ferocious enough. Poor Wagner looked like someone's pet dog. Admittedly that was a *really* old magazine.

So, he thought, what are you going to do about it? His father was off all the way to Luxor. On his own, despite all the hints Zé had dropped about how educational a trip to Luxor would be. Which had fallen on stony ground. Every single one of them.

All right, not that his father would be his first choice. The embarrassment factor again. And he didn't feel all that comfortable with the idea of consulting either the second or the third mate, even though they both knew something about the supernatural. Well, Senhor Harris was a werewolf and Senhor Yeoh could shift in and out of time — a talent Zé was very envious of — but they both persisted in treating him like a child. To be fair, Senhor Yeoh was probably entitled, since he was something like a hundred and seventy years old.

There was only one other person aboard who might help, and that was Benjamin. That wasn't his real name, but the big Negro always claimed that nobody would be able to pronounce his real name, so Benjamin was what everyone called him.

Zé wasn't completely sure, but his father had once let something slip that made Zé think the crewman might have some unconventional information. Whether he could be persuaded to share it was another matter. At least Benjamin never talked down to him.

He didn't like staying on board when *Isabella* was in port, especially in summer. It wasn't so much the stench of the docks, he was almost used to that by now and anyway the stinks of the land were just as pungent, although potentially more interesting, exploring any port was the best entertainment he could imagine. What he really hated was the combination of heat, humidity, having to study in a smelly stuffy cabin, and his duties while in port which were the dullest, dirtiest and most dogsbodyish. Unalleviated by any actual sailing.

Also the ship was stuck with Senhor Ashley in charge most of the time, since Zé's father usually claimed skipper's privilege and went ashore, though most of the time he didn't actually travel hundreds of miles from *Isabella*. Senhor Ashley was all right, really, it was just that he was such a stickler for order and doing things properly. His father described it as having a poker stuffed up his arse, but Ashley was ferociously well-organised and the ship under his régime was not only thoroughly shipshape but ran like clockwork.

Glad of a reason to go on deck, he closed both *Pearson's Magazine* and his homework and stowed them away in their respective homes. Patted his pocket to make sure his sketchpad was there. Since meeting his grandfather, he took it everywhere with him. Avô da Silva was a real artist, he'd praised his drawings, that was enough of a reason to do more as far as Zé was concerned. He slipped his pencil into another pocket, where it joined the normal detritus of coins, matches, fish-hooks and string that inhabited Zé's clothing.

Six bells went. His stomach growled, and he sighed. That was another disadvantage of being fourteen. He was always hungry. He toyed with idea of trying to scrounge something from João before going in search of Benjamin. Decided against it. The cook's temper was unpredictable, and Zé had no desire to have his knuckles rapped with a ladle for uncertain benefit.

His quarry took some hunting down, which was quite a feat on a vessel a hundred and fifty feet long. Zé found him in the galley, irritatingly enough, bound on the same errand as he'd been contemplating.

"Not your watch?" the big man asked casually.

"Dog," replied Zé, mouth full of bread and cheese. Benjamin nodded. There was quite a lot of him to fuel; normally he was more talkative than this. "Had to study."

"Ah," said Benjamin, sagely.

Zé chewed, wondering how to frame the question he wanted to ask. After a while, he blurted out, "Is it true you know about zombies and stuff?" Oh, *good* way to make him talk, he added in silent disgust at himself, seeing Benjamin's eyes narrowing.

The Negro eyed him gravely. "Don't want to go messing with that sort of thing."

"Oh, no, I'm not," said Zé hastily. "I was just curious." The crewman put down his mug and frowned.

"Ain't no such thing as just curious with them things," he warned. "What was it you was just curious about?"

"Dreams." Benjamin raised his eyebrows, to be exact, the places where he would've had eyebrows if there'd been any hair at all on his head or face, and picked up his mug again. Eyed Zé over the rim.

"Dreams," he repeated, thoughtfully. "You been having dreams, then?" Mortifyingly, Zé went brick-red. He looked down at his boots to try and hide the blush. Hunched his shoulders and stuffed his hands into his pockets in sullen embarrassment. Benjamin, surprisingly, took pity on him, something he was pretty sure no-one else on board would do. "People, they can be haunted in dreams, if that what you asking." Zé seized on this like a drowning man grabbing a spar.

"Yes," he squeaked, his voice coming out, he thought disgustedly, like his little sister's. He cleared his throat and growled, "Yes."

Benjamin eyed Zé speculatively, as if considering how much to tell him. "Don't know enough 'bout all that," he said at last, and Zé's face fell. "You could try finding a charm." He gestured towards the teeming port, the city whose souks and markets were calling so enticingly. Zé turned his head.

"What, you mean like an amulet?" His voice was doubtful. He didn't really trust amulets, not after last year. Benjamin shrugged.

"Maybe," he said. "You find anything you want over there."

Well, it wasn't much. But it was a start.

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This was good, anyway. This was wonderful. This beat sitting and studying 'til your head was so full you thought it would burst. I wonder if your brain ever gets full? he speculated. There was nothing better, as far as Zé was concerned, than having a couple of hours to spend examining a new town. The more unfamiliar, the better. Looking at foodstuffs he couldn't even identify, signs in script he couldn't read, even gagging on a completely unfamiliar stench, were his idea of heaven. He was an old hand, now, at dodging the grubby urchins who snatched at his clothes, shaking off the clutching hands of beggars, and avoiding the grabbing stares of merchants. Had timing down to a fine art, knew just how long to look at a display of bubble-pipes or hammered plates before the shopkeeper started badgering him. And could, if something caught his eye, haggle with the best of them. He could count in Arabic, even knew a handful of phrases, and if those failed him, well, he also had a couple of handfuls of fingers.

How he was supposed to find what he was looking for, though, that was another matter. He sauntered down the narrow maze of shop-lined streets, worming his way through the heaving crowds, eyeing the merchandise, carpets, trinkets, sacks of pulses, pieces of meat black with flies, voluminous clothes, fake tomb ornaments, mummified cats (ugh!), perfume bottles, jewellery, more things than anyone could ever want. The noise was incredible, it was like something solid, had a life of its own, the smell of frying food delicious, the mingling odours of drains and spices less so. Would he even know what kind of shop to try?

He had been walking aimlessly, deeper and deeper into the old town, for about half an hour when he realised he was being followed, indeed, that he'd known it for some time. His back prickled. Who could be following him? Or what?

Shut up, shut up, he told himself. It's only one of those *rapazinhos* wanting money. He looked round, half-cross-half-nervous, but of course saw nothing in the crowd. But the feeling grew stronger, grew insistent. Don't stand there like an idiot. Zé ducked round a tall man wearing what looked like a tablecloth on his head, and nearly bounced off his unexpectedly protruberant stomach. *Meu Deus*, he looks like he's eaten a horse, he thought in astonishment, and *merda*, nearly trod on that man's foot, calm down, Zé, get a grip.

Sweat ran down his face, and he batted it away nervously. Felt his breathing speed raggedly up. Tried to push down the rising panic, its unknown origin made it worse, what the hell was pursuing him?

Unable to stop himself, he broke into a run, zig-zagging in and out of the crowds, knocked into a pile of brass plates, they went clanging in all directions, the shopkeeper's shouts of fury followed him, he cannoned into a pair of women like walking black tents, spotted a side-street opening on his left, darted into it, more shops, risked a glance over his shoulder, it was nearer, he couldn't see it but he knew it.

Gasping for breath, he dived into the nearest shop, past heaps of merchandise he didn't even see, found himself in a musty-incensey-carpety-smelling interior, dim after the glaring day, came to a panting halt. Turned all the way round with a tearing indrawn breath, and looked suspiciously at the bright rectangle of the open door.

*Nada*. Still. But the sense of danger had gone. Had he lost his follower? Was it that simple? Surely not. His father—

"And what may I do for you, young effendi?" enquired a voice from behind him, in cultured English. Zé whirled round on something like a cross between a gasp and a scream, and saw an old man watching him curiously with bright eyes in a wrinkled face. Smoking a brown cigarette that smelt worse than his father's cheroots, and that was saying something.

"I—" But he didn't really trust himself to speak. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and waited for his heart to stop hammering in his chest.

The ancient shopkeeper came out from behind the counter and approached him, his smile showing eerily white, even teeth. He was wearing one of those nightshirt garments, Zé had forgotten what they were called, and a grey fez on his head. Zé swallowed. Looked round at the somewhat eclectic collection of goods on display. Took his left hand out of his pocket and scratched his eyebrow in com-

pletely unconscious imitation of his father. At home he'd have called it a junk shop. Here, it was transformed into something exciting and exotic.

"I am Harith ibn Jabala," the old man told him. "You came in search of something." He sniffed the air, though God only knew how he could smell anything over the acrid stink of his cigarette. "Or to escape from something, perhaps," he added, his eyes unexpectedly shrewd, and Zé's heart gave a small, wholly unpleasant lurch.

Still a little too nervous to dissemble, he nodded. "I didn't see—"

"But you know." The shopkeeper peered at him, and his eyes narrowed. "Iskander?" he asked in a surprised tone. Zé blinked.

"What?"

"Son of the one-eyed warrior," he said, nodding his head, sounding satisfied. "Yes, she would want you."

Thoroughly baffled now, and more than a little spooked, although he didn't think the old man could be any threat, he looked about three hundred years old, perhaps he was one of those walking mummies, shut up, Zé, don't be an idiot, he backed a step. Put out a hand to steady himself and encountered something soft and yielding. A squeak rose in his throat, and he sucked in a deep calming breath. At least that was the intention.

I will *not* lose it again, he told himself firmly, and turned to find his hand on the shoulder of a small boy with white sightless eyes.

Zé whooped like a banshee and jumped two feet in the air, coming down with a crash against a very large hookah-pipe, which clattered to the ground with a noise like the end of the world. He grabbed the counter to stop himself from following it, and turned to look at the boy. His knees were shaking.

The boy was an ebony statue. Polished wood. Hard and shiny. And the plucky young hero strikes again, he thought in disgust. Zé da Silva, Young Detective. One-person wave of destruction, more like. *Foda-se*. He bent down crossly and picked up the fallen pipe, replacing its components as best he could.

"Sorry," he said, rather inadequately, when he was done, but the aged shopkeeper's expression was unreadable. Certainly not anger or, worse, amusement at his clumsiness.

"Did it speak to you, effendi?"

"What?" Oh *mãe*, I even sound like a moron. He rolled his eyes in self-deprecation. The old man gestured.

"The statue, the black boy. Did it speak?" he insisted.

"No," said Zé, rubbing his hand down his trousers to try and wipe away the remembered feel of it. "But it felt — I thought it was real."

"Touch it again." Ugh. He shook his head.

"Do I have to?" Harith ibn Jabala smiled, not unkindly, and stubbed out his foul cigarette in a tin ashtray.

"Perhaps, if I explain it to you," he said, and lit another of his vile cigarettes. "What is your name, young effendi?"

Zé told him, scratching his eyebrow again. It felt sweaty. He touched his back hair. Also wet, though not too bad, since his father had frogmarched him to the barber before they left Lisbon. Stop wool-gathering, he told himself firmly. Something important going on here. He dragged his attention back to the present. The shopkeeper was looking at him enquiringly.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Go on."

"Are you a Christian?" The question startled Zé, he wasn't used to such bluntness, and he answered with more honesty than tact.

"I don't know, I suppose so." Of course he'd been brought up a Catholic, you could hardly avoid that, it wasn't as if you could say *no, I don't want to go to Mass*, but his father made no secret of a profound disillusionment with religion, or at least its trappings, that probably added up to agnosticism. Zé, who had actually given the matter some thought, agreed with him, and not particularly because of some dim sense of solidarity or even the usual adolescent rebelling against authority. He didn't see how stinky incense and following a lot of stupid rules meant you got a place in heaven, like booking a room in a hotel.

But the shopkeeper was nodding his ancient head. "I too." Zé blinked. "The Coptic Church is the oldest." I knew that, I'm not a complete ignoramus, it just sounds funny coming from a man wearing a fez and a nightshirt.

"Yes," he said lamely. The old man rubbed a saggy hand over his chin.

"You are aware of demons, though." It wasn't a question.

Oh yes. Only too well. Zé nodded, and licked his dry lips. "You could say that," he remarked, trying for nonchalance but only too aware that he hadn't made it.

"Of course," said the other gravely. "As am I. But what about gods?"

"Gods?" Zé repeated, blankly, thinking of the classical myths he'd read in school and the way some of the characters popped up in the *Lusiádas*. Which he'd also had to read. Well, bits of it. What an old windbag Camões was — and how he was drifting off-course again. He felt sweat trickle down his ribs, and his nose itched.

"Yes, gods. Not God. What do you suppose are the enemies of demons?"

Zé scratched his itching nose. "Angels?" he hazarded. The old man laughed rustily, like a creaking hinge.

"Have you ever seen the archangel Michael ride to the rescue with his flaming sword?" he asked. No, but I've seen my father with his knife, and... and Teresa skewered old Batista with a swordstick. He swallowed. Don't go there, Zé.

"No," he answered, hoarsely.

"What the ancients called gods, and worshipped," Harith ibn Jabala went on, puffing out a cloud of noisome smoke, "are creatures similar in nature to demons. Powerful beings, yes, but not divine. Thousands of demons, thousands of gods. We might call them godlings." *Deusinhos?* thought Zé, adding the diminutive. "Not benevolent, necessarily, but not inimical to mankind, as demons are. But not worthy of worship, whatever name they go under." He smiled at Zé's expression, flashing his bright teeth, and Zé decided they must be false. "Some answer to several names, being claimed as gods by different peoples."

"Like the Greeks and Romans?" said Zé, glad to be able to ask an intelligent question for a change. The old man nodded, like a teacher with a bright pupil.

"And more," he replied. "Ancient Egyptians, Phoenicians, Minoans, Babylonians. Many nations have risen and fallen since this city has stood."

The idea of such a weight of years made Zé's back tingle. He swallowed.

"I thought they were... well, symbolic," he ventured. The old man eyed him sternly.

"Do not underestimate the power of the symbol." The words hung in the air, seeming to take on more significance than a mere warning. A warning against what? Or an admonition to do something? Zé cleared his throat.

"What does it have to do with me?" he asked, nervously. "Or—" he eyed the ebony figure suspiciously "—with that?"

"Patience, young effendi," the elderly shopkeeper said with a smile. Oh, definitely false teeth, how could I ever think they were real? He tapped ash off the end of his cigarette. "The statue will speak, to the right person."

And what do you say to that? thought Zé wildly. "Am I — the right person?"

"We shall have to see." Zé met his stare steadily, although he could feel his heart pounding. He was beginning to get alarmed again. "You are being sought by a goddess."

"Sought?" he repeated, dry-mouthed. Trying not to think of his dreams.

"You know what I mean," said Harith ibn Jabala, narrowing his eyes slightly. Zé shifted uncomfortably, but didn't drop his gaze. The old man's mouth curled again. "Remember what I just told you. This is less to be feared than a demon. It does not seek to kill you. It is powerful, but not divine. Not omnipotent, not immortal. In that it can be slain."

Now he was going off into areas Zé didn't even want to contemplate. "What is it?" he whispered, almost afraid of the answer. No, make that definitely afraid of the answer. He was sure he wasn't going to like it, whatever it was.

"Isis," replied the shopkeeper, who was surely much more than just an elderly merchant. "Isis the magician, Astarte the warlike. Ishtar of Babylon. Inanna, Mylitta, Cybele. Aphrodite Androphonos. Venus. All the lovers. All the names."

Horrified, Zé gaped at the old man. Smoke wreathed his face. "All the same... person?" If *person* was the right word to use here. A nod. "What does she want?"

"Why, to possess you, of course."

Zé went cold all over.

"But she can't if I don't want her to, isn't that right?"

There was a pause. The old man looked at him with a teacher-disappointed-in-star-pupil look that still wasn't without compassion.

"How long do you think you can resist her?" he asked finally, his voice as dry as dust. Dry as Zé's mouth. Zé sagged.

"I don't know," he said.

"Touch the statue," Harith ibn Jabala told him, gesturing with the cigarette.

He didn't want to. It was a horrible thought. There was something about the idea of putting his hand on carved wood and having it quicken at his touch, feel like a human, that made his flesh crawl. But — well, his father wouldn't be hesitating like a silly little girl, would he? *Fia-te na Virgem e não corras*. No point in waiting for divine intervention. Zé put out his left hand and rested it on the thing's shoulder.

It didn't actually feel like flesh. It was yielding, yes, but not soft, and not very warm. Sweat trickled into Zé's eye, and he wiped it away, gaze fixed on the statue.

Which moved its head slowly round, turning to look at him with white marmoreal eyes. A sickening jolt went through him.

"What do I do?" he whispered, not daring to take his eyes off it.

"Ask it your question," came the old man's voice. It sounded as if it was coming from a very long way away.

But what's the question? He cleared his throat nervously, and addressed it. "How do I get rid of her? Isis?"

The carved lips parted, and they looked moist, wetter than Zé's. A voice sounded in his head. There was nothing human in the sound.

\*The symbol of another goddess can protect you.\*

Oh, great, he thought, disgustedly. And that helps me how?

"What goddess?" he asked. "How—"

There was a blinding flash of light. Zé clenched his eyes shut, and tried to cover them, but his left hand was stuck to the statue. When he opened them, he was standing on sand.

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*Goddamn if that boy ain't more trouble than Barnum and Bailey's entire circus with a bucket of imps thrown in for good measure. What's he thinking of, sloping off like that without a word to anyone?*

Edward Harris, second mate of the *Isabella*, peeled a shred of tobacco off his lower lip from the cigarette he'd just finished, and pushed his way through the press of people. This was rather easier for him in some ways that it had been for Zé, since Harris was six feet tall and built, as he himself put it, like a brick outhouse. Outhouse was the word he used if there were ladies present. In crowds, where Zé could worm his way along, Harris just made like Moses with the Red Sea. And they parted for him. Usually.

*Skipper'll skin me alive if anything happens to him. I'll tan the kid's hide myself when I get my hands on him. Don't he think I ain't get better things to do than track him round all the goddamned souks of Egypt? Aw Jesus, now what? Zé had suddenly broken into a run. Harris lumbered after him, swearing and sweating. Sprinting wasn't something a man had much chance to practice on board ship. Certainly not on one the size of *Isabella*. Although Zé, who rarely walked when he could run, seemed to manage quite well.*

*Shitfire, where'd he go?*

Harris rounded the corner of the alley he'd seen Zé disappear into, and came to a halt in annoyed frustration. *Just have to check all the shops, then, won't you, Ed my boy?*

He lit another cigarette, *goddamn things taste like camel dung*, and ducked through the first doorway.

*Person could get sick a rugs. And I seen enough hubble-bubble pipes to last me a lifetime, too. Not to mention spindly-looking brass pots. No, son, I don't want dirty pictures. Pardon me, ma'am, seen a kid, yea tall, sailor's jacket and cap? Boy am I gonna whale that Zé when I get a hold of him.* He came out of the fourth shop, scowling ferociously. Stuck his cigarette in his mouth. Took off his cap and ran a hand over his damp red hair. A passer-by looked up, startled, then made a peculiar hand gesture and hurried off. *What's that about?*

But there was no time to speculate. There came, unexpectedly and impossibly, a pulse of light and brilliant heat like a sudden desert wind from the door of the next shop. Harris swore virulently, dropped his cigarette, and charged in.

Felt himself falling.

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Zé stared round, too startled to move or speak. After a second he realised his mouth was open, so he closed it.

His hand was still resting on the ebony statue's strangely living shoulder. Still, apparently, stuck. But that was the only thing that hadn't changed.

He was standing in the centre of a walled area of yellow sand that reflected the sun so brightly it hurt his eyes. The space, about thirty feet square, was enclosed by high white walls that looked incredibly smooth. Above, the sky was a clear unbroken vivid blue, the sun almost directly overhead. In the wall facing him was a plain wooden door, and hanging on a hook above it, some ten or twelve feet from the ground, well out of his reach, a big black key.

"What's going on?" he demanded, annoyed at how querulous his voice sounded.

The statue spoke, out loud this time. Because I'm dreaming, thought Zé. That's got to be it. I'd better be dreaming.

"It is a test," it said, and its voice was, somehow, exactly like you'd expect wood to sound. "You may gain the protection of Hathor, if you can find your way out."

"Hathor?" Zé asked. The statue seemed to shrug.

"Hathor as Het-hert, sky goddess, Tanetu, Argos, Hera, Juno. Consort of Baal-Hammon. The name is not important. We consider her your best chance."

"We?"

But the statue stilled under his hand. Reverted to wood. Zé snatched his hand away, blinking sweat from his eyes.

Behind him, something growled.

Uh-oh. He whirled, not quite in panic, he was still numb from the shock of finding himself in this elsewhere. His heart stuttered. There was a wolf lying against the far wall, trying to scrunch itself into the meagre shade it cast. But it was too big to gain much relief. Huge. With a reddish tinge to its fur.

Senhor Harris? Zé started towards it, then stopped. It wasn't full moon. It wasn't even *night*. But, wait. This isn't real anyway, he reminded himself. Why shouldn't the ship's werewolf be here? Don't expect logic, even the weird logic of dreams. It's not even my dream. He gulped. The wolf looked at him out of hot yellow eyes, its tongue lolling out of its mouth. Panting. Zé suddenly realised how hot it was under that sun, a dry heat, desert. That, more than anything, brought home to him that he wasn't in Alexandria any more.

Poor wolf. Must be thirstier than I am, he thought, and resumed walking towards it. Now he could see it was tethered, the rope thick as a hawser, tied in an enormous knot.

It spoke to him. Perhaps only someone who knew Harris would've recognised the sound. Wolf-mouth wasn't made for human words. But Zé was pretty sure it was trying to say his name. It came out mushy, something like "Shoshay."

"Senhor Harris?" he said tentatively. The wolf nodded its big head, panting loudly. "I don't know what's happening." I don't even know if you're really here, he added silently. Or if I am.

"Col—rr," the wolf enunciated, with difficulty. Huffed out a breath. "*Hh—urrs.*" Hurts? Was it too tight? Zé squatted down and examined the collar. It was actually a chain, looped intricately in and out of the tethering rope. It was made out of silver.

"*Merda,*" he muttered. "Don't worry, I'll get it off you." Yes, but how? It wasn't as if it had a buckle or a fastening. The rope — he couldn't cut that, even if he'd remembered his penknife. It was hard as steel. He rocked back on his heels, surveying the surroundings again.

Everything was the same. Sand, four walls, door, key. Zé stared at the key crossly. He couldn't reach it, couldn't climb the smooth shiny wall.

But a thought occurred to him. If Senhor Harris was in human shape, he could stand on his shoulders and get at it easily.

He frowned, wanting to hit something. A test, the statue-boy had said. Oh, and where had *that* gone? This was *so* annoying. What right did they have to mess him around like this? Whoever *they* were.

At his feet, the wolf growled, and Zé allowed himself a rueful grin. Yes, get back to the important things, he thought. Turned his attention back to the Gordian knot. Wished it was that simple. But I can't cut it, he said irritably to himself. So stop thinking about it. He stared fixedly at the wolf. The silver must be binding him in wolf-form, somehow.

Frustrated, he stood up. Patted his pockets. What would his father have done? His father would have his long knife, and he'd have got Senhor Harris loose by now. All Zé had was a sketchbook, a pencil, and assorted other singularly useless items. Fine. If a vampire came he could stake it with the pencil.

Which wasn't very constructive, really. He sighed, and fiddled with the pencil. Harris-wolf watched him, panting loudly.

*Do not underestimate the power of the symbol,* the old man had said. And everything was supposed to be symbolic in dreams, wasn't it?

What if I drew the rope untied?

Before he could convince himself that it was a stupid idea, he whipped out the sketchbook and quickly visualised the thick rope coiled on the ground, the silver chain lying beside it. Roughed out lightly how it would look. Then he firmed up the lines, pencil flying across the paper, added detail, shading, shadows on the sand from the harsh sun overhead. He did all this without looking up, in case it didn't work.

The monthly wolf-change always felt like it broke all Harris's bones one after the other. That he was lying in the baking sun without the excruciating aftermath told him this couldn't be a real change. The fact that when he came back to being human-shaped he was still fully clothed was another pointer.

*Pretty glad I ain't buck naked in this sun,* he thought, *squinting in the bleached light. I'd be red as a lobster in five minutes. Huh, match the hair.*

"How the hell did you manage that?" he asked.

Zé, who was staring at him open-mouthed, simply passed him his sketchpad. Harris rubbed his neck, the memory of inimical silver leaving remembered pain even if it had all been illusory. He shook himself, still caught half in wolf — *hafta remember how many*

*legs I got now* — and staggered to his feet. Leant against the wall and dusted sand off his pants.

“What’s going on, Zé? Where was you scooting off to in such an all-fired hurry? And where the devil are we?”

“Something was following me,” Zé said. “Look, we can get out of here now.” He pointed to the key, and Harris got the idea. Strode across the sand, not that sand is ever easy to stride over very purposefully. Zé followed in a kind of undignified scamper that was a little more effective. “Stupid sand,” he muttered, and ran into the back of the mate, who had stopped without his noticing. Zé swallowed a curse.

“What’s that smell?”

“What sm—” Zé gagged on it, a horrible kind of mephitic stink that filled his mouth and nose like something solid. “Gah!” He would’ve spat if he hadn’t been so dry. He looked up at Harris, who was staring into the sky, shading his eyes with one hand. Followed the big man’s gaze and saw only the shapes of birds against the blue.

Harris glanced down at him, his face serious. “Don’t let ‘em bite you, or anything,” he said. “I’m fresh outa holy water.” This last was ironic. Being a werewolf, holy water was as painful as silver to him.

“But—” Zé began. He’d been about to say something unremittingly stupid like *they’re just birds*. Which was true, up to a point. Except that they were the birds of your worst dreams.

They weren’t very big, no more than turkey-sized, but they didn’t need to be. There weren’t very many of them. But there were more than enough for Zé. Entirely too many beaks and claws. Beaks full of jagged teeth and clawed feet bigger than Harris’s hands. They screamed as they stooped, harsh grating cries that made his hair stand on end. Somehow that wasn’t the worst of it.

Their heads were totally bald — not bald like a vulture, but bald like a skull. Yellow-white bone, tulwar-curving beaks, gnashing, clashing. He saw the talons on their feet, each longer than his finger. Took in all this with one shocked glance, and then the air was full of their rushing, beating wings, their ghastly stench, their screeching voices.

Zé covered his head with his arms and ran to where the silver chain still lay. Harris batted one of the birds out of the sky with his fist, Zé heard the crunch and hoped it was bird-skull and not Harris-hand, the scream that followed made him grin manically. Dodging another’s strike, Harris seized the bird he’d stunned by its legs and swung it up like a club, the beak slashed a great wound across the breast of one of its fellows, which fell out of the sky, spattering sizzling blood across the sand. The one he held aimed its beak at him dazedly, and he dashed it against the wall. The naked skull shattered, leaving a long streak of red and grey matter down the stones, and Harris swung his now dead avian club at another swooping bird, which managed to evade it and opened a long cut down his arm with a stroke of its talons.

Harris swore, and grabbed the bird out of the sky with his other hand, disembowelled it with the dead one’s beak, and threw it across the arena, blue steaming ropes of guts trailing after it. Above him, another of the bird-things folded its wings and stooped like a falcon.

“Look out!” yelled Zé, scooped up the silver chain, and barreled towards Harris, swinging it over his head. Harris, with wolf-reflexes, stepped to one side, the bird recovered in midair and dived at Zé, who smashed the chain across its skull-head as hard as he could. A cloud of acrid smoke burst upwards from the contact, and the bird’s eyes exploded. It fell at his feet screaming in anguish, and Zé started lashing at it with the chain in revulsion.

“Leave it,” Harris panted, ducking another bird. His arm was bleeding badly, blood dripping from his fingers onto the sand. Zé, wild-eyed, stared round, swung the chain up in pure reflex. The bird flapped its wings frantically, apparently trying to fly backwards to avoid the silver. Harris made a grab for it and missed. He was slowing down rapidly. The bird landed awkwardly ten feet away and screamed at them balefully.

But there were only two birds left now, unless they’d sent for reinforcements. The one still airborne was hovering warily, the one on the ground seemed equally reluctant to continue the fight. Zé started to walk towards it, swinging the chain nervously. Harris, eyeing the other one, followed him, walking backwards. His large presence was reassuring.

The bird hopped backwards, and then apparently decided that discretion was the better part of valour, launched itself into the air with a final defiant screech, and flew off, followed by the last of its fellows.

Harris’s red hair was almost black with sweat, and plastered to his head. Zé’s clothes were sticking to him, and moisture was pouring down both their faces.

“*Meu Deus*,” said Zé, inadequately, but he wasn’t going to risk anything stronger in front of a grownup, even if it was Senhor Harris. His heart was thundering in his chest.

“Now you know what it’s like being around your pa,” Harris remarked, breathlessly, improvising a bandage out of his torn shirt. Zé helped him tie up his arm, and Harris lit a shaky cigarette. “Let’s get outa here.”

Zé wasn’t going to argue with that.

His knees were trembling more than a little, but Harris boosted him up to get the key and he climbed steadily enough onto the mate’s shoulders. Stretched his hand up, steadying himself against the wall, and got his hand round the wards. Then let go with a startled curse. The metal was too hot to hold. Muttering, he fished a grubby handkerchief out of his pocket and used it to shield his fingers from the burning heat.

“You got it?” enquired Harris.

“Yes.”

“Good, then hop down and let’s get the hell outa this place. Wherever the hell it is.”

But Zé didn’t answer the implied question any more than he’d answered the direct one Harris had asked him earlier. He dropped to the ground and stuffed the key in the lock, thinking, it’d better be the right key after all this. Yes, it turned smoothly. He gave silent thanks. Pushed the door, and it swung inwards.

Opening on darkness.

“Oh, now what!” he exclaimed in annoyance. Harris gripped his arm.

“You mind telling me what’s going on?” he demanded, sternly. Or as stern as he ever got. For a man who turned into a wolf every full moon, he found anger quite difficult to maintain. “I ain’t setting foot through there lessn’n you give me a goddamned good reason.”

“Er, that the birds might come back with friends?” Zé suggested, hunching his shoulders and stuffing his hands in his pockets. His attempt to look sullen, though, if that was what he was aiming for, backfired thoroughly. Harris bit his lip to keep from smiling.

*Looks just like his ma when she's concentrating on something.* He didn't share that observation with Zé.

“It's some kind of test,” he muttered at last, unaccountably embarrassed, and repeated what he could remember of the old shopkeeper's words. And the statue's, mustn't forget the statue. Ugh. Don't think I'll ever forget the way it felt, he thought, taking his hand out of his pocket and wiping the palm down his thigh.

Harris rolled his eyes heavenwards. *Jesus, ain't it bad enough his pa attracting trouble?* Aloud, he said, “Goddesses? That don't sound too healthy.” *Sounds like real bad news, is what it sounds like.*

“Yes, well, don't think we've got any choice,” Zé pointed out, a bit crossly. He stepped through the doorway into the dimness, and shivered. The temperature plummeted about thirty degrees, out of the sun.

It was a small square chamber. Opposite the door he'd come through was another opening. Darkness seemed to flow out of it. The anteroom was dimly lit by sunlight coming through the doorway behind Zé, but it didn't penetrate to the far side. Looking round the room, he found a small niche next to the door. It held an oil lamp that sloshed encouragingly when he picked it up, and a ball of string.

With a sigh, Harris followed him through, half-expecting the door to slam shut and trap them. “Zé—”

“Look.” He brandished the lamp triumphantly. “We must be meant to go in. What d'you suppose the string's for?”

“Finding our way back, could be,” Harris suggested. “Dime to a dollar there ain't gonna be anything straightforward through there.”

Zé scratched his eyebrow, “Back here? Why would we want to come back here?” The mate shrugged.

“I dunno. What if we get ourselves lost out there? Coming back might look like a good idea then.”

“Hadn't thought of that,” Zé admitted. He put the lamp down and searched for the matchbox he knew was in one of his pockets. His thumb encountered a fish-hook he hadn't known was in his pocket, and he muttered darkly. Pulled his hand out bleeding and put his thumb in his mouth. The salt iron taste made him salivate.

When he found the matchbox, there were only five matches left in it.

“Save 'em,” said Harris, and took out his own. Zé took the box and lit the lamp, handed the matches back. “Okay. Let's get this show on the road, shall we?”

The lamp threw his shadow in front of him. it wavered like a black ghost, waxed and waned in the yellow light. Zé decided he wasn't fond of dark underground places. His palms were sweating despite the stuffy chill of being under stone. He had the silver chain still looped round his left hand and was paying out the string with his right. It seemed like an awfully big ball of string. Which was either a good thing or a very bad one.

Behind him, Harris held the lamp aloft, letting his wolf-senses range. They weren't as acute when he was shaped like a man, but they were still more than a human's. Something had raised his hackles almost as soon as they went through the dark doorway, but it was still very low-key. If there was something there apart from his own nervousness, it was keeping well back. His arm throbbed, but the pain had reduced to a bearable level.

They'd been walking steadily downwards for about ten minutes along a dead straight passage, and Zé was beginning to think that the Ariadne-string thing was a waste of time, when the corridor forked.

“Senhor Harris,” he whispered. An echo caught his voice and bounced it back about a hundred times. Oh, nice work, he thought, cringing. Let's just shout a bit louder so the demons can be quite sure where we are.

“Your call,” breathed Harris, directly into his ear, the warm air making him jump. “Your quest, remember.”

*Merda*, so it is. He'd almost forgotten, since Harris had appeared. Zé chewed his lower lip, which felt cracked, and finally pointed to the left fork.

He'd stopped to consider which way to go. All he could hear was the sound of his own breathing. Now, though, as he started to move again, he heard the stealthy scrape of something on stone, and froze.

A creep ran down his back. Ice water in his veins. He turned to Harris, mouthing *Did you hear that?* The big man nodded, and put a finger to his lips.

Yes, as if I'm going to start yelling, thought Zé crossly. Harris gave him a little push in the back, and they resumed their progress.

*Thought so. Huh. Couldn't not be something coming after us, could there. And now that goddamn string's gonna tell it which way to go. But shitfire, I ain't fixing to be lost in the dark without even one lifeline. Even if it means going back to face whatever with a bum arm.* But for now he hurried in Zé's wake.

Zé didn't have werewolf senses, but he had very good hearing, a healthy imagination, and a lot to draw on. Both fiction and experience. He tried to stop thinking about the sort of thing that might be following them along a subterranean passage. But that was a bit like trying not to think about an elephant when you were told not to. Somehow images of *Isabella* and the open sea and home just weren't compelling enough to hold his mind.

Which persisted in conjuring up images of something insectoid. He didn't know why. He kept thinking he heard the rustle of wing-cases, a certain cockroach rattle, scraping like crickets' legs. It's just imagination, he told himself firmly, but didn't entirely believe himself.

One thing he was certain of, though. Even lacking Harris's hearing.

It was getting closer.

And then the corridor forked again. He opted for the right-hand one this time, suppressing an urge to take to his heels. The passage began to slope upwards. Which had to be a good sign. Since they were, after all, underground. And up had to be better than down, in the circumstances. Didn't it?

The upward slope grew steeper, and went on climbing. And on. And on again, until his leg muscles began to protest. This irritated Zé out of all proportion. They couldn't even provide a flat corridor?

Behind — still a long way behind, but nearer than it had been — he heard that stealthy noise again. He swallowed nervously. Gripped the silver chain more tightly. Went on putting one foot in front of the other.

“Now would probably be a good time to run,” muttered Harris, and Zé didn't need any more urging. He took off like a racehorse.

Harris, after a brief check with wolf-sense, followed a little more slowly.

*Good idea to get a bit more distance between us and whatever it is.* He couldn't get any kind of handle on what it might be, except that it felt... old. And not in the sense of ancient and decrepit, either.

He rounded a corner, and found Zé standing motionless. At the edge of a pit.

*Well wouldn't ya just know it.* Harris's mouth was almost as dry as Zé's, but he spat on the floor all the same. Sometimes it was the only way to express your feelings properly.

Zé turned a face to him that combined rage and frustration in equal proportions, and threw a stone furiously into the abyss.

"It's not *fair!*" he snarled. Harris tried not to smile. Then he heard Zé's rock smack into something meaty-sounding down below. The roar of pain that came out of the depths wiped the smile off his face rather quickly. Zé said something in Portuguese that Harris was pretty sure he'd get his ears boxed for if his father heard it, but — *Worry 'bout that later.*

"Guess whatever's down there don't appreciate being whacked with rocks overmuch," he breathed.

"It wasn't a very big rock," protested Zé.

"You musta smacked it in the eye or something." Harris held up his hand to halt the conversation. "Now let's figure us a way to get across." He lifted the oil lamp, noticing it was burning a little smokily. No time to think about trimming wicks right now. In the light they could see the chamber was completely split in two by a twelve-foot chasm, depth unknown.

*Depth unimportant. Long as whatever lives down there don't come climbing out to find out who's been chucking stones at it. Then we hafta hope it's pretty goddamned deep.*

Scratching his eyebrow absently, Zé stared at the pit. Forced himself to think calmly. There's got to be a way, he decided. Just have to figure it out. He looked at Harris. Found no comfort in the way the lamp illuminated the planes and angles of his face. He looked quite unhuman. That's because he is, moron.

Can't jump across it, he thought. So there had to be another way. I'm supposed to find it. Not down. Not back. He looked up, possibly for inspiration, and almost laughed aloud. Dangling over the chasm, a fifteen-foot rope with a handy knot at the end. He touched Harris's arm, not the bad one, and pointed.

"Look!"

Curiously, Harris followed his finger, and he *did* laugh. "Mighta known," he growled, resignedly. "Now all we gotta do is figure out how to get it over here." Zé grinned, and held up the ball of string.

"That's what the string's for." He put his hand carefully into his pocket and found the fish-hook. Brought it out. "Can you throw that far?"

Harris shook his head, and handed Zé his penknife. "Not with this arm," he said. "You can do it."

"I suppose so." Zé cut the string and attached the fish-hook to the end.

"Sure you can."

"Oh sure." He measured out arm's lengths. "This enough, d'you think?"

"Give it a bit more. You wanna get a good swing. That hook don't weigh much."

"Mm." Zé nodded, his attention on the task. Harris smiled to himself. *Smart kid.* He looked up to see how the rope was attached, and his expression darkened.

"Shitfire," he muttered, under his breath. The rope was tied round a spar of rock jutting from the roof of the chamber. No point in speculating how it had gotten there. This whole situation was artificial, they were being manipulated, of *course* the rope would be frayed.

*Thing is, should I tell him?*

"Here goes," said Zé breathlessly, half to himself, and swung the line out over the chasm. The fish-hook glinted, catching the light — *we're gonna have to leave that lamp, goddamn it* — and flew through the air in a perfect arc to lodge firmly in the knot at the end of the rope. Zé gave it an experimental tug, and the rope came towards them.

"Dandy," exclaimed Harris. "Just dandy. Well done, Zé. Knew ya could do it."

It wasn't quite done. Sweat trickling down his nose, Zé reeled the line in as carefully as an angler landing a tricky fish, and Harris heard him exhale in relief as the knot he'd hooked came within reach. He moved to help him, grabbing at the rope convulsively, and held onto it tightly while Zé coiled the string.

"Oh *mãe.*" He looked up at Harris with a grin of nervous triumph, and wiped the sweat off his face.

"Good work," said Harris, trying not to sound stressed. He patted Zé's shoulder. "But I gotta tell you, we only get one shot at this. That rope ain't gonna last much longer, and you know I ain't no lightweight."

Zé raised an eyebrow, *yes, I'd noticed*, and Harris gave a bark of laughter.

"Then let's—"

Their pursuer burst round the corner then, and Zé only had the chance to see a pointed drooling face topped with rustling antennae but with horribly human eyes in its shiny chitinous head before Harris grabbed him in one arm with a grunt of pain, seized the rope with his other hand, and launched them both into the air and darkness over the chasm.

Up from the depths, as they swung over the dizzying midpoint, a vast crocodilian snout reared up, ten, twenty feet of it, and fell back before Zé could utter a sound.

And then the rope parted with a barely audible twang and they were careering through the air with no support whatsoever. He heard someone yell in fright, and realised it was himself. The wind of movement sang past his ears.

Barely a second later they smacked into the opposite wall of the chasm with a force that drove the breath out of Zé's lungs and deposited the pair of them on a narrow sloping ledge. Fighting for air, he scrabbled for a handhold, got some purchase. Saw to his horror that Harris was sliding away. He saw panic in the werewolf's eyes, and grabbed frantically for his coat.

It didn't work, he was too light, barely half Harris's weight. He began to slide.

"Let go!" Harris shouted.

"No!" panted Zé. "It's my fault you're here!" His flailing foot snagged on something, and he braced himself against it. That stopped the sliding at least. The smell of the werewolf's blood was making him feel sick. He hoped, distantly, that he hadn't got any

on him. Turning furry every month was definitely not part of his career plan. But there was no time to think about that now. He bunched Harris's coat more securely in his hands, but the big man's weight was too much, he was beginning to lose his grip. He clenched his fists as hard as he could, but the coat was still slipping, slowly but inexorably, through his fingers.

"Zé," he yelled, "you gotta—"

"No," Zé shouted again, obstinately. Then the rock his foot was braced against started to move. Harris gave a great heave that almost pulled Zé's arms out of their sockets, and got a hand over the rim of the ledge. Zé pulled frantically, relieved of a little of the weight. Everything hung in the balance for an agonising moment, and then Harris surged over the edge like a whale beaching itself and collapsed on the rocky shelf, breath coming in loud ragged gasps.

Leaning back against the cold stone wall in relief, Zé found he still had a death-grip on the mate's coat, and prised his fingers loose. His left hand was smarting where the scalding hot key had seared it. He tried to frame words but nothing came out. He hadn't been so frightened since the time something he hadn't been able to see had knocked him off the rigging, just over a year ago. The split second between losing his grip and Senhor Arkright breaking his fall hadn't seemed any longer than the eternity of trying to hold onto Harris. With the same possible end result. *I ain't afraid of falling*, as Harris had remarked to him, *it's the landing I don't fancy much*.

"Jesus Christ in a clipper ship," said Harris at last, hoarsely. Zé couldn't think of anything constructive to contribute to this. They sat motionless until they got their breath back. Dim light filtered down, obviously the oil lamp was still burning back up on the other side.

"D'you suppose that thing's still up there?" Zé asked, peering upwards, although insectoid creatures as big as apes had rather lost their terrors for the moment. He thought he'd almost rather have taken his chances with fighting it. They'd done rather well against those bony birds, after all. Harris shrugged his shoulders.

"Ain't been a peep outa whatever's down there, neither," he observed, with a nod towards the dark depths of the chasm.

They sat in silence for another moment. Then Zé got carefully to his feet, froze as he dislodged a handful of pebbles and scree, then, when nothing further happened, began to feel the stone wall behind them.

"There's a gap," he announced after a moment, sounding almost indignant. Harris turned his head to look. Sure enough, there was an opening. *Okay, it's pretty dim down here. But I coulda sworn that wasn't there when we landed here. It looked a tight fit for a Harris, but I ain't taking bets. We're meant to get outa here, now. And we better do it now. Something about gift horses and their mouths, huh?*

"Let's go, then," he said, pulling himself upright with a sigh and a wince as his arm shot pain through him.

The passage behind sloped upwards for a short distance. Dim light filtered down from some outside source. After about seventy feet it gave way to a flight of rough stone steps, the topmost few strongly lit by the sun.

Scowling at the neat manipulation, Zé peered up the stair. "Think it's safe?"

"Oh, yeah," replied Harris grouchy. "Reckon you've aced all their goddamned tests."

"What?"

"Hey, c'mon," said the werewolf. "Resourcefulness, bravery, selflessness — I can read this stuff as well as you can." He paused to light a cigarette. "Trouble is, I dunno what it's gonna mean for you."

Zé pulled a face. He didn't know either. Nothing good, he was sure. Oh well, he thought resignedly. Better get on with it, then. He put one foot on the bottom step and began to climb. Harris followed him.

As he emerged into the light, he had to squint his eyes shut. The sun beat strongly on his head. He put up a hand to shade his face. Opened his eyes again, to see a woman standing in front of him. His heart missed a beat. She was tall and tawny with the green eyes of a big cat, pupils a black slit up the pale emerald of the irises.

"Who are you?" he blurted out, too startled to be polite. Struggled for the name. It seemed like a long time ago. "Hathor?"

She smiled. The smile was... old and decidedly predatory. She was older than the rocks around her. "No, not Hathor," she said. "Her emissary, maybe."

"Where's Senhor Harris?" asked Zé, looking round.

"He has been restored," the woman replied, carelessly. Obviously she had no interest in Harris. Zé blew air out between his dry lips, hoping the werewolf was all right. Hoping the werewolf would forgive him.

"All right," he sighed. "Can you explain? Please?"

"You know." Her tone was austere. "You have passed the trial. Solved the Sphinx's riddles. Come through the rite of passage. As the wolf told you."

"I—" began Zé, uncomfortable.

"The willing sacrifice," said the woman — could she really be the Sphinx? — showing her powerful teeth, and his heart gave another leap of alarm.

"Sacrifice?" She laughed at his expression.

"Do not worry, José da Silva. No blood is required. Look at your hand." It was still smarting where the wards of the key had burnt it. But now he could see that they had branded a symbol onto his palm. A circle above a triangle, the two divided by a horizontal bar, and from each end of this, a small vertical line pointing upward. It looked more like a tattoo than a brand. Oh, that's wonderful, he thought. My father'll skin me alive if he thinks I've gone out and got a *tattoo*, of all things. He glared at her. "No-one but you can see it," she reassured him.

But it didn't reassure him at all, really.

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Usually the only time he had to endure anything like a hangover was when he woke up from a wolf-night. But Harris knew perfectly well, this time, that the wolf had only been an illusion. He emerged from the steps not into sunlight like Zé, but into the musty interior of a shop, and the headache blasted into his skull with the force of a small artillery shell. Its sudden onslaught made him stagger. He clutched at his temples in a vain attempt to make it go away, and clenched his eyelids shut, only vaguely aware that his arm had stopped hurting.

A voice at his elbow offered, "I have something for your headache, effendi, if you will permit," and he opened his eyes to see an elderly man in a neat djellaba and fez, holding out a steaming glass to him.

From the smell, it was mint tea, strong on the sugar. From something else his wolf-senses detected, there was another ingredient he couldn't identify. The taste-essence-impression was beguiling, it made him salivate. *So I'd guess the old codger ain't trying to poison me, then.* He took the glass, and a tentative sip.

"What is it?" he asked, enveloped in fragrant vapour that marvellously dispelled the pounding in his head.

"A herb," said the old man, unhelpfully. "In this land we have had creatures like yourself for a very long time." He looked shrewdly at Harris. "My apologies, effendi. It was not the intent to involve you in the boy's quest. I will give you some of the mixture to take away, as recompense."

Harris glared at him. "Would he have gotten through it on his own?"

The shopkeeper smiled. *Grandma, why are your teeth so white?* "The test would have been different without your presence. But yes, I believe he is resourceful enough to have triumphed, whatever form the trial took."

*Had about enough of this, magic tea or no magic tea.* "So where is he?"

"Have patience," the other advised. *Sorry, not feeling very patient just now, pops.* He was, in fact, feeling more than normally wolf-like, with a strong desire to bite something. He finished the tea instead — *there, see how civilised I am* — and put the glass down on the counter.

Turned to see a rather bemused-looking Zé standing behind him.

"Senhor Harris! Are you all right?"

"Am I glad to see you," he growled, favouring Zé with a threatening, relieved glare. Zé winced. He'd seen grownups give him that look all his life. Made an attempt to deflect imminent Harrisian retribution.

"Your arm's better."

"Yeah," said Harris, evidently not at all deflected. Zé stole a look at his palm. He could see the brand, plain as anything. Harris followed his gaze. "Your hand all right?"

"A bit sore," Zé told him. "Burned it on that key." The mate breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ah. Thought you might've gotten some blood on it," he muttered.

Zé showed him his palm. "See?"

"Looks okay to me."

Over Harris's shoulder, the shopkeeper's eyes met his, and he swallowed. The old man smiled at him, the smile of someone sharing a secret. He held out his hand to Zé.

"Something to guard against nightmares, should you still need it," he said. "Though you may not. I do not know what Hathor may send you." Zé took the red stone. It felt warm on his palm, as if it had been in the sun, and almost, somehow, alive. But not in an unpleasant way. Not like the statue. And quiescent.

"What is it?" he asked, enjoying the pleasant sensation.

"Just an amulet to make nights calmer, bring riches, who knows?" said the old man. "Thirty piastres." And he winked, so that Zé would know the test wasn't — quite — done yet. That he had to find a third thing from his pocket.

He rattled the coins he had. He was pretty sure he didn't have any Egyptian currency, but he had just about everything else. That wasn't the point, anyway.

"Sixpence in English," he countered.

Harris looked at them haggling. His eyebrows travelled up until they almost met his hairline, not an easy thing, for despite some of the illustrations in Dr O'Rourke's magazines, which we know to be inaccurate, a werewolf's human hair doesn't grow down his forehead to meet his brows.

He lit a cigarette, and began to laugh.