



Volume I

A Novel By

Milton J. Davis

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First Edition

A DIFFERENT SAFARI

By Charles R. Saunders

Once there was a world in which sea lanes and trade winds connected scores of exotic kingdoms on opposite shores of a great ocean. Nations of black, brown, yellow, and white people interacted in rivalry and harmony, war and peace, trade and treachery. This world was not conjured out of a storyteller's imagination. It was real – the world of the African and Asian lands washed by the Indian Ocean. This world reached its peak during the 14th and 15th centuries, only to experience a downfall that lasted half a millennium.

During the best of this world's times, a vast and intricate commercial network stretched from the interior of Africa to the farthest reaches of China and India. That net-work ultimately unraveled with the coming of the Portuguese and other European nations bent on conquest and colonization. That was the downfall of a trade that was likely the richest in the world – a fact glossed over or ignored in subsequent history books.

That world lives again in Milton Davis's *Changa's Safari*. The title character, Changa Diop, is a merchant who drives a hard bargain, and can back it up with a sword-blade when necessary. Of West African ancestry, Changa fights his way out of slavery in the glittering cities of Africa's East Coast, and becomes a force to be reckoned with on two continents.

With his companion Panya, an enigmatic Yoruba sorceress, Changa goes to places whose names echo in the halls of history:

Mombasa, Calicut, Zimbabwe, the Middle Kingdom of China, Sofala and Indonesia. Larger than life but hardly super-human, Changa contends with mercantile rivals and political intrigue – not to mention supernatural perils – malevolent sorcery and mythical beings that come to terrifying life.

The word “safari” means “journey” in Swahili, the lingua franca of the East Coast. These days, that word is associated with khaki-clad white men and women chop-ping their way through the jungle, accompanied by black porters bearing bundles of supplies on their heads. Changa’s safari is a journey of a different kind: an epic passage that makes the Odyssey look like a walk in the park.

With this novel, Milton restores a world of magic and mystery that is nonetheless the real world of our past – a past that centuries of colonialism obscured, but could not destroy.

Changa’s ship is about to depart. Get on board, and enjoy the ride.

To Mom and Pop
Thank you for everything.

Kitabu Chakwanzaa

(Book One)

The Jade Obelisk

N



Mogadishu*

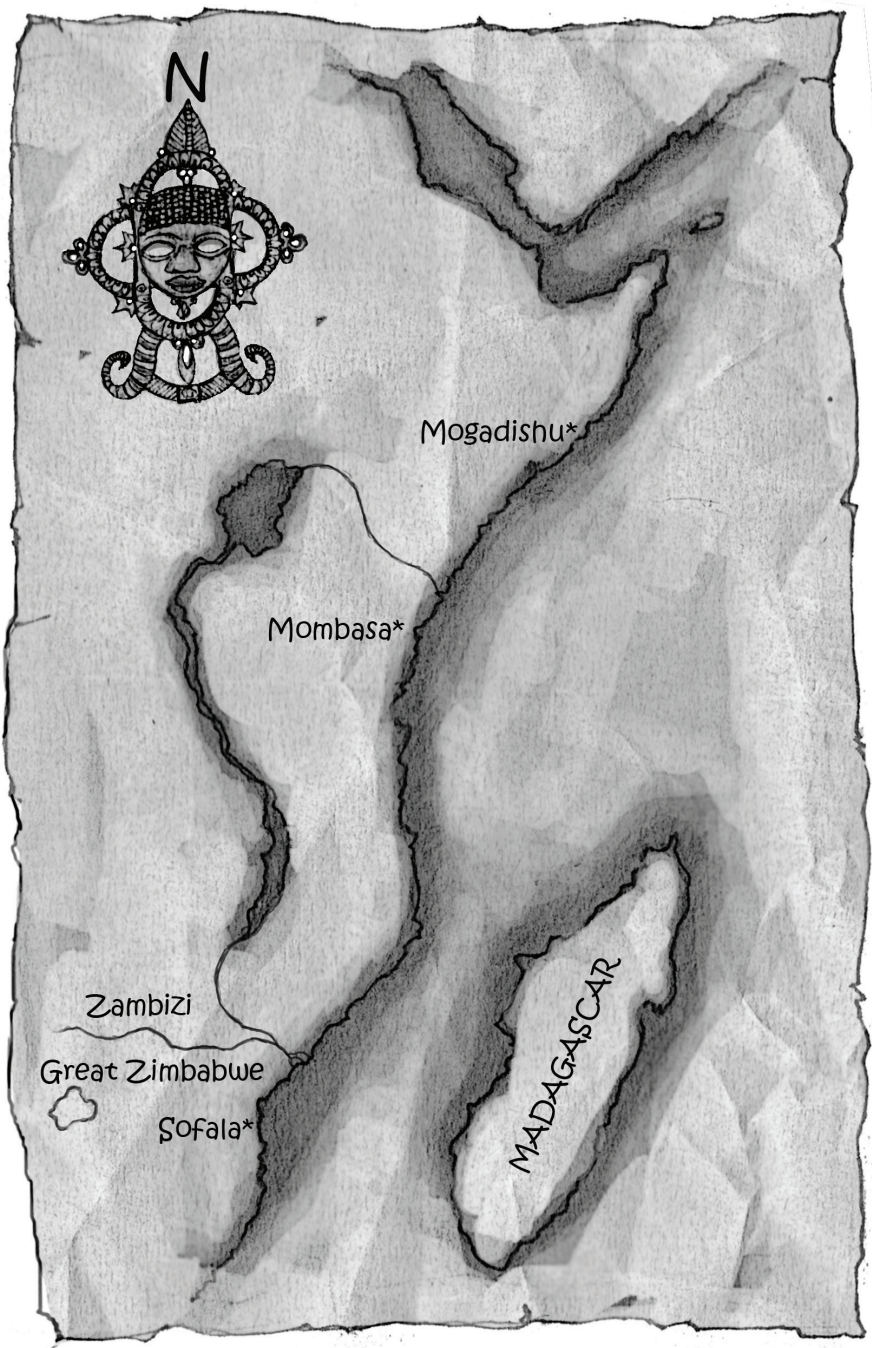
Mombasa*

Zambizi

Great Zimbabwe

Sofala*

MADAGASCAR



PREFACE

This was not the way for a prince to die. Amir Zakee ibn Basheer teetered at the edge of the cliff, his bloody fingers clinging to the hilt of a rusted scimitar as he clutched the precious bundle underneath his arm. His muscles had given up long ago; only hate and anger kept him on his bare feet. His black hair was matted to his forehead by sweat and blood, dungeon filth smeared across his young face and ragged clothes. Behind him the wind hissed through the leaves of the forest canopy carrying the urgent voices of his pursuers to his ears. Below him colorful birds darted through the branches, oblivious to his plight. Three days of flight and pursuit had finally ended. There was no way out.

His hunters emerged warily from the foliage, their cowhide shields protecting their leather clad bodies, their assegais leveled. A grim smile came to the young prince's face. They were being careful this time, the deaths of their comrades fresh on their minds. He summoned the last dregs of his strength and attacked, knocking the closest warrior's shield aside with the scimitar then dodging the point of the warrior's assegai. He stabbed the man's throat, turned and ran before the others could close the gap. The edge of the cliff rushed closer and closer with each step, but Zakee did not hesitate. He would not be a sacrifice. He closed his eyes, whispered a prayer, and jumped.

Chapter 1

The Unexpected Guest

Changa Diop stood at the bow of the *Sendibada*, a broad smile on his rugged brown face. He took a deep breath, raising his massive chest and shoulders in exaggerated ceremony, then let the air out like the monsoon winds pushing him south. For the first time as far back as he could remember, he was at peace. Mombasa and its mix of memories faded with each day sailed. Ahead lay Sofala and the promise of a new beginning. He glanced behind him for a check on the rest of his fleet. Eight dhows sailed in his wake, each of them laden with a wealth of goods. Changa intended to buy his way into the Sofala merchant guild just as his mentor Belay would have done. A sad shroud descended over him as he thought of the old merchant. He owed his life to Belay, this kind man that saved him from the fighting pits of Mogadishu and made him a free man. He closed his eyes and banished the bad thoughts to the winds. Sofala was a new beginning; the past would stay buried in Mombasa.

The jangling of bracelets brought a smile to Changa's face. He opened his eyes to see Panya beside him. She stood a head shorter with long beaded braids framing a face whose beauty displayed her royal Yoruba blood. Like Changa, Panya's origins lay far west of the Swahili Coast. Fate and circumstances brought her to Mombasa; her special skills brought her to Changa's attention. Their high status in a Swahili society that excluded outsiders was a testimony to their special abilities. In Mombasa,

Panya normally wore traditional Muslim garb, but on the sea she dressed practically. The cotton pants and loose shirt she wore looked much more alluring on her than on the men.

“Are you sure this is the right decision?” she asked.

“Of course not,” Changa replied in his deep rumbling voice, “which makes it more exciting.”

Panya folded her arms across her chest. “Mogadishu is a better choice. It’s closer to Hormuz and the trade is well established.”

Changa looked at Panya, his eyebrows raised. “So now you’re a sorceress and a merchant?”

“Some things are obvious to anyone with a sharp mind.”

Changa shrugged. “That’s true, but the winds blow south so south we go. If we waited until the northern monsoons Mombasa would be in civil war. I have no desire to be involved in a war.”

“I’ve seen enough of it myself,” Panya agreed.

“Besides, Sofala is prospering. My friends say the iron trade with Benematapa is strong. We have enough goods to buy dock space and a trade house. The rest will come.”

They were interrupted by a tall, lean man covered from head to toe in blue robes of concealment, his eyes the only visible part of his face. He bowed to Panya then focused intensely on Changa, pointing to the shore.

“You’re right, Tuareg. Send a party to shore for fresh water and food. We’ll take the Kazuri into the harbor. Will you lead the men ashore?”

The Tuareg nodded.

“Good.”

Panya followed the robed man with suspicious eyes as he walked away.

“How do you know what he wants?”

Changa shrugged. "We've been together a long time."

"I don't see how you trust a man that never speaks."

"I saved him from the fighting pits and gave him his freedom, just like Belay did for me. Instead of going back to his homeland he chose to follow me. Over the years he has done much to earn my trust. In time you will learn to trust him."

The fleet sailed another hour before reaching their destination, an obscure harbor hidden by a hook of land. Changa used it many times as a destination for replenishing water barrels and food stock. The thought of hunting excited him, and he left Panya to find the Tuareg.

He found his silent friend overseeing the boat loading.

"I'm coming with you," he said.

The two went to the bow and climbed down to the boats waiting to take them to the *Kazuri*, Changa's favorite dhow. It was small, fast and armed with the best cannons he could afford. The *Kazuri* was the perfect dhow for missions such as gathering fresh water, running blockades or chasing pirates. The crew consisted of Changa's best bahari, men hand picked for their fighting skills, seamanship, and bravery.

Changa's fleet anchored as the *Kazuri* set sail for the harbor. A good wind carried them quickly into the deep, calm waters. As they anchored, Changa appeared on the deck, sword at his waist, a crossbow in his arms, and his leather throwing knife bag on his shoulder. The Tuareg walked beside him, his takouba hanging from his shoulder, a hunting spear in his hand. They boarded the smaller boats with the others and rowed to the shore. They split into groups; one group would hunt while the other group gathered whatever edible plants were available. Changa's group went inland with gourds to gather water at a nearby freshwater stream they knew well. The stream was also a watering hole for the

abundant bush deer and boars, which they hoped to bag to add to their stores.

Changa led the way, hacking through the thicket with his machete. The plan was to gather water first, of which the dhows were in the most need, then return to hunt for fresh meat. As they descended the slope leading to the stream, Changa could hear the grunts and growls of nearby *mambas*. The man-eating lizards slid silently into the waters as the men approached.

"Keep an eye out," he said. "We are here to gather food, not become it."

A grim laugh rose among the hunters as they reached the banks of the stream. The men filled their water urns as Changa and the Tuareg worked their way further down the bank until they found a shallow spot.

"Let's cross here," Changa said. "Maybe we'll find bull or boar. Either would be a feast."

No sooner had the words left his mouth when the sound of thrashing branches rushed towards them. They crouched, the Tuareg raising his spear while Changa rushed to load his crossbow. A man burst from the woods clutching a bundle of cloth to his chest with his left arm, his right hand holding a scimitar. He bled from cuts on his head and legs as he ran towards them with eyes full of desperation.

"Help me!" he said in Arabic. "They are after me!"

Changa raised his crossbow, aiming at the man. The Tuareg knocked it down, pointing his spear to the woods. More men appeared, tattooed, bare-chested warriors brandishing short spears and tall broad-leaf shields.

"This is not our fight!" Changa said. The Tuareg looked at him then turned to the attackers. He threw his spear, striking the closest man square in the chest with a force that knocked him

back into his brethren. He drew his takouba and charged.

“Damn it!” Changa exclaimed.

He raised his crossbow and sent a bolt into another man. Two more went down to his fire before he threw the weapon aside, running to join the Tuareg. He twisted to his right, dodging a spear thrust aimed for his chest. Grabbing his attacker’s shield, he twisted again, ripping the shield away and driving his sword into the man’s gut. Changa yanked his sword from the man, kicking him into the warrior behind him. Another assegai flicked at his face; Changa knocked it away with his wrist knife then lowered his shoulder, absorbing the warrior’s shield blow. He reached low, gripping the man between the legs and lifted him over his head. With a grunt he slammed the man on his head. A spear tip pricked his neck; Changa grabbed the spear shaft with his right hand, snatching the weapon from its wielder. He turned it about and rammed it through the shield and the warrior. Stepping back as the warrior crumpled to the ground, Changa’s eyes darted about for more attackers. There were none.

The companions stood over their grim effort for a moment, making sure they were thorough in their task. Changa glared at the Tuareg as they approached the man who began this confrontation.

“You have no idea what you’ve gotten us into,” he said. The Tuareg looked back, his gaze steady and unremorseful.

They halted before the man sprawled on the ground. He struggled to his feet, a grateful smile creasing his dingy face. He was younger than Changa first thought, his smooth face clear of the lines of wisdom. He was Arabic, possibly Yemeni. Despite his condition he seemed in good shape.

“Praise Allah for you both!” he exclaimed. I am Amir Zakee ibn Basheer, son of Sultan Saheed ibn Mamud Basheer.

Allah truly blesses his faithful, for he sent you to my aid.”

“You’re not much of an amir to look at,” Changa replied.

Zakee looked at himself. “I have been held prisoner for weeks, I think.”

“And I am to assume that bundle you hold is of some value.”

The prince clutched the package. “If you seek ransom I’m sure my father would make my return worth your while.”

Changa’s banter with the prince was interrupted by a jolt on his shoulder. The Tuareg jabbed his finger to the stream. More warriors spilled out to the woods, assegais raised and swords drawn. Changa and the Tuareg pushed Zakee ahead of them and ran. There were too many to fight; if they could make it to the shore they stood a chance. Branches and vines flailed them as they ran down the narrow trail to the shore. Breaking out to the beach, they came upon the others loading the boats for the trip back to the *Kazuri*.

“Arm yourselves!” Changa yelled. “Yusufu, sound the drums!”

The bahari dropped the provisions and scurried to their weapons. Yusufu’s hands blurred across the drum skins; his rapid rhythms were answered by the *Kazuri’s* drummer. The dhow raised its sails and pivoted, exposing its broadside to the beach, the gunners working furiously to load and aim the cannons.

“Tuareg, get the supplies to the *Kazuri*,” Changa shouted. “Bowmen, form a line and wait for my signal.”

Changa raised his sword high enough for the gunners on the dhow to see. He waited until all the attackers were out in the open then snapped his arm down. The bow-men fired, their bolts felling the first line of warriors as the *Kazuri’s* cannons barked in the distance. Changa and his men fired another volley of bolts then

switched to their swords as cannon shells whistled overhead and exploded, throwing men and sand into the sky. The Mombasans fell upon the remaining enemy like lions. The unknown warriors were skilled, but against Changa's best they were no match.

As the last attacker fell, Changa and his crew hurried to the remaining boats. If this attack was like the earlier assault at the river, there were more warriors on the way. No sooner had the thought emerged in his mind when another wave of warriors appeared. The *Kazuri* fired another volley, ripping apart more sand and men. Changa grabbed Zakee by the arm and dragged him to the nearest boat.

"I hope you're worth the trouble!" he said as he shoved him into the boat with the Tuareg.

The bahari added their crossbow fire to the *Kazuri's* barrage while the others loaded the canoes and rowed away. One empty boat remained; at Changa's signal the remaining sailors sprinted for it. Changa scanned the beach as his men filled the boat, right hand holding his Damascus sword while the other held his deadly throwing knife.

Despite the barrage, the determined warriors broke through. Changa sent the closest one spinning to the ground, a throwing knife buried deep in his forehead. He ducked a spear thrust to his head, slicing the next man across the abdomen. Standing, he blocked a sword with his wrist knife and kicked another warrior back into the crowd of attackers.

"Changa, come!" his men shouted. Changa turned and high-stepped into the waves, the bowmen covering him the best they could from the rocking boat. Spears fell about him as he swam, nipping at his legs. He reached the boat and was lifted over the side. The rowers set pace immediately, climbing the surging waves to open water. The unknown warriors continued to pursue

them, diving into the water and swimming furiously until there was no hope of catching the boat. The bahari cheered their escape as they pulled alongside the *Kazuri*, hoisting up the wounded before climbing into the safety of the armed dhow.

“Let’s get back to the fleet,” Changa ordered. The anchor was lifted and the dhow headed for open water. Zakee crouched on the deck drinking a cup of water, the bundle clutched under his arm. The Tuareg sat beside him, watching the young man with sym-pathetic eyes. Changa approached his unexpected guest, folding his arms across his chest as he looked down skeptically.

“I think it’s time you showed us why our friends on the beach fought so hard to capture you.”

Zakee put down his cup. “Yes, yes. You are correct.”

He placed the bundle gently on the deck and pulled back the cloth, revealing a jade obelisk covered with symbols Changa did not recognize. The object emitted a mysterious glow that casted a faint green light on the prince’s pale face.

Changa rubbed his chin. “Interesting, but it doesn’t seem worth the trouble.”

“That’s what I thought,” Zakee replied, “until I saw the sorceress use it with the others.”

“Other obelisks?”

“No. I saw an elephant tusk, a blue diamond and a jeweled goblet. Together with the jade obelisk, the priestess was able to summon terrible evil.”

“We’ll show this to Panya,” Changa decided. “Maybe she will know the story behind this thing.”

The *Kazuri* met the *Sendibada* at the mouth of the harbor in full sail. The crew apparently had heard the cannons and broke for the harbor for assistance. The Tuareg, Changa, and Zakee transferred to the larger dhow, and were greeted on the deck by

Panya. Basheer looked at Panya and froze, his face losing color.

“Who is he?” she asked. “And what is wrong with him?”

Prince Zakee dropped to his knees. “If there was ever a reason for women to wear the burka, it is because of the beautiful women of this land. A man would truly go mad among such splendor.”

“He is a flattering prince,” Changa answered. “We found him fleeing a group of warriors I didn’t recognize. He carried this.”

Changa extended the obelisk to Panya. Her eyes went wide as she reluctantly reached out and touched the object.

“By the ancestors!” she said. Her amazed expression caught everyone’s attention; there was very little Panya found interesting.

“Where did you get this?” she asked.

“It belongs to our family,” the amir answered. “My great-grandfather Mamud acquired it during the Desert Jihad. He led an army against infidels dwelling at the Kahar oasis. The amir leading them was formidable, but no one can defeat the warrior carrying the shield of Allah. The infidels worshipped the obelisk, so my grandfather took it and brought it to our family mosque, locking it away.”

“You know nothing of its potential?” Panya asked.

“I am a man of faith. I have no need of such things. But there is one who does. Her name is Bahati.” The amir sat hard on the deck, his head falling into his hands.

Panya’s eyes bulged at hearing the name and she looked at Changa. “We must take the obelisk to Zimbabwe. It is the only place it will be safe. If Bahati is attempting what I suspect, we are all in danger.”

“Wait, who is this Bahati and why...”

They were startled by the clanging of the dhow bells.

"Everyone to their stations!" Changa ordered. He ran to the stern of the ship.

"Dhows approaching behind us," Mikaili said. The tall, bearded Ethiopian pointed, his piercing eyes focused on the horizon. Changa saw the ships in the distance and raised his spyglass. Five warships approached rapidly, faster than the winds that pushed them. Men scampered about the deck, preparing for boarding. At the bow of the lead ship he spotted a figure draped in a dark cloak, arms outstretched.

"It's her," the amir spat as he came to his feet. His face contorted in anger. "I will give you a thousand dinars for her head!"

"If she and her friends catch up to us, we'll be the ones losing our heads," Changa replied. "Were outgunned and outmanned."

Panya came to his side and looked for herself. "She's raising a wind spell to speed their dhows."

"Can you stop her?"

"I can raise a counter spell with the obelisk. Amir Zakee?"

The prince handed over the talisman. Panya reached into the medicine pouch tied around her narrow waist, selecting a few choice ingredients and a stone pestle. She dropped the herbs into the mortar and ground them into a fine gray powder.

"Hurry, Panya," Changa urged. "We'll be in cannon range soon."

"Don't rush me, man!"

The thump of cannon fire crossed the distance to their ears. Moments later a plum of water erupted a hundred yards from the *Kazuri*.

“They’re calculating range,” Changa said. “Panya?”

“I’m almost done.”

She sprang to her feet with the gray powder in her right fist, the obelisk in her left. She trotted to the stern of the dhow with Changa close behind.

“Will this work?”

Panya glared at the worried merchant captain. “Pray that it does.”

Another cannon boomed and a geyser of water exploded a few feet from the ship. Panya extended her arm and dropped the powder into the sea. She spread her arms, reaching for the waves with the jade obelisk clutched in both hands.

“Oya, your daughter calls you! Great mother of the rivers and seas, mistress of the winds, give me your strength and your favor!”

Panya grasped the obelisk with both hands, pointing the tip towards the waves. A blast of wind shot from the object and she fell hard onto the deck. The wind struck the waters and the sea swirled. Panya scrambled back to her feet and pointed the obelisk again, this time preparing with a stronger stance. The obelisk blasted again, emitting a powerful stream of wind that churned the waters, pulling it upward into a wide spinning column. The column churned away, increasing in intensity and height as it meandered towards their pursuers. The peak of the watery spiral widened, forming a dark cloud that reached even higher as it darkened the sky. Lightning flashed and the clouds roared in response. The column became a storm, assaulting the enemy fleet with malicious fury. A towering wave rose before it, dwarfing the ships in its path. Panya convulsed and the wave crashed down on the hapless objects, burying them in water and foam. The water spout followed close behind, slashing about like

a wounded snake. Storm clouds threw bolts into the maelstrom, the dhows vanishing from the sight of Changa's terrified crews.

"That's enough, Panya," Changa said.

The storms continued to pummel the area where the dhows were last seen.

"Stop it, Panya!" Changa yelled.

"I can't! I can't!" she cried.

Changa gripped the obelisk and jerked it from her hands. The storm waned, the clouds dissipating as the column of water collapsed into the sea. The commotion on the ocean surface diminished until the waves resembled those that lapped against the side of the *Sendibada*.

"Are you okay?" Changa asked Panya.

"Now you see why that thing must be destroyed," she answered, her voice coming out between gasps.

Changa extended the object to Zakee but the young man refused it.

"That thing reeks with the smell of Shaitan. I will have no part of it!"

Changa shrugged then went below to his cabin. In the corner hidden behind his map chest was a small box made of ivory, gold, and iron. Changa unlocked the box and placed the jade obelisk inside. He closed the lid tightly and locked the box with a key that he hung about his neck. Panya entered the cabin as he hid the box.

"There are eleven more talismans just as powerful," she said. "If Bahati has them, all her power will be unimaginable. We have to turn back to see if there are any survivors who could lead us to where the other objects are hidden."

Changa said nothing as he strode back on deck. "Turn us around, Mikaili," he ordered. "Let's see what we can find."

The *Kazuri* cruised among the wreckage. Broken wood and bodies bounced off the side of the dhow as it cut a wake through the carnage. Sharks searched for food among the dead, their fins slashing the surface.

“There,” the prince said, pointing starboard. “It’s Bahati.”

The *Kazuri* veered starboard. Bahati lay still on a piece of wood just large enough to hold her.

“Come, Changa,” Panya said.

Changa shrugged his shoulders and followed her to the boat. The oarsmen paddled them to Bahati as Panya worked on another concoction, rubbing the leaves together in her hands into a paste. They pulled alongside the plank and hooked it, pulling it close. The Tuareg jumped into the water and swam close to the body. He stopped trance-like as he looked upon her intense, unnatural beauty. The veiled man placed a hand on her neck then extracted a dagger from his robes.

“Tuareg, no!” Panya shouted.

The Tuareg glared at her as he pressed the blade’s edge against Bahati’s neck.

Panya pounded Changa’s arm. “Stop him! We need her to locate the other talismans!”

Changa frowned at Panya then signaled his friend with a slight lift of his head. The Tuareg’s eyes protested but he obeyed. He swam with her to the boat and the others lifted her inside. No sooner had they pulled her aboard did Panya rub the mixture on her lips. Bahati licked instinctively, sighed and was silent.

“I’ll keep her sedated until we reach Zimbabwe. I hope Chipu can discover what we need to know.”

A crescent moon rose over the calm night seas, its frail light barely staining the black waves. Changa paced the deck, his mind too muddled to rest. The intrusion of the amir and his

mysterious nemesis worried him. As a merchant he was used to the unanticipated, but this situation involved powers beyond his knowledge.

A sound caught his attention, a painful moan drifting on the slight breeze. He hurried to the bow and saw the prince standing alone, his hands covering his face. Changa wasn't sure but it seemed the young noble was crying.

"Allah punishes me," he whispered.

Changa touched Zakee and startled him. The amir wiped his face and nodded his head.

"Forgive my display of weakness," he said. "It seems I have lost Allah's favor."

Changa shrugged. "Gods can be fickle. Tell me of this Bahati. I sense you have a deeper history than you've revealed."

"You are very perceptive," the amir confessed. He leaned against the bulwark then took a deep breath.

"My brothers and I were raised in my father's harem to protect us from the world and each other. When I turned twelve, my father took us into the world. We traveled the sultanate for two years, educated by tutors from as far as Timbuktu and learning the ways of our various subjects. After two years my father selected three of us, Yaseem, Abdul, and myself. Each of us was given a province to rule. It was our chance to show him if we were worthy to be his heirs.

"I was given Aden. I governed over the province and its port city for two years with the help of Hakim, my vizier. Under my rule the city prospered mightily. I was sure of my father's favor and knew my chance of becoming sultan was great indeed.

"One day a strange ship approached the harbor in a shroud of fog. For two days it sat motionless save for the rocking caused by the waves. No one walked its deck; no person climbed its masts

to tend to the sails. A number of small craft tried to approach it but were held at bay by some strange current. Larger dhows attempting to approach were steered away by the winds.

“On the third day a boat was lowered over the side. It crept toward the dock, its occupants obscured by the distance. The harbor guard sent a message to me on the boat’s approach, asking my advice. I decided to meet these mysterious visitors myself.

“I reached the docks the moment the boat arrived. Eight muscular men manned the oars on either side of the boat, their naked chests covered by a strange circular tattoo, their bare heads crowned by a simple gold band. The true surprise waited at the center of the boat. She stood almost my height with skin like the sky on a moonless night. She wore no veil, exposing her lovely face for all to see. Her garments fell about her in a sensuous way, clinging to her wide hips and full breasts with the rhythm of the sea breeze. I spent most of my life in the harem of my father surrounded by the loveliest women of the sultanate, but never had I encountered a woman as exquisite as her.

“She said her name was Bahati and she came to Oman as an ambassador of her people, the Zanj. She heard tales of the power of our land and was anxious to discuss the possibility of alliance and trade between our kingdoms. I greeted her as an equal, sending for my carriage to take us to my palace. She asked to see our city and I obliged.”

A wistful look came to Zakee’s face. “I must admit, by the time our tour ended I was in love with Bahati. I was determined to make her my wife. She seemed to feel the same, for she suffered my company with extreme grace and attention. For two weeks I courted her with lavish feasts and grand entertainment. She captivated me with exciting tales of her land and her people. A month after her arrival we traveled to my father’s palace in a grand

procession, a fine caravan loaded with gold, ivory, and exotic shells from Bahati's homeland and accompanied by the finest nobles of Aden. My father was taken by Bahati's beauty and impressed by the gifts she presented in his honor. We met later as father and son, and I expressed my intentions. Though he had reservations because she was an infidel, he understood my feelings for her. Before everyone he announced our engagement and promised a lavish dowry for his future daughter-in-law.

"I remember well the day we stood on the balcony of my father's palace, looking at the city when she took my hand and looked into my eyes.

"Zakee,' she said, 'I came to your land seeking friendship and have discovered love instead. I am truly a happy woman.'

"But a melancholy shadow dulled her beauty.

"What is wrong, my flower?' I asked her.

"There was one task I hoped to accomplish here, but it seems I will fail like the others.'

"Tell me.'

"Two thousand years ago my people lost an object sacred to us, an artifact we consider essential to our future. Our priests decreed that anyone leaving the borders of our kingdom is obligated to search for this object and if found, return it to its rightful place.'

"What is this object?' I asked.

"It is a jade obelisk,' she told me."

Zakee smiled as he relived the memory. "My friend, I was a man overcome with joy and sadness. I knew of this obelisk and I could take her to it. But I also knew that by giving her this object I would be feeding into her pagan beliefs."

"I know of this obelisk,' I finally said to her.

"Her eyes shone bright against her dark skin and she

embraced me.

“I will take you to see it tomorrow,’ I said.

“No, no, we must go tonight,’ she insisted. ‘You have no idea how important this is to my people.’

“I took her to our family mosque. The imam led us to the secret room then handed me the plain oak box holding the obelisk. I showed it to her and her eyes glowed with her smile. She looked at me and I knew what I had to do. I closed the box and against the protest of the imam, I took it with us.

“The next day we set off for Aden. I wasted no time making preparations for the journey to her homeland when I arrived at the port city. In two weeks, three dhows were loaded with Bahati’s dowry, supplies for the journey, and the belongings of my retinue.

“A great celebration was given in our honor the day we departed. We paraded to the docks through the decorated and crowded streets, boarded the dhows and headed to the Zanj.

“That night, far out to sea, Bahati came to my cabin.

“I know it is your custom not to touch the bride before marriage,’ she told me, ‘but that custom does not apply to mine.’

“She removed her clothes and came to my bed. That night I knew I made the best choice.”

Zakee’s face turned grim and he said to Changa, “The next day I awoke in chains. The smell of death surrounded me as I struggled to rise from the floor of the dhow. I heard creaking and caught a glimpse of light. Footsteps came my way and I tried to raise my head to see. Bahati loomed over me, smiling.

“My husband awakes,’ she said.

“What is going on?’ I asked. ‘What kind of game is this?’

“This is no game, Zakee. I have what I want, so you are no more use to me. Your people are dead and your dhows burn.’

“Why are you doing this?’ I shouted. ‘I love you!’

“Bahati laughed. ‘That was your mistake, fool. I will keep you until we reach Zanj, then I will decide how you will die.’”

Zakee looked into Changa’s eyes, his pain apparent.

“That was the last time I saw her. They took me ashore not far from where you found me. There was an altar on which I was to be sacrificed before the obelisk, just as those who possessed it had done for centuries before they were destroyed by my forefathers. But my ropes were loose and I broke free. I stole the obelisk and fled for my life.”

“And then we found you,” Changa finished. Zakee nodded. Changa walked to the bulwark and gazed into the night.

“An interesting story, but I wouldn’t worry. Panya has knowledge of this Bahati. If anyone can solve this mystery, she will. She is a woman of many talents.”

He reached down and lifted Zakee to his feet. “Get some rest, amir. You’ve had an eventful day.”

Zakee managed a smile. “I will try, Changa. Thank you for listening.”

Zakee went below. No sooner did he disappear when Panya came into view.

“How much did you hear?” he asked.

“Enough,” Panya replied. “This is more serious than both of you realize, Changa.”

Changa shrugged. “It may be, but I’ll think no more about it tonight. It can wait until we reach Zimbabwe.”

Changa left Panya standing alone on the deck. He hoped this all would end soon, but something in Panya’s eyes told him this was just the beginning.