

Mansur and the priests of Nod

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1. The Book

Long, long ago, in a time both like and unlike our own, there was a land called Nod. This land of Nod was great and vast, and it stretched all the way from one end of the world to the other, from East to West and from North to South as far as the feet of men could reach. It had one common language and one common government, and the people of Nod belonged to one common faith. In the mountains and the plains and in the forests and the seacoasts, men and women obeyed the same laws, and spoke the same tongue, and worshiped in the same temples. They dressed the same, and talked the same, and even thought the same in every corner of the land. The people of Nod took pride in their likeness to one another, and deemed this sameness the highest adornment of their civilization.

Now, the sameness of Nod had an important foundation. More than anything else, it lay in the arrangement of society, in the fact that its religion and its government were one in the same. There was no division in Nod between the worldly and the spiritual sides of life. The same priests who led the people in their devotions ruled them too in the earning of their bread. The same temples that served as houses of worship were also consecrated as houses of law. The same officers presided over offenses against God and man alike: punishing the neglect of prayers in one case and the theft of a scrap of food in the next. In every question, whether great or small, the word of the priests was final.

And there was no matter too small to escape the notice of the priests of Nod. As the divinely appointed guardians of the public peace, they made it their business to ensure the good character of each man and woman. Both the dress and the conduct of the people, especially women, were closely supervised: every care was taken that nothing might be found that was undignified or unseemly. The priests ensured that the men and women of Nod maintained the highest standards in every aspect of their lives: that they served honorably in their occupations, that they engaged only in appropriate pastimes, and that the subjects of their conversations were suitably elevated and moral. It was the priests who set the standards and the priests who acted when they were not met. Minor transgressions were the occasion of a fatherly reprimand, and for more serious offenses more serious sanctions were reserved.

In all matters the priests governed the people, and in all matters the priests were governed by their sacred text, the Book of Boznah. The Book of Boznah had been written nearly five thousand years before by the all-knowing prophet Boznah-i-Mishram as the divinely revealed and inerrant word of God. For the past five thousand years the priests of Nod had turned to the Book, referring all of their judgments to its wisdom. It was said that for every question that ever had or ever

would be asked, the Book held the answer. Every living creature, whether fish, or flesh, or fowl, was listed in its pages; the exact boundaries of the earth were described to a cubit's length; and the movements of the sun and all the stars were laid out in perfect order. The laws pertaining to God and the laws pertaining to men were there expounded in perfect clarity: every duty, every sacrifice, and every penalty. Nothing had ever happened that was not recorded in the Book of Boznah, and nothing would ever happen that it did not foretell. All reality was contained within the Book, and it was called the key to knowledge and the key to truth.

Thanks to the wisdom revealed within the Book of Boznah and preserved by priests, the people of Nod were never at a loss to understand why anything happened, for good or ill. No one in Nod ever needed to ask why things were one way and not another or ask why one thing happened and something else did not. No one in Nod ever said "I wonder..." or "why do you suppose it is..."; Blessed as they were with this source of divine wisdom, speculation was unnecessary. For all deserving questions, the priests provided answers, and where the priests had no answers, the people could be sure the questions were not worth asking. Thanks to the guidance of the priests of Nod, the people knew why the sun rose in one place and why it set in another; they knew why winter came and why summer followed it in turn; they understood why the harvest failed in one year and why it succeeded in the next; they learned from birth the reasons they were brought into this world, and they were informed in no uncertain terms about their destination after death. With so many clear and unequivocal answers, was it any wonder that the people of Nod had little use for questions?

Perhaps the only question that the Book could not answer was why, one day, for seemingly no reason whatsoever, someone did begin to ask questions. His name was Mansur, and he was a man, no longer young but not yet old, who had spent the twenty and twenty years of his life in Aminabdid, the great city of the central plain of Nod. Everyone who knew Mansur was at a loss to say why he began asking questions when he did, but then everyone was at a loss to say why he began asking questions at all. For the first twenty and twenty years of his life, Mansur had done very little to distinguish himself from his neighbors. He had been a promising student during the years of his schooling and, having renounced a married life, had served for many years as a scribe of the great temple. He had read a great deal and was known as a man very quiet and thoughtful, but this was not enough to explain his strange conduct. Other men read a great deal and other men were very quiet and thoughtful, but none of them asked the questions that Mansur did.

Although he had been silent through the previous years of his life, once Mansur began asking questions, he showed no sign of ceasing. He spoke to his brothers and sisters, to his neighbors, and to the other scribes of the temple. He even spoke in the hearing of the priests. And what was worse, Mansur was not content with simply asking questions: he asked them in a way that implied that no answer could satisfy him. He would ask the very questions that called into doubt the wisdom of the answers supplied by the priests. "Why do the priests say that evil fortune follows those who do evil and that the good receive blessing and prosperity?" he would ask. "I have seen the wicked prosper, and I have seen the righteous cut down at the height of their life. The children of upright men and women die as soon as those of others, and I have seen men of evil lives entrusting great riches to many sons and daughters. The priests tell us that our God sends years of rain to bless the good works of the people and the years of drought to punish their sins, but I do not understand this. Are the people good in one year and evil in the next? And should all be rewarded in the same measure? Why, if a few are good, should our God send rain to all? And if some have sinned, why must all the people starve when locusts come and lay waste to the fields? And who can declare the reasons for the things our God accounts as sins? Why does He punish a man who steps into the temple with his left foot first? Why should a child who is born on the first day of the month be a curse upon the entire household? Why should a woman who once neglects her purification forever be held unclean? Why does our God ask these things of us, and where is His justice to be seen in the world?"

These, and many more questions like them, Mansur asked, to the increasing concern and distress of all who heard him. Wherever he went, he shared his thoughts, and whenever he spoke, his listeners were sure to repeat his comments to the priests. And with every report, the priests became more and more concerned with his resolve to question the answers they had provided for the people. In due time it was agreed that measures needed to be taken, first to convince Mansur of his error, and—if this were not possible—to remove him from the community. This was by no means the most agreeable aspect of the priests' duty, but they also held it very necessary for the well-being of the people as a whole. It was written in the Book of Boznah that just as sickness could afflict the whole body through a single diseased member, so through one misguided individual great social evils had their start. A decision was made, orders were given, and Mansur was arrested and brought to a special audience before the priests.² The Trial

Just as the priesthood lay at the center of life in Nod, so the great temple stood in the very heart of Aminabdid: an imposing structure of gleaming stone that raised its head and shoulders far above the surrounding buildings. Between broad pillars and through high doors and down great, airless halls Mansur was led to his trial. Beneath a marbled ceiling he stood and waited as the priests arrived and took their seats in high stone chairs that towered over him. Last of all came the High Priest, and all the guards and scribes and even the other priests rose as he arrived in his place upon the gilded throne above the altar. All the court was silent and held its breath as the High Priest began to speak and inquire of Mansur if the charges against him were true. He asked Mansur if it was true that he had challenged the answers contained in the Book of Boznah and offered interpretations contrary to the interpretations of the priests. He asked Mansur if he had questioned and doubted what he was told by others about the wisdom of the priests. He asked

Mansur—and here his voice rose as he described the most serious charge of all—he asked Mansur if he had denied the operation of spiritual forces in the world. “Your neighbors have told us that you expressed doubts about the existences of the Horses of the Sun,” said the High Priest, confident that all must appreciate the gravity of his words. “You are said to have remarked that they cannot be seen at any point in their progress across the heavens.”

“Nor can they be seen”—here Mansur broke his silence and spoke suddenly out of turn—“nor has any man out of any time ever looked upon the Horses of the Sun. From its rising in the East to its setting in the West, the sun travels alone; and as for these horses which are spoken of in the Book, no eye has ever beheld them. And who can believe what he has not seen?”

“So it is true then,” said the High Priest, with the tone of a man firm in the truth, “that you do not believe that the sun rides through the sky conveyed by nine golden horses who rest by night at the bottom of the earth and douse their flaming hooves in an ever-flowing stream of milk and honey? So it is true that you trust your own wisdom over what has been set down in the Book?”

Here all the faces of the court were turned towards Mansur as the guards, scribes and priests waited for him to retract what he had said, or make some apology for his previous words. The High Priest waited too, and stared steadily at Mansur as he began to speak. “But why must it be that we deny the evidence of our senses? Has our God given us eyes that we should not see or ears that we should not hear? He has given us minds with which we can weigh and consider all that is revealed to us: and should we refuse this gift? Tell me, reverend priests, is the knowledge of God inconsistent with sense? With logic? With reason?”

Mansur would have said more, but at this mention of reason, the whole court—guards, scribes, and priests—broke out in laughter, drowning his words with the sound of their voices. The High Priest was the first to regain his composure, but he still spoke in a tone of ridicule: as a man who has just heard a strange or incredible jest. “Reason?” He asked, pausing briefly to collect himself. “And what has reason to do with the mysteries of faith? All men and women know, for it is written in the Book, that the vain and inconsistent fancies of the human mind can never grasp the sublime secrets of the All-High. The idle imaginings of men were not meant to comprehend the counsels of our God. Would you reason with God? Would you seek to discover His ways? Reason and religion! These are as unlike as night and day, as far removed as distant North from utmost South. Every child knows this.”

“Does Your Honor then deny the oneness of truth?” said Mansur quietly and steadily, his eyes fixed upon the High Priest. “Or do you imagine that truth is not one but two? Is the truth different by day and different at night? Is there one truth in the East and another in the West?” The High Priest did not answer this. The rest of the court was silent too. All waited and listened as Mansur continued. “If truth is one in all places and all times, how can it be that reason and faith are at odds? If truth is the same for all conditions of men, how can the truth apparent to our senses contradict the truth set down in the Book? Surely, reverend priests, the truth I know with the eyes and the ears, with the mind our God gave me; surely this must be the same truth of which you all speak, the truth that is the foundation of our faith. Tell me, if it can be otherwise.”

The mention of reason a few moments earlier had left the High Priest in a good humor. The self-evident absurdity of Mansur’s words revealed him as an individual of very limited mental capacity, and the High Priest spoke gently in response. “I see that you are a good man and well-meaning. Your only fault, if it can be called a fault, is to have strayed into matters beyond your competence. But your error must be evident. You must see that it would be best for you to return to your home and your profession and trouble your neighbors no more with these speculations. And what use can there be in questioning what has been set down in the Book? Why inquire so deeply when plain answers have already been given? Trust instead in the priesthood, and trust that our guidance and our wisdom must be sufficient to watch over you through all the days of your life.”

“Where the answer is clear, I see no use in questions.” As Mansur spoke these words, a look of satisfaction crept across the features of the High Priest, and the other members of the court exchanged knowing glances. “When the truth is evident, what man would inquire further? But I ask you, reverend priests, whether anything is certain, or any truth clear and evident, even to your wisdom?” Here the expressions of the priests changed abruptly, and all the court stood perfectly still as Mansur continued. “Even the beginning and end of our life is uncertain: the very nature of our soul is unknown to us. Can any of the reverend priests gathered here remember where his soul was before birth? And of the world that awaits us after death, has any brought back a report of that unknown region? Has any of you seen with his own eyes or heard with his own ears any sign of what is set down in the Book? And if the priests know no more than the people, why should the priests be masters of the people? What knowledge do the priests have that the people do not, or how are their minds fashioned that they possess superior understanding?”

At this moment Mansur’s words were drowned out as all the priests of the court raised their voices at once, and at first not even the High Priest could be heard over the noise of their indignation. “Since you have not only repeated but compounded your statements,” he said to Mansur, now angry as he had never been before, “this court

will take the necessary steps. Because the freedom of conscience is the foundation of our faith, we do not desire to compel your belief. Above all else, we have left to you the liberty of choice. No person must remain a member of this community who does not choose to: understand that. This is why the court presented you with two options. The first, which you have rejected, is to freely retract your words and return to our community. The second, which you have now embraced, is to be cast out into the desert of Aminabdid, where you will most assuredly starve or die of exposure within a week. This is the decision that you have freely made.”

And so it was that Mansur, through the free exercise of the conscience bestowed on him by his God, was cast out of the city and removed from the community of the people of Nod. Three days and nights he was dragged along in the back of an old horse-carriage, with little water and less food, into the very midst of the desert. And there, in that waste of rock and sand and dry, withered grass, he was left to face the consequence of his decision not to abide by the fundamental principles of his faith, and to make a living if he could in the harsh and inhospitable wilderness. 3. The Desert

It was written in the Book of Boznah that there is no greater grief than the grief of separation. No man or woman, it was said, could know any sorrow harder than in leaving the community where they had once known love and acceptance. And almost certainly, no one who heard Mansur’s cries of woe on being cast out into the desert would have denied this. For a very long time, Mansur simply sat and wept. Only when he was finally alone did he feel the full weight of his situation. Only alone did he realize the fatal consequence of his choice. Whatever way he looked, the desert was alike cold and inhospitable—no sign of food, or drink, or shelter. Even his poor shoes seemed unfit to travel any distance over the rocky ground. For many hours, Mansur waited and pondered, but no clear plan occurred to him of what he might do, or even in which direction he might begin to walk. His only thought was to curse himself for his own rashness in forever losing the happiness that had once been his. Since he was alone, he spoke to himself, and freely gave voice to his bitter disappointment.

“Why did I share what was in my thoughts before the High Priest? Or why with my neighbors and friends? Why choose to be miserable when I was happy before? Surely I am not the first to doubt and to wonder—others must have had questions before me. And yet they were wise enough to remain silent. Why should I be the only fool who casts away what he has by speaking what is in his heart? And yet, even now, even now all I can do is ask questions. What use are all my questions, if they have not made me happier or better? Or if the end of learning is truth, why am I less certain of the truth than when I began? If all that I have learned and read has led me to this place, how better it would have been never to have learned and read anything at all. Better to have been like the old man who tends the garden of the great temple—he has never read a book in all his life and he has never had a doubt. Better to have been like any number of the people I have seen thronging the streets every day—men and women who have never wondered about the providence of God or troubled themselves over the purpose of their lives. If I were to ask them if they lay awake considering their soul, its nature or its destination, they would fail even to understand what was asked of them. They sleep peacefully because they trust the answers offered by the priests and want no others. Would I have slept soundly if I had trusted the priests? And what can await me but death, now that I have been cast out?”

These thoughts and many others like them, Mansur repeated to himself as he sat in the gathering dark—an outer gloom which perfectly matched the condition of his heart. Whether hope always comes when all hope seems lost, this was never written in the Book, but it was nonetheless what happened to Mansur. For even as the shadows gathered upon the desert and Mansur began to feel the chill of night within his bones, he started with surprise. Off on the distant horizon, he saw a light, a fire flickering almost out of sight on the very edge of the darkness. Mansur did not think to ask what this fire might be or who had made it. He knew that whatever hope he had lay in finding a warm place to pass the night.

Quickly, but with great care in picking his way across the rocky ground, Mansur rushed towards the light. It was much farther than he had first imagined, and as he drew nearer he could feel the pain of exhaustion creeping into his cold limbs. Mansur saw that the fire was very large and that it had been built among a number of tall stones that provided it with shelter from the wind. Mansur could also make out the shadowy forms of men around the fire and he could hear, still indistinct, the sound of voices raised in conversation and song. Mansur had no way of knowing whether the men gathered around the fire were friendly or not. Quite possibly they were bandits—if they would not send him back into the darkness they would slit his throat. But Mansur also knew that to remain in the desert was to die of cold or thirst. So with a deep breath, he overcame his hesitation and plunged forward into the light.

What Mansur saw at that moment made him gasp. Around the fire were more than half a dozen men—and such men as he had never seen in the comfort of the city. Long, straggling hair ran down their heads and wild, filthy beards shot out from faces thick with dust. In the place of clothes, they were dressed in filthy rags and great, clumsy coats of animal skin. When Mansur saw this, he drew back in fear. But within an instant he perceived that far from appearing to threaten him, the men around the fire seemed as frightened and shocked as he was. Instead of offering violence, they stared at him in wonder, as if they had never seen anything like him before. Mansur doubted whether such wild desert men would even understand his words, but since his only hope for life lay in finding shelter, he ventured to speak.

“Your fire is warm,” said Mansur slowly, still trying to restrain the trembling of his voice, “your fire is warm and I am cold. Only let me stay the night here, although I can offer you nothing but my thanks.”

For some moments, none of the men said a word, but at last one of them stood and addressed Mansur in an accent surprisingly clear and familiar. "You are welcome to stay and pass the night. If the same fortune has brought you to this place that has brought us here, you have our compassion and our promise to give you what help we can."

This was more than enough of a welcome for Mansur, and without asking anything more, he took a place around the warmth of the fire. Before he could say a word, the men brought him dried fruit to eat and offered him water drawn from a nearby spring. Mansur was surprised by this unexpected hospitality and so grateful for it he was almost reduced to tears. When he was finished eating, the first man who had spoken to him broke his silence and asked Mansur what had brought him into the middle of the desert. Mansur did not hesitate, and he quickly told his hosts his entire story: from his first questions to his interview with the priests to his final expulsion from the city. When he was done, all the men began to murmur to one another, but it was the same man who had spoken before who turned to Mansur and addressed him directly.

"Can this be true," said the man, whom the others obviously regarded as their leader, "that you have been cast out of your community through your own free choice? And how could you be so foolish? You had everything you could want, and here is only misery and hardship. Why, we should send you back into the desert—you never understood your own good fortune, or else you would have held on to what you had. None of us chose to come to this place, and if we had ever been blessed with the choice you were given, we would not be here now."

Here Mansur's curiosity, which was always one of his foremost qualities, got the better of him. Although he could see his host was angry with him, he could not resist inquiring further. "But if you did not choose to be banished, what can be the reason? For what crime could the priests have consigned you to the desert, if it was not that you denied the wisdom of the Book?"

Instead of growing angrier, a great look of weariness came over the man at this question, and he bowed his lined and dusty face. "Nothing that we thought or said or did condemned us—it was what we saw and heard and tasted. We were cast out not for what we believed, but for what we are and what we have known. We have been sent into the desert for a cause which lies beyond our power to change."

At first it looked as if the man might have been content to break off his account here, but Mansur asked him if he would continue and explain in greater detail the reason that the priests had banished him and his companions. After a long pause and a glance at his friends, the man agreed and commenced his story.⁴ The Tale

"My name is Faruk, and I was born on the Eastern coast of Nod. There I learned the trade of a sailor from my father, who taught me to fish the Northern Sea. There I grew wealthy and purchased a larger fishing fleet than any of my forefathers before me, and gathered together a crew of men, the remnants of which you see here with me today. I was the first to fish the great banks of the Northeast and my crews sailed farther than any had sailed before, even to the utmost reaches of the world that are recorded in the Book. There we found untold wealths of fish and filled our boats with the richest harvest men had gathered from the seas. Although others soon followed our example, none were so skilled at finding the choicest fishing grounds and none were so bold or sailed so far towards the world's final limits.

"I have no doubt that it was for our willful daring of the bounds that He had set that our God chose to punish us. I only wish that we had heeded the warning that He gave us according to the abundance of His mercies, and turned back while the opportunity remained. For we were warned, of that I have no doubt. Even during our earliest missions upon the Northeast banks, I heard reports from among the crew of fish caught in our nets of a kind and likeness different from any that has been set down in the Book. And it could be no excuse for any of us to say that we were ignorant of what this meant. For all who live upon the seas are instructed from their earliest days by the priests in the knowledge of every fish that God has created to swim within their waters. And just as we learn that the form of every living creature is described within the Book, we are taught the name and shape and qualities of each fish that we find within our nets. Then what could it be but a warning from our God, when our nets first snared fish such as none we had ever read of or known, whose very existence defied the authority of the Book?

"But wisdom, so it is written in the Book, comes often too late to the reckless soul, and we cast away the chance that we were given. We threw the strange fish back into the sea and spoke no more of what we had seen, but we continued to fish the Northeast banks and traveled farther afield to fill our boats. And so it was one day that God ordained to punish our crimes, and a great storm arose that scattered our fleet and drove all our ships into the four winds. I learned in later days that most of the ships were lost in that hour, their crews dead at sea, but our God reserved me and the men you see here for a more terrible fate. When the storm broke we were still uncertain of our location and our ship was all but shattered, so we sailed as best we could for what we hoped was home. Instead we saw almost at once an unexpected sight on the horizon. We discovered, to our amazement, the outline of land—land that that we never expected to see and that was described nowhere in any of the maps or accounts included in the Book.

"Had our ship been undamaged we might yet have sailed away and put out of our minds forever anything that we had seen. But our mast was broken by the storm, and we had little choice but to make our way slowly towards the shore.

What we found there it breaks my heart now to repeat, and you should know that before you came here none of us had said a word of what befell us for many years. We never speak of it to one another for even the mention of it is painful—and what profit could we find in repeating what each of us already knows? For on that day we found an island, a stretch of sandy ground no more than a dozen miles long and scarcely a mile across, an island that was not written down in the source of all knowledge and wisdom: a place unrecorded in God’s omniscient Book. And on that island we found growing trees of a kind of smooth, red wood untold in the holy pages and bearing fruits like none that it described. And we stayed on that island for nine days, for this was the length of time we required to repair our boat and ready it for the return. And in that time we lived underneath the shelter of the trees and fed upon their fruits. And we saw flowers that bloomed there that were new and strange, and above our heads we heard the calls of birds that we feared to look upon for they were like nothing that had been taught to us by the priests.

“When at last we returned to the familiar coasts of Nod, we swore that we would say nothing of what had taken place and never visit the Northeast banks again: but our God would not allow us to conceal our sin from his appointed ministers. For the mast of our boat was fashioned from the strange, reddish wood of the island trees and this soon came to the attention of the priests. And so it was that we were arrested and brought before an audience with the High Priest, and there made a full confession of our crimes. We admitted to all that we had witnessed which was not recorded in the Book and we acknowledged our guilt in straying from the wisdom set down by our God.

“At first our account was not believed and no credit was given to our confession. For the priests maintained that since all knowledge was set down within the pages of the Book, such things as we spoke of could never exist. At best, they said the island we claimed to have seen was a theory, that its reality was attested only by our fallible senses of sight and touch—and the evidence of our senses was nothing when weighed against the unfailing wisdom and authority of the Book. It was therefore objected in our defence that since no such island could exist, we could not be punished for finding it. The High Priest finally brought an end to this dispute by an ingenious ruling. He declared that appearance was different from existence. He said that although the things we described had no reality, he believed that we still spoke the truth when we claimed we had experienced them. And if the island we recalled did not exist, he explained, our crime in seeing and touching it was all the greater. For what more terrible insult could there be to the Book, he argued, than to see or touch such things as it clearly states have no reality—to deny the manifest truth of the Holy Teachings not only with our words or thoughts but with our senses? And so we were convicted, but the High Priest was merciful and he ordained, in his great wisdom, that we should not be killed for what we had witnessed. He decreed instead that we should be banished and removed so that our obedient neighbors would be spared any knowledge of our crimes.

“For nearly ten years now, we have lived in this desert. And if it were not for the skills we had learned in our days of finding food and shelter on the islands of the sea, we would have died here long ago. Many of us wish we were dead rather than be removed from the things we once knew and loved. But all of us believe that the sentence of the High Priest was just—and indeed more than just. For what better could we deserve when our own eyes and ears and hands and mouths have betrayed us and turned us away from the Book? How can we walk among our neighbors or enjoy the company of our families after all we have experienced? We have seen land and trees and flowers that mock the Word of God, we have heard the songs of birds He has never written of, we have tasted the fruits of which He has made no mention. We, even we ourselves, have become a stain upon His Book and a living challenge to His omniscience. We do not know why our God has chosen to prolong our suffering nor do we hope for His forgiveness. But we wait here, and endure, for as long as we are able, the punishment He has prepared.”

5. The Leper

As Faruk the seafarer told his story, Mansur listened with perfect attention. As the words of his host took root in his mind, Mansur conceived a vivid image of all the things that the sailors had discovered and he felt a sudden desire well up within him to know them for himself. It seemed almost as if he could smell the salt air of the sea and feel the sand of the island beneath his feet and hear the calls of the birds and taste the fruit in his mouth. The idea of experience unrecorded in the Book filled him with fear, but also with a longing that was irresistible. No plan occurred to him of how he might find the unwritten island, but he knew that he would have to try: and he had nothing to lose by the effort. What he would do after he reached it, he did not consider. Only hours before, he had thought his life was over, and now he eagerly reached out to grasp at this new hope that was presented to him.

When the story was finished, the sailors, who seemed to feel a fresh sadness at hearing their story retold, grew silent and huddled closer around the fire. Partly to distract them from their unhappy memories, but also hoping to learn more about the location of their island, Mansur asked the men about their happier days when they had first sailed the Northeast banks. At this the faces of the men brightened, and they began to talk all at once about their adventures aboard the fishing boats. Some shared songs or told stories of friends long gone; others described the difficult and dangerous life of the sea. By the time they were finished, Mansur had learned as much as he had hoped: he knew the name of the port from which they had sailed and the region on the banks where they had fished when they discovered

the strange island. He knew the time of year when they ventured farthest and he knew the direction of the winds.

Later that night, while Faruk and his crewmen rested, Mansur lay awake as he had done so often during his years in the city. But where before he had wracked his mind over his unanswerable questions, now Mansur turned his thoughts towards the road that lay ahead of him if he were to reach his goal. There were a number of different obstacles he thought that would need to be overcome before he even came near. First he needed to find the shortest way out of the desert, and from there a road to the great coastal city of Shiarpur-Faizal, the port from which Faruk's fleet had sailed. Like all the scribes of the great temple, Mansur was well trained in the movements of the stars, and as he looked up into the night sky he silently calculated his position and began to consider the best path North.

Early the next morning, at the first sign of light, Mansur rose and told his hosts of his decision to leave the desert and strike out for the North although he said nothing of his true plans. At first the sailors implored him not to go: they told him that he was welcome to stay and join them as they passed their years of exile, but Mansur would have none of it. He was determined to leave, and rather than see him die in the attempt, Faruk and his crewmen offered Mansur what help they could. They brought him food for the journey and a cast-off hide for warmth, they gave him tough-soled shoes for walking, dry tinder for a fire, and a hide flask full of water. Mansur thanked his new friends many times over, and his gratitude was very real. Where before he had been sure of dying in the desert, he now had a real chance to escape. Mansur was certain that if he followed the spine of the hills for a few days he would find his way to one of the great highways which ran from Aminabdid to the port cities of the coast.

Within an hour of the dawn, Mansur was up and on his way, striding across the desert. By day the desert was milder than Mansur had feared and in the first part of the morning he covered a good distance. It was only later, as the hours stretched on, that Mansur felt the stiffness of his legs and began to move more slowly over the rocky ground. By mid-day, he knew that he could go no further without rest. And though he was resolved to stop only for a moment, he soon fell into a deep sleep. When Mansur woke, night was gathering once again. As he saw the setting sun, he cursed himself for drifting asleep so easily. But although he was afraid, he knew that he had no choice but to go on. Before he continued, he bowed down and made this prayer to his God.

Oh Eternal and Unchanging Lord! I am but a tiny atom of Your creation and my wisdom is insufficient to comprehend the smallest part of Your plans. I do not know what the future holds, nor dare I ask anything of You, Who are the Bestower of all things. If it is Your will that I survive this desert, it will be so; and if it is not, no prayer of mine can move You. But still let me pray to You, Lord, let me pray: and let me resign myself to whatever You ordain.

All night now Mansur walked, and at times it was all he could do to put one foot before the other. More than once he thought that he might lose his way and there were a few occasions where he did. But luck was with him or God and he held to the hills just as he planned. And after nearly two days with little rest, Mansur found himself walking down one of the narrow and rutted roads which led, like streams running into great rivers, to the broad, smooth highways laid at the order of the priests. No sooner did Mansur find this road than he fell on his knees, and uttered a brief prayer of thanks.

It was written in the Book of Boznah that good fortune begets good fortune in turn, and here Mansur's luck, which had served him so far, continued for the best. Although the little road was hardly well traveled, it was not completely deserted, and within the first hours of joining it Mansur began to encounter small groups of men: farmers, traders, and pilgrims on their way to Aminabdid. From these he learned, to his great relief, that a stream of fresh water lay only a few miles down the trail. The little skin given to him by the sailors was long empty, and Mansur's throat had been dry for hours. And so he walked on as fast as he might on tired legs, and he promised himself that once he had found something to drink he would allow himself a few hours of rest. Perhaps, he thought, he might even take the time to sleep if he could only find a soft patch of ground.

When Mansur reached the stream, it was already late in the afternoon. The shadows were growing long and only a few hours of daylight still remained. To Mansur's dismay, he saw that the bed through which the stream ran was very steep: its sides were nearly impossible to descend. In one place there was a series of steps made by the feet of travelers, but

these were little more than small dents in the side of the ravine, and Mansur saw how easy it might be to lose his footing and to fall. So very carefully, almost climbing at times as he reached out to steady himself with his hands, Mansur descended to the stream below.

As he turned to fill his flask in the running water of the stream, Mansur started with surprise. At the foot of the ravine there lay the fallen figure of a man and such a man! The strange figure was dressed in the long, black gown which the priests assigned for the injured and deformed who made their living begging for alms, but this was nothing Mansur had not seen in his time in the city. What lay before him now was stranger still. Mansur noticed that the hands and feet of the beggar were wrapped in filthy cloth, as was done in cases of leprosy, and this was the strangest thing of all the very face of the beggar, even the nose and mouth, was covered by a black hood with only two small slits for eyes. Mansur realized in a moment that this poor leper must have fallen while trying to climb to the bottom of the stream-bed easy enough with hands wrapped in clumsy bandages. Although he was frightened at touching a leper, Mansur reached out to the motionless man and felt his neck for a pulse. When he determined that the beggar was still alive, Mansur dragged the prostrate body as best he could away from the stream. There was no use trying to carry an unconscious man up the side of the stream-bed, but Mansur thought that if he could start a fire, the strange beggar might stand some chance of being revived.

For some minutes after the fire was started, the dark figure remained perfectly still, and Mansur feared that his injury was very great. Then all at once, the beggar began to make a dry coughing noise and to stir slightly in his arms and legs. Mansur had never been given any training as a doctor, and he had little idea of what he could do to help. The only thing he imagined that might work was a reviving drink although he had nothing but water. So with great care, he raised up the beggar's head. He hesitated a moment before removing the hood for fear of what he might see, but after a short pause he gathered his thoughts and lifted back the dark mask.

6. The Mask

When Mansur caught a glimpse of the face that lay beneath the black hood he nearly cried aloud. He had steeled himself to gaze upon some terrible deformity, but he was wholly unprepared for what he saw at that instant. He stumbled backwards in shock and for a long moment he stared straight ahead in amazement his mouth hanging open and his eyes stretched wide. Beneath the mask was the face of a woman, the most beautiful that Mansur had ever known in the twenty and twenty years of his life. No streaks of dust or dirt could obscure the perfect contours of this face: its exquisite features were not only free from any mark or blemish, they were flawless in every respect. Even the fine, dark hair that framed it seemed to Mansur too lovely to be true.

After a moment which lasted, it seemed, for an eternity, Mansur recovered his wits and remembered his original purpose. Slowly and with hands trembling as they never had before, Mansur tried again to lift the strange beggar's head and bring a trickle of cold water to her fine lips. At this she stirred slightly, but she did not wake. Mansur was at a loss to think what else he could do. He had heard it written in the Book that fever came through the absence of warmth in the extremities, so he peeled away the cold, wet rags that bound the lovely stranger's hands. And behold! Here too, he saw not crooked claws or twisted stumps but beautiful fingers perfectly shaped. Desperate to do some good, he rubbed and chafed the flawless hands within his own and held them as close as he dared to the heat of the fire.

Whether Mansur's ministrations were any real help cannot be said. But placing her hands before the fire woke the woman, as it seemed, in an instant. Her eyes, which Mansur saw were also of surpassing beauty, flashed open as she started awake all at once. At first she seemed shaken by her ordeal and she twisted her head and cast about her eyes, in obvious confusion but without fear. It was only when she glanced down at the mask which lay on the ground beside her and she caught a glimpse of her hands free from their bandages that she cried out in horror. Then, as never before, fear was evident in all her features as she first turned to Mansur and then looked away again: almost as she had resolved to jump to her feet and bolt off down the stream bed in that very moment.

Mansur, as he watched all of these wild and excited motions, did and said nothing. The beauty of the woman was so great, and her obvious distress so frightening that he was entirely at a loss to act. He only stood and stared, and if the

strange beggar had chosen to flee, he would certainly not have made any move to stop her. But she did not run, and instead approached Mansur and fell on her face before him. And to Mansur's great confusion she began to plead with him in a piteous tone of supplication.

Please sir, said the woman, who raised her lovely eyes to Mansur in the manner that the people were taught to use in showing reverence to the relics of the priests, please say nothing of what you have seen. The fault is mine, and I beg that you will forgive me and find it in your heart to keep my condition a secret. My life depends upon it, and I supplicate you, by the mercy of our God, to tell no soul the truth. My village lies a short way down the road from here, and if you breathe a word of this, it would be my death.

For a long moment, Mansur was at a loss to respond. This was far too strange and sudden a turn of events for him to grasp at once. But at last calm returned to his thoughts, and he assured the woman that if she would only sit and speak to him with more consideration, all would yet be well. For now that he had the opportunity for thought, Mansur's curiosity had taken hold of him. While he resolved not to say or do anything that would harm this beautiful woman, he was determined to understand the mystery of her actions. Why she would hide such lovely features behind a mask or why she would fear his revealing her secret, Mansur promised himself he would discover.

I swear to you that I will say nothing of what I have seen here, said Mansur, speaking in a tone he hoped would assure the poor woman. I will guard your secret just as you wish. But in exchange for this favor, you must explain the reason that you ask it of me. For what cause do you hide your features from the world? Why bind even your hands and feet? What shame can you have in that which is without flaw?

At the promise to say nothing of her secret, a look of relief crossed the woman's fine face but one still mingled with doubt. For though she hoped Mansur could be trusted, she was still afraid he might betray her. To give her some real grounds for trust, Mansur shared his own story. He told her his name and his place of birth and the circumstances that had led him into exile in the desert. He said nothing of Faruk and his crewmen or of the island they had found, but he freely told her all the rest. He explained that he too had a secret that must not be revealed. This seemed to reassure the woman, and she became less afraid through hearing Mansur's fears. Finally, she told Mansur that she was willing to let him know the reason for her secrecy.

It began long ago, explained the woman, who had been known from her first day by the name of Sunjit, which means unfortunate. It began, in fact with the hour of my birth. For I was born in the ninth hour of the ninth day of the ninth month, in the time when the earth falls under the influence of the moon. This was something that had been feared from the moment my mother's labor pains began the previous night. And as the hours advanced, the apprehension of my family grew greater and greater.

And so it must have. Here Mansur interrupted the telling. For it is written in the Book that great misfortune comes upon the ninth hour of the ninth day of the ninth month when the earth falls under the influence of the moon. Any child born within that hour will issue from the womb a blighted monstrosity this verse I repeated a thousand times as a student of the great temple.

The face of the woman called Sunjit grew dark as Mansur said this, and a look of deep sadness flashed across her peerless eyes. And I have repeated it many times myself, for it was the first of the verses of the Book that I was ever taught. Indeed it is this very verse that has governed my fate since the hour of my birth. For great as was my mother's grief when she gave birth to me upon the hour assigned by the Book as cursed, her sorrow only deepened when she saw me issue forth. She had feared to beget a monstrous child, a creature missing a finger from one hand and a toe from one foot, and with a face horrible to look upon, for this is what the Book promises. But what she saw instead terrified her even more. For I was born, as you see, with a full set of fingers and toes, and my face, though my mother swore it was not beautiful, free of any obvious deformity. Now my mother was a pious and prayerful woman, and she foresaw the response of the priests if they should see me: how angry they would be to have their infallible prophecy refuted. For as the appointed guardians of the Book, it falls to the priests to insure that its wisdom and authority are respected.

And how was it then, asked Mansur, that you or your mother were never punished for this? Why would the priests not cast you out if you defied the prophecy?

Only my mother and her sister who served as midwife saw me in the minutes after my birth, replied Sunjit. And they resolved immediately to keep my true state a secret. They announced that they had hidden my features because of their deformity, and all who heard them believed it. Even my blessed father did not know, to the very moment of his death, that my hands and feet and face were not as the Book predicted. When I was old enough, I was taught the truth, but only that I might better conceal myself from others. And indeed, I have tried to forget my condition all my life. I see my hands and feet but briefly when I wrap them in new bandages, and I have never had a mirror to behold my face nor have I ever removed my hood except in darkness. And it is better that this is so, since it is easier for me to honor the Book if I believe what others believe, and never give any sign that its prophecy has failed.

And there are times when I think it has not failed. Here Sunjit cast her eyes down, as if ashamed. For I know that what is written in the Book is even as the Word of God Himself: and He has authority over all things. Were He to declare that day was night or the crooked straight, it would be so this is what the priests have taught me so great is the power of His Word. Is it not a little thing, then, that He should decree that I am hideous? Or who am I to make an answer to my God? I know that at the Command of God, fire is made ice and ice fire, and the seas of the world turned to dry land. That I should be ugly as He has ordained, compared with such miracles, is as nothing. And if all things are in His power, it must be even so with me.

7. The Prisoners

Surely, our God would never suffer this. Here Mansur interrupted the unfortunate Sunjit. That you should hide your true self simply to vindicate the prophecy of the Book: I cannot believe this is what our God desires. How could He, who is the Source of all truth, ever ordain that your life be a lie? What pleasure can it give Him that you never reveal your face? And why do you stay? If no one has ever seen you remove your mask, if no one knows your features, you need only leave this place and begin your life again. In the great cities, you would be lost among the crowd and never be discovered.

At these words, the lovely face of Sunjit grew dark, and she cast her eyes towards the earth. And what would I do? Or how would I live? What is there in the city for me?

What is there for you here? Replied Mansur. Here there is nothing. You live by begging and have been made an outcast and what could be worse? Nothing you could find there could offer less than your current condition. Any employment would be better than this one, any life.

Mansur paused, and although Sunjit stared very thoughtfully at him, she still said nothing. So he continued. At least grant me this. Now that your face has been revealed; look on it for yourself. See who you are: and then decide what you will do.

Although Sunjit still made no response, she did not protest as Mansur took her hand in his, and gently led her to one of the pools of still water that lay by the edge of the stream. At the first sight of her reflection in the pool, she gave a small cry and for a moment placed her hands over her eyes. Then, very hesitantly, she allowed herself to peer from between her fingers at the image in the water. Then her hands fell away and she looked down for a very long time, turning her head from side to side and examining her face from every angle. Mansur could see tears in her eyes, but he said nothing.

At last, after what seemed a very long time, Sunjit rose from the side of the stream. She asked Mansur, in quiet but determined tones, whether he traveled to one of the great cities and if he did, could she go with him? Mansur responded that he was glad not to travel alone and was relieved to have a companion. And so it was agreed that while Mansur rested by the stream by this time he was so tired he could hardly stand Sunjit would gather her few belongings together and prepare herself to leave. And several hours later, at the first light of dawn on the next day, the two set off towards the great highway.

It was written in the Book of Boznah that God helps those who cannot help themselves. And though neither of them actually said it, this must nevertheless have been what Mansur and Sunjit believed. For if neither thought that their God would provide unexpected help along the road, it is hard to conceive how they planned to survive their journey. For the food Mansur had been given by the sailors in the desert was finished by the time he reached the stream, and Sunjit had only a few pieces of fruit and bread from her neighbors. In this difficult situation, their faith that God would provide must have been firm indeed. And for the first day at least, it was severely tested. Those few they met along the way were hungry as well, and had little food to share. It was not until the two travelers reached the great highway, at noon upon the second day, that their luck turned.

It was on the great highway, a broad, straight road to the cities of coast, that hope finally came. For there Mansur and Sunjit saw approach one of the prison trains of the priests: something under a dozen caged wagons bearing nearly a score of prisoners down the road from Aminabdid to Shiarpur-Faizal. Beside the wagons marched armed guards, and at the front of the column, on horseback, there rode a scribe and a priest.

Since Mansur had served for most of his life as a scribe of the great temple, he was not at a loss for what to say in this place. He greeted the priest and said that he and his companion were pilgrims returning from the great temple of Aminabdid. This pleased the priest, who welcomed Mansur and Sunjit to accompany him with his prisoners to Shiarpur-Faizal. As Mansur and Sunjit had hoped, the scribe offered them food from his stores which they gratefully accepted.

As the caravan traveled onwards, Mansur walked beside the scribe, talking for this was the normal conversation of the scribes of the glories of the Book and the majesty of God's revealed word. As time passed, Mansur looked to the prisoners in the cages. He asked the scribe about their crimes.

At the mention of the prisoners, the scribe's face brightened he was also tired of discussing the Book. He told Mansur that he was happy say a few words. If nothing else, he said, it would be a useful and moral lesson for Mansur to hear how these wretches had strayed from the true path.

Do you see that man over there? said the scribe, pointing to one poor prisoner who sat in the foremost wagon with his face in his hands. He was arrested for despair which is the charge against many that you see here. He was heard to say, and this is from the testimony of several neighbors, that he doubted whether any good could come of his life. He said that he was afraid of what the future might hold for him and for his family.

Here the scribe paused and looked at Mansur meaningfully. Of course the priests could never suffer this. Dread for the future is a failure of trust, a failure to trust the priests and to place full confidence in their wisdom. Which is why they teach the people time and again that there is no greater crime than doubt and uncertainty.

As of course they should, said Mansur, who nodded gravely. For if men and women entertain doubts regarding the future, what else will they doubt?

But it is more than this, answered the scribe. For if doubt is a betrayal of the living so it is also an insult to the dead. How many are the holy who have consecrated their lives to their faith, or the saints who have given up all they have in the name of our God? These pure spirits never knew uncertainty or hesitation or fear, but gladly bent their wills to the Will of their Creator. And after their lesson of courage, who could fail to be steadfast in this day? Whoever doubts betrays their memory, and whoever wavers where they have been certain dishonors those holy dead.

As he continued, the scribe began to warm to his subject. With great enthusiasm, he listed all the criminals the caravan contained. First were the scribes who had made mistakes in copying the Book, and then there were the scribes who had pointed out that the copies contained errors. There was a man who insisted on watering his garden in a year when the Book predicted abundant rainfall and another who had enjoyed a great harvest of apples in a season when the Book had foretold a blight. One woman had been arrested for giving birth to a son a full month before the time prescribed in the Book, another for bearing her child at an age when she should have been barren. And in one wagon at the very back, there was a blind man who had failed to bow when the Book was carried past him and a deaf girl who had not stood to attention when the priests sang prayers in the streets.

Of all the prisoners, one in particular caught Mansur's attention. He was a very old man with wild, white hair and bright, blue eyes. He sat alone in one of the cages and had, it seemed to Mansur, a strangely thoughtful look. There was something in this that appealed to Mansur, and so he asked the scribe about the old man's crime.

The scribe shuddered. This one is the worst of all. This man was by far the greatest threat to his neighbors.

And what harm could such an old man do? asked Mansur, now more curious.

Not harm to their bodies, the scribe replied, but harm to their minds. For this is a madman, a lunatic who lost his own sanity and endangered that of others with his strange notions.

And what if I approached him, inquired Mansur would it harm me to share a few words?

The scribe thought for a moment. As you seem strong of mind and well-versed in the Book, I doubt he could do you much hurt. But if you choose to speak with him, remember that you do so at your own risk.

Mansur agreed to this, and after promising to use the greatest care, he left the side of the scribe and approached the cage in which the madman sat.

8. The Madman

Why is it, said Mansur, speaking softly to the man inside the cage, that you have been imprisoned here?

The eyes of the madman brightened and he answered Mansur clearly and with great conviction. I have been imprisoned through the fault of my family my wife and children rendered me up into the power of the priests.

And why would they do this? asked Mansur.

Because they are all of them insane, replied the madman, with the same conviction as before. Everyone, my son and my daughter, my wife and my brother and my sister: all of them are out of their right minds and have lost their power of reasoning. And it was because I told them this that they sent me here.

As it could be expected, this response only fed Mansur's interest. So after a glance at the scribe, who stood talking with the priest, Mansur asked the prisoner, as gently as he could, about the nature of his family's madness.

Although the insanity that I witnessed took many forms, it had a single source explained the madman. Everyone I knew, from my wife who trusted the priests' ridiculous blessings, to my son who put his faith in prophecies that never came to pass: all of them fell into the same error. All of them abandoned the use of reason in their lives: reason, which alone makes us more than beasts. And there can be no excuse for this. For I knew them long and well enough to understand that like me, they had once possessed this faculty and been sane. They were once endowed with reason, and if they had lost it, it was by their own choice.

And this is what made your family insane? asked Mansur.

At this the madman's blue eyes flashed like hard stones and he grew more excited. Of course it was. And how could they be anything but insane, when they came to believe the nonsense of the priests over what they had known and experienced for themselves? What is it but madness not to trust our own eyes and ears? What is it but to lose our minds, the noblest part of ourselves, when we submit all of our judgments to the wisdom of another? We would never give away our belongings to a thief and how easily do we cast off the most precious adornments of our mind. To the priests we surrender all of our convictions, choices, opinions, loves all that is finest and dearest to us. And in return, we trust in their

wisdom without understanding why, and we believe in the Book even when we have no reason; even when it has been contradicted in fact again and again. Tell me, if this is not the most terrible form of insanity! And it is an insanity that afflicts every human being that I have ever known. My wife is insane, my children are insane, my brothers and sisters and my neighbors are insane, the scribes of the temple, even the priests are insane.

At the mention of the priests, Mansur cast his eyes about. But the priest and the scribe were still fixed in conversation and showed no sign of noticing what the madman said. Very carefully then, and in a soft tone which he hoped would encourage the old man to speak more softly himself, Mansur inquired further. And you say the priests are insane? But how could this be?

To Mansur's great relief, the madman responded in a measured voice. Oh, but they are. They are the least sane of all. For while all the rest make themselves into something less than human, the priests presume to be something more and could there be more dire insanity? If that horse which pulls the cart should believe itself a man, it would not be more ridiculous than these human beings who pretend to a wisdom and discernment which no man or woman can ever possess. If the people are insane to believe that they can trust the priests without reason, the priests are insane twice over when they imagine they are worthy of their unreasoning trust. And this is the true source of all the suffering that we see, all the needless sorrow and injustice visited on the people of the world. For the insane are led by the twice insane: and those with less judgment guided by those with least. It is as if men blind in one eye should follow those blind in two, or that men who hear with only one ear should seek counsel from those who hear with none.

But why? asked Mansur, now forgetting the priest and the scribe entirely, and looking only at the face of the old prisoner. Why must this be the way of the world? Why must the people believe in the follies of the Book? Will they never trust in themselves? In their gift of reason?

The madman shook his head when he heard this. In his eyes Mansur saw a look of inexpressible sadness. This is what I have often wondered. And for the best part of my life it was a riddle past solving; one that cost me many hours of rest. Only now as my years draw to a close have I learned the answer, and it is this: the madness of my neighbors and family reflects the experience of their lives. Men and women choose insanity because it seems the best answer to the insanity of the world. Even I know this and admit it, although I cannot join them. Even I can perceive how weak an instrument sanity seems when we confront a lawless universe. A sane man may speak of reason, but reason is inadequate to explain a world where goodness goes unrewarded and where evil is triumphant. Reason cannot make sense of the random injustice that reigns in all our affairs. Reason looks for order: but there is no order in the pattern of our lives. This world is insane, an outrage to sense. And so to understand it, men and women turn to teachings which are an outrage to sense: doctrines as monstrous and inexplicable as the reality they describe. This is the true logic that I have discovered in the minds of the people. This is the true foundation of their choice to forsake sanity for madness. It is because of this that the strange contradictions of the priests are not only necessary, but inevitable. The teachings of the Book must be insane or men and women would never accept them. Only an insane doctrine seems fit to account for the insanity of their lives. Reason will never satisfy them, because reason is not apparent in the ways of the world.

Here the madman fell silent. And Mansur was quiet too. Finally he drew close to the old prisoner and whispered in his ear that, if he chose, he would try to free him. Mansur asked the old man to join him and Sunjit on their way to the city. But the madman refused and told Mansur he was just as happy to remain in his cage.

I am a very old man, said the madman, and I could not travel far. My life is nearly over now. And as for what I have seen and learned, I believe that though I am a little wiser, I am also much sadder for it. I have discovered that my wife and children and all my neighbors are insane, and I have learned to my sorrow why this must be so. I have remained sane myself, but I have been alone in choosing this. I realize that I would be happier if I had been insane like them, but it was not to be. So I will stay here and wait a little longer. And soon I will learn what death is like. I do not pretend that any of this pleases me, but I know that it is no longer in my power to change.

Mansur thanked the madman for sharing his thoughts, and together, the two said a brief prayer. When the prayer was finished, Mansur left the madman and returned to the front of the caravan.

9. The Poor

In the hours that followed his conversation with the madman, Mansur said very little, either to the priest, or to the scribe,

or to Sunjit. Nor did he sleep well that night, and those who rested near him noticed his unease as he lay awake on the hard ground. He rose early in the morning and returned to the madman's cage, but he was already too late. The old man had died quietly an hour before the dawn. When the priest heard news of this, he declared that the caravan must halt for a burial service. Since the dead man had been mad, the priest explained, he could not be held accountable for his insane opinions. Like a small child or a cretin, his sins were forgiven because he had no capacity to understand why they were sins. And so, in keeping with the rites set down in the Book of Boznah, the priest ordered a deep hole to be dug, deep enough to cover the length of a man from head to toe. And at his command the madman was buried lengthwise, with his head pointing down and his feet pointing up: for this was what the Book prescribed. And over the dead man's heavenward feet, the priest spoke prayers in words so ancient that not even he understood their meaning. When this was done, the caravan continued on its way.

As the hours passed, the country through which the prison train traveled began to change, and Mansur perceived that they were moving into a more populous region. Where the road had been nearly empty before, now men and women and children passed them on their way. And where the land had seemed wild and all but deserted, they now saw houses and fields. But Mansur also saw that the people were very poor. The children, especially, seemed thin and weak, and Mansur looked for a long time at their lean, sunken faces, and their large, hungry eyes. Many of the travelers they met had no shoes and wore threadbare rags wrapped around their feet. And the farms the caravan passed seemed no better off. The fields were dry and dusty, and overrun by clouds of insects, and the only animals Mansur noticed were a few bony goats chewing at the yellowed grass. In most of the farms Mansur passed, he saw no one working. Families sat in the shade with neither livestock nor crops to tend. And in the burial plots, Mansur noticed many fresh graves.

Shortly after noon, the prison train arrived at a humble temple that lay at the foot of a great hill. The inhabitants of the region had anticipated the coming of the priest for days, and dozens of people were crowded before the door of the temple, which they had decorated with the boughs of withered trees. And despite the obvious poverty of the people, it seemed to Mansur that there was something festive in their manner: and in this perception he was correct. For the trials conducted by the priests against heretics, blasphemers, and those given over to despair were regarded as the most important occasions of the year: the greatest, and often the only chance for celebration. In order to express their gratitude, the people presented the priest and his attendants with a meal of goat meat and a thin gruel of grain. Because they traveled with the caravan, Mansur and Sunjit were welcomed to take part in the meal as well. And while he was glad for whatever the people could offer, Mansur was less happy when he noticed that they ate nothing themselves.

When the meal was over, the priest rose from the seat that had been provided for him, and he indicated that he would like to preach a sermon. The priests often preceded their trials with sermons, and the people all crowded closer to hear what he would say. Before he began to speak, the priest stood very straight and he cast his eyes around the crowd with the look of a parent scolding a disobedient child: and as he spoke he chopped the air with his hand for emphasis, his words clear and firm and sharply articulated. He told the people that they had much to be ashamed of and much to regret. They did not remember God in their lives, he told them, and this was the root of all of their miseries. The priest explained to the people that they thought only of the things of the world and that they desired only the things of the world and were mindful of nothing save worldly things. They had forgotten spiritual matters and no longer heeded God and God's commandments. If they were unhappy, the priest explained, this was the reason. For he said that only the Word of God was a pledge of lasting happiness. The longer the people looked to the world for satisfaction, the longer they looked to the world for fulfillment or joy, the more miserable they would become. He told them to look to God and find refuge in the One that made them while there was yet time, and to turn away from the world in which they would only find suffering.

After the sermon was ended, the priest went into the temple to begin the trials, and most of the people followed him. But among the crowd nearly a dozen remained, and Mansur and Sunjit stayed and spoke to them. The people all agreed that they had never seen a woman so beautiful as Sunjit, and they spent several minutes in admiring her. Some marveled at her lovely eyes, and others reached out to touch her long, dark hair: and although Sunjit was unused to this attention she allowed it. For his part, Mansur was curious to understand why these few had not gone to view the trials, but he did not know how to raise the question. Instead he asked them about the famine and inquired how long it had gone on.

"It has lasted for nearly a year," said one old woman, who seemed even thinner than the others. "For nearly a year we have not had a good rainfall, and all of our crops have died and all of our animals have been killed long ago. For myself, I have not eaten a thing this past week, but it does not concern me. I have grandchildren and great-grandchildren who are hungry, and I think only of them. And I will not watch the trial because I do not have the time I spend my days looking for something to feed them."

"I have lost my husband to sickness," said a younger woman, "and now my children have no one else to care for them or find them food. It is the same in all the villages for miles around. They say that there have been more funerals in the last year than in the nine that came before it."

"But why not bring your problems to the priests?" asked Mansur. "Surely if the priests are the guardians of the people, they must do something for you?"

"But they would give us nothing," explained one man, who, though he was no older than Mansur, seemed bent with age. "Indeed, we dare not tell the priests our troubles. If we did they would only say that we think too much of the world and are not mindful of God. They would tell us to pray longer and free ourselves from the desire of earthly things."

"When my children die," answered the younger woman, "the priests say that I must resign myself to this, because it is part of the divine plan. They declare that all things are as our God wills them, and for me to fail to accept them is to fail to submit to His Wisdom and Power."

"The priests tell us that the poor are blessed," said the old woman who had spoken first. "They say that we should not lament our poverty but rejoice, for they promise that our God has given us heavenly riches to compensate for the suffering we undergo here. They declare that our condition is enviable even above their own."

At first Mansur did not know what to say to this. For though he had heard of the suffering of the people during his years in the temple, he had never witnessed it first hand. When he did speak, he chose his words with great care. "Of the fate of the poor, I know nothing," said Mansur, "nothing save what they priests have taught. But I hope that their teaching is correct: since you enjoy no other blessings that I can see. I hope that our God cares for the poor as much as the priests say I know that there is none on earth who does."

Here all the people nodded in agreement, and the shadow of a smile crept across the old woman's face, and she spoke very slowly. "And this is the single comfort that I derive from the words of the priests: the promise that a better life awaits. It is this thought alone that makes my life bearable. I have lost children, and grandchildren, and now great-grandchildren to famine and sickness, and each time it has come close to breaking my heart. If it were not for the knowledge that even their deaths are part of God's design, I do not think that I could have born it. I think that I would have died of grief long ago."

The old woman looked at first as if she would have liked to say more, but instead she turned and left. The others began to walk away as well, some shaking their heads and muttering to one another as they went. And in a few moments, Mansur and Sunjit were alone at the door of the temple.

10. The Fleet

It took longer than expected for the prison caravan to reach the coastal city of Shiarpur-Faizal, certainly longer than Mansur had foreseen: but then unexpected delays were the rule in the land of Nod. There were always new trials to be held along the way and new criminals to be added to the wagons. And so for many days at a time, the caravan would halt so that justice could be done. Mansur and Sunjit attended all of the trials, and both of them found the verdicts instructive. Or at least Mansur was heard to say that they had learned a great deal from watching them. But all good things, so it was written in the Book, must come to an end. And at length even the trials were finished, and after many days on the road, Mansur and Sunjit reached the gates of the great city.

The gates of Shiarpur-Faizal were themselves a remarkable sight. Ever conscious of the majesty of their office and the enduring spiritual significance of architecture, the priests had raised an exceptional monument. The gates of Shiarpur-Faizal were tall and wide as no other gates in any of the cities of Nod. They were a fitting tribute, said all who saw them, to the glory and the dignity of the priesthood, a wordly reminder of an otherworldly authority. And if this were not enough, relatively few lives had been lost building them.

It was just inside the gates of Shiarpur-Faizal that Mansur told Sunjit that their ways would have to part. Mansur did not

tell Sunjit where he would go: he only said that he had business at the docks and that she must find her own way. Although he was sorry to leave his beautiful companion among the endless streets and houses of the city, Mansur was more determined than ever to find a boat and set sail. Now that had set foot in the port city, his dream of finding the unwritten island was real as it had never been before. All he needed, he thought, was to make himself useful as a fisherman. Then it would only require luck to discover the island where Faruk and his companions had been wrecked. These, and many thoughts like them, Mansur turned over in his mind as he asked the direction to the docks. And if his tired body had been as willing as his mind, he would have walked there that night. But while the spirit is strong—so it was written in the Book—the flesh is weak. And so Mansur fell asleep in one of the alleyways of the city. But when morning came, he went straight to the docks.

Now, since Mansur had never left Aminabdid before he was banished by the priests, he had not seen the coast before. And so he knew little of what to expect when he arrived at the the docks of Shiarpur-Faizal. So it may be wondered how he could find what he saw there unusual. The truth is that while Mansur knew nothing of the normal condition of the docks, he was nevertheless certain of seeing something extraordinary. For the docks of Shiarpur-Faizal were crowded with more ships than he had imagined could be found in the four corners of Nod. Great and small, old and new, boats of all sizes were anchored in every possible place: there were so many that there was not room for all of them, and the smaller were tethered to the larger, stretching far out to sea.

And this was not the strangest sight that greeted Mansur as he looked down on the docks. For while the sea was crowded with ships the land was crowded too: thick clusters of people, mostly men but also women, that swarmed up and down the shoreline. And what was stranger yet, Mansur saw that they carried similar implements: axes and picks were everywhere, shovels and buckets were the most common of all. Not even in the thronging streets of Aminabdid had Mansur seen so many people—or so many shovels. He rushed into the crowd as fast as he could and looked for someone to explain the peculiar scene before him.

“To do the work of God—praise be to His name!” replied one man when Mansur asked him why he carried a shovel. “For the triumph of the Book!” said a young woman holding an axe. Another group of men walked past Mansur singing hymns as they held their picks and shovels above their heads. When Mansur asked them what they did, they marched on past without, it seemed, even noticing him. A moment later, Mansur felt the butt of an axe handle prodding him in the back. “Praise God,” someone cried, “get out of the way!”

Mansur had almost despaired of discovering anything when, to his surprise, he heard a familiar voice calling him. At first Mansur did not know who spoke: he could see no one that he knew among the sea of faces. And then, in a moment, he realized whose voice he heard. There, beside a small, new fishing boat, stood a man of middle age. And although his appearance was strange, Mansur recognized the voice of Faruk, the captain of the sailors that he had met during his time in the desert. Now shaven, clean, and dressed as a rich man, Faruk stood beside the boat and asked Mansur to come nearer.

“But how is it that you are here?” These were the first words that escaped from Mansur when he saw Faruk. “It was only a matter of weeks and you were in the desert.” Faruk smiled—Mansur could never remember him smiling before. “This is something I will explain to you, but first come with me.”

And so Mansur, after another glance back at the crowded shore, followed Faruk into the waiting ship. The boat was not large, but it was new and well-made, and Mansur found himself wondering, even before he could ask, how Faruk had come to own it after his disgrace. He had his chance at last, but only after he had first been given both food and drink from Faruk s modest stores. Only after he had finished eating did Mansur find occasion to ask the questions he had held so long in his mind.

Before he answered, Faruk smiled again. “It is my chance for redemption,” he explained. “At long last, God in His great mercy has opened the door to forgiveness, to a new opportunity to wash away my sins. Everything that I had before, my wealth and my honor and my place in God s favor—all of this will now be restored to me. I will redeem myself and I will redeem the Book.”

Although Mansur said nothing, his looks spoke for him. So Faruk continued. “It was hours after you left us that the great thing happened. Not half a day had passed when we saw approaching a delegation—from the High Priest himself! I and all my companions were received with honor and escorted to a special audience with the High Priest. And what he told me then, I never dreamed I would hear. He wanted my help, he wanted my help to find the island on which

my ship was wrecked. Since the day I was banished, many boats had stopped there, he said, as more and more sailors discovered the wealth of fish on the Northeast banks.”

“I can understand,” said Mansur, interrupting “why no order of the priests could keep the fishermen from following the best catch. But why, if the High Priest wanted to find the island, would he seek you out in the desert? Were there no others who could lead him there?”

“There were not,” replied Faruk. “Because they are all dead. Because my crew and I were the first to glimpse the unwritten island, and because we repented our crime, the High Priest favored us with a mild sentence. But others who came later were not so lucky. They were put to death time and again in the hope that knowledge of the land which lies outside the wisdom of the Book would die with them. Many were killed this way, and when the High Priest devised his current plan, there was no one left to show him the way.”

“And the current plan,” asked Mansur, “what is that? Why does it require so many ships and so many people?”

Here Faruk smiled. “It is as I told you, my hope for redemption. It is my chance to win a new life by undoing my former sin. For it is the plan of the High Priest, with my help, to make straight what is crooked and restore the authority of the Book. The High Priest has declared that the unwritten island will be destroyed, removed from the world where God's holy Book says that it has no place. The fleet you see assembled will carry to the island an army of laborers—both men and women gathered for a holy crusade. With their axes they will chop down the trees, with their picks they will break up the stones, and with their shovels they will fill their buckets and cast the shards and sand into the sea. When they are done, the island shall be no more, and this body of land which should never exist, which does not exist in the pages of the Book will disappear. And I will begin my new life.”

Faruk would have said more, but here he was interrupted. One of his former crewmen appeared and brought word from the docks of a woman desperately seeking a man fitting Mansur's description. Faruk asked Mansur if he knew what this meant, and Mansur responded that he thought he might. And so Faruk told the sailor to invite the woman on board his ship.

11. The Island

As Mansur had imagined, the woman who boarded the little fishing boat was none other than Sunjit. And if she seemed more beautiful than at any time before, she was beautiful in her tears. For Sunjit's lovely face was streaked with tears, and every feature bore the marks of her distress. At first she was too excited even to speak, and she took several moments to find the breath for more than a few disconnected words. When she did speak, it with a voice still weak and thin and wavering. “Help me! Tell me what I can do or where I can go! I have doomed myself and I have doomed you.”

At first neither Faruk nor Mansur made any move. Neither was prepared for Sunjit's sudden appearance or her words, and Faruk, who had never seen so beautiful a woman before, could only stare in wonder. It was Mansur who acted first. He motioned for Sunjit to sit and gently asked her to tell him what had happened since they parted a day before.

“I had gone only a few steps from you,” explained Sunjit, “when I was approached by the same priest and scribe who traveled with us to the city. They asked me how I knew you. They said they were concerned that you had spoken so long with the madman in the prison wagons: they had come to fear you might be mad yourself. I told them I had not known you long, which was true, and if this had been the end of their questions, I think they would have believed me. But they began to ask me about myself, and here I had no answers. I could think of no lie and my fear was obvious. I stumbled and trembled and I broke beneath the gaze of the priest. Before I could say another word, I was brought to an audience in the temple, a jury of nine priests, and there I told the truth of my story—although I betrayed nothing of yours. I admitted the month and day and hour of my birth, and I confessed that my hands and feet and face were not as the Book foretold. In another moment, it seemed, I heard their verdict—and how I wish I had never heard it! For the priests have decreed that they will vindicate the Book by fulfilling its prophecy. Their sentence is to remove one of my fingers, to remove one of my toes, and to scar and deform my face with a sharp razor: so that I will look at last as it has been written in the Book.”

Here Sunjit paused. And it can be wondered whether Mansur or Faruk would have heard her then if she continued. The thought of those lovely features marred by a razor blade was too much for either man, and for a moment both were silent. And although Mansur and Sunjit did not notice it, Faruk had turned so pale that he was almost white. Finally, Mansur recovered his wits enough to ask Sunjit how she had escaped the priests' sentence.

"It was the old bailiff," she answered, "a simple man who had never so much as read the Book, but who was there in the temple when my sentence was decreed. After my trial I was led to a cell where I waited for a priest to arrive with the razor. It was then that the bailiff came to my door and whispered these words: I am an old man and I may forget to lock some of the cells. When I asked him why he would do this for me, he replied that any punishment he received for neglecting his duty would not be as terrible to him as seeing my face deformed. And so I escaped. And since I had not told the priests your destination, I hoped I could find you at the docks before they did, which, thanks to the blessing of our God, I have."

"But what can I do?" Mansur asked Sunjit. "For if the priests suspect me, they will find me out as well. And how could I protect you? Now that they know your face, they will look for you until they carry out their sentence."

"You can both hide here, and come with me to the island." Here Faruk, who had still to regain his color, spoke for the first time since he had seen Sunjit. "You may stay aboard this ship until the crusade to destroy the island is finished. What you will do next, you may decide after."

Both Sunjit and Mansur were at a loss to say anything to this. Neither of them understood, at that moment, why Faruk was willing to risk so much to help them. This was because neither of them realized, that like the old bailiff who had left her prison door unlocked, Faruk had fallen instantly in love with Sunjit. The thought of cold steel slicing into her features only enhanced her beauty in his eyes: as all fine things seem most precious when they are most fragile. When Faruk had first seen Sunjit, he had not known what to think: he could only look and listen. But by the time her story was finished he was determined. All the thoughts of sin and redemption that had crowded into his mind were wiped away in a single stroke. From that moment he thought only of her beauty and how he could protect it.

Faruk's first decision was to prepare his little craft to sail at once. The fleet was not to leave for the unwritten island until the morning, but since Faruk would lead the way, he said the boat needed to be readied at once. And he let it be known among his former crewmen that he would not need them to pilot his ship—he could not trust any of them keep the presence of Mansur and Sunjit a secret.

And so it was that on the morning of the next day, an hour before the dawn, the great crusading fleet of the priests of Nod set out for its destination; a holy fleet guided by two men and one woman who had violated the holy law. For days they traveled, and Mansur and Sunjit did all they could do to assist Faruk aboard the boat, and they noticed little more. Because Faruk was still too frightened by Sunjit's beauty to speak to her directly, he gave all of his instructions through Mansur, with whom he conferred at each stage of their journey. By the morning of the fourth day, Faruk told Mansur that he would signal to the fleet that they had drawn close, and that the island itself would soon come into sight to the East. Down the long line of crusading ships that followed them, the sound of hymns was heard, as men and women prepared their souls to do God's work.

As they stood on Faruk's deck, watching the dawn break, Sunjit asked Mansur how he would feel to set eyes upon the unwritten island. Mansur thought long before answering this. At last he replied that while he had once dreamed of seeing the island for himself, he did not feel the same way now.

"The thought that the island is to be destroyed by the fleet of the priests makes it hard for me to think of it as I once did," said Mansur. "For just as I fear to imagine the harm they would do to your face, so I tremble to think what it must be for them to deface the natural beauty of the world. If it is terrible to destroy features as lovely as yours, so it is a violation of the earth that they should strip it of the things which make it beautiful. Not only the island itself, but that the birds and the trees that dwell there should be no more—this grieves me more than any words can tell. I fear even that I am sick at heart."

Sunjit wanted more than anything else to tell Mansur something that would console him, but she could think of nothing:

nothing that would give any real comfort. And although she felt much, she had no words to express it. Trust in the priests and in the wisdom of the priests had been the sum of her education. Nothing she had learned had prepared her to explain the thoughts that overwhelmed her when she heard what Mansur said. If she could have spoken, it would only have been to declare her confusion. It seemed, she would have said, an inexplicable contradiction, a riddle without any clear solution. Nothing that she had believed was true, and every trust had been betrayed. The stable foundation of her world had been broken, and she had no new faith to replace it. The priests were everything holy, and yet their actions did not seem holy, and she did not understand the reason. For the priests to overturn the work of creation seemed to her like the sun shedding darkness on the earth, impossible and monstrous, a nightmare vision seen with waking eyes.

But Sunjit said none of this. She only looked to the light that was breaking in the East and tried to make sense of her thoughts. A few moments longer, and she might have found the words she searched for: but their conversation was cut short by Faruk's cries that they should look not East, but West. And so Mansur and Sunjit turned to face the new sight that broke upon the Western horizon.

12. The Storm

It was written in the Book of Boznah that men and women are often disappointed in their thoughts of the future—whether hopes or fears. The things which they foresee, so it was written, do not come to pass, and for things surpassing expectation, God opens a way. And this is how it was in the final chapter of Mansur's story. For instead of the outline of the unwritten island, the unexpected shape which broke upon the horizon was a ship, a mighty frigate bearing the purple sails of the High Priest. To reach the island, the fleet that set out from Shiarpur-Faizal had proceeded slowly, in a long train that stretched backwards across the broad waters of the sea. And now, for reasons that no one yet knew, the ship of the High Priest had pursued and overtaken them.

Mansur did not know why the ship approached, but at once he feared for the worst. And in this at least, his expectations did not betray him. For upon the ship rode the High Priest and his greatest ministers: their mission no less than the capture of Faruk's ship. In the hours before the fleet sailed, reports had come from the docks of a woman of surpassing beauty and of a strange man clad in animal skins: reports dutifully relayed to the High Priest, who had arrived in person to witness the preparation of the fleet. And if the High Priest was angry to hear that Mansur had escaped from the desert, he was angrier still to hear that Sunjit was with him. For it was the High Priest who had assumed for himself the duty of correcting Sunjit's face. The priests who had tried her were unanimous in ruling that this responsibility be reserved for their master: a decision which the High Priest accepted gladly, for he loved justice above all things. But there was no passage in the Book capable of comforting the High Priest when he found that he had been cheated in his hope. The discovery of Sunjit's empty prison cell left him furious and bent on retribution. When the report of Mansur and Sunjit reached him, the fleet had only just set sail for the Northeast, and the High Priest ordered his ship to be readied at once to pursue them.

As Mansur saw the High Priest's purple sails gleaming in the new sun, he turned to Faruk and asked him what chance they might have of escaping. "Our hopes are few," Faruk replied. "The ship is large, it is true, but it has many sails and strong oars and we will not elude it long. But that will be as it may. I..." and here Faruk looked for a long moment at Sunjit's smooth and flawless face "...I will do what I can."

And so Faruk began to steer his little boat away from the main body of the fleet that had been assembled to follow him. He hoped, he said, to throw the other ships into confusion. He told Mansur and Sunjit that it would win them time, perhaps even enough to draw away altogether. By the time the High Priest knew which ship to follow, he hoped that their fishing boat could slip out of sight.

At first Faruk's plan showed every sign of succeeding. His sudden change in course caught the entire fleet off guard. As Faruk's boat, which had guided them, pulled farther and farther away, all of the ships down the line were thrown into confusion, one after another falling off course, and the entire fleet came to a halt. And as the little fishing craft drew away, it seemed that it might yet leave the High Priest behind.

But this—like so many things either for good or ill—was not to be. For the High Priest had heard from his spies a description of the little boat that carried Mansur and Sunjit. And he ordered his oarsmen to bear down upon it as fast as they could. And it soon became clear to the three fugitives that the High Priest's ship was drawing closer. For although the wind still bore them swiftly East, their fishing craft was no match for the great, purple sails.

“I am fortunate,” said Mansur to Sunjit. “I will only be put to death. But you will have to live.”

“I do not believe,” replied Sunjit, “that I will live long.”

“By rights I should have died before this,” said Faruk. “I thought that my life was over when I found the island. And now I see that this was true.”

As the minutes passed, slowly, and the ship of High Priest moved ever closer, Mansur saw no escape, and he knelt down to pray. But before he could say a word, there was a great crash as a huge wave smashed into the side of Faruk s boat. Mansur and Sunjit, who had never known such a wave were knocked off their feet. And by the time they regained their footing, a wave just as large as the first struck the boat again. Mansur and Sunjit asked Faruk what this meant, but the sailor did not hear them, and looked only at the gathering clouds. And within a few minutes, no answer was needed, as the winds grew stronger, and the waves rose higher, and the full force of the storm broke upon them. For a storm it was, a storm as great and violent as the one that had struck Faruk s fleet nearly ten years ago and cast it upon the unwritten island.

As the storm grew and built, the sky darkened and clouds gathered overhead, and great drops of rain lashed the air, and the winds whipped harder and harder. In the dark heart of the storm it was no longer possible to see if the High Priest s ship was near or far. Even the direction the storm blew was not clear, and as the battering waves continued to strike Faruk s boat, all notion of time or place was lost. It seemed to Mansur that he was aware of nothing now but the power of the storm, which at every instant was amplified and redoubled. In one moment it seemed the little ship would be hurled up into the heavens, and at another it plunged almost to the bottom of the sea. But the boat was new and it was built well, and with every plunge it rose again. And at long last, so long that Mansur forgot when it had begun, the force of the storm began to subside: the waves sank down and the wind became milder. And in one spot after another, patches of light began to break in the sky, and Mansur cast his eyes about to see where they were, or if the ship of the High Priest had followed them.

The first direction Mansur looked was West, and as he looked, his heart sank within him. For there in the distance, plainly visible over the slowly calming waters, he saw flying the purple sails of the High Priest, still moving swiftly towards him. But just as Mansur gave voice to his despair, he stopped. For even as he faced West, a wild shout of amazement rose up from Faruk and Sunjit, who had both cast their eyes in the opposite direction. And Mansur turned to the East and he saw what they had seen—and for the first time in his life, he did not believe the evidence of his eyes. For there, stretching ahead as far as he could see, whether he looked to the North or to the South, was land, seemingly endless miles of land at the utmost East of the world. For the storm had blown their boat East, farther East than Faruk had sailed even in his most daring voyage, even to the very coast of a strange and unfamiliar continent. And as he looked at the alien coast, Mansur could see rising up the jagged peaks of mountains like none that he had ever seen in Nod: great mountains clad in deep green forests and peaked with white snowy tops that pierced the clouds: long chains of mighty summits that slowly faded from his view. And still Mansur looked and still he saw more: roads, and bridges, and the outline of a strange city that lay upon the shore of the newfound country. And from that city, tall and graceful towers rose with a beauty and proportion that was like nothing that he had seen in Nod or learned in his study of the Book. And the tops of the towers were high and sharp, and they shone like gold in the light of the noonday sun. These, and many more unaccustomed shapes Mansur could clearly see: for all was close and growing closer as the wind blew Faruk s ship still Eastwards. And still the sky cleared, and still Mansur saw yet more. For not only the land was new, but the sea was changed as well. Upon its grey swells Mansur saw riding boats that were not the boats of Nod: great sea-going vessels of unfamiliar design, ships which moved even against the wind towards him, gliding across the water with a grace that seemed miraculous.

And as for the ship of the High Priest, Mansur and his companions did not look back at it again. They did not turn to see if it still pursued them. Nor did they stop to wonder how the High Priest would react to the marvelous sights that stretched before them: what his thoughts might be when he was witness at once to so much that was not recorded in the Book. They turned their back on him forever and looked only to the East, as to the East the waves bore them, ever closer and closer towards their new home.

And so it was that Mansur, Faruk, and Sunjit left forever the land of Nod and passed beyond the utmost boundaries of the world that were recorded in the Book. And so it was that the High Priest returned to Nod and announced the beginning of a new era for his people. He declared that it was written in the Book that men and women were never meant to sail upon the ocean and that all vessels fit for travel on the sea should be destroyed. And he decreed terrible penalties

for anyone who defied this law by failing to sink their ships or who tried to build anything larger than a rowboat or a river skiff. Nod was the whole world, he explained, and it was a sin of the highest order to look beyond it or to imagine that anything but darkness lay upon its borders. Men and women had all they needed on land, so there was no reason to look to the sea. And if the people of Nod ever saw strange ships on the Eastern horizon, he told them they should not believe in them because they were not real. Such illusions, he warned, could be very powerful, as he had discovered himself.

And so the affairs of Nod continued as they always had in the years that had gone before, and the people of Nod led their lives as they had always led them. And the remarkable sameness that characterized the life of Nod was preserved. But for Mansur, Faruk, and Sunjit, life was never the same again. They passed on into a new land and became part of a new world. And there they learned many things that were not written in the Book. They learned that the world was larger than they had been taught, and that the land of Nod, which they had once thought was the whole world, was only an island surrounded on every side by still greater continents. They learned too that there were other languages than the one spoken in Nod, other customs, and even other religions: ideas as strange and beautiful and varied as the people who held them. And they learned that while the men and women in each country spoke and dressed and acted differently, everywhere the human condition was the same: the same hopes, and also the same doubts and fears and uncertainties. For to be human, they learned, was to hope, but also to fear and to doubt and to find no firm assurance.

And this ends, so far as may be told, the story of Mansur and of his friends: how they passed from one world into another. As for what happened next; whether they were happy in their new lives, or if they experienced only good fortune from that day onward; nothing more may be said. And if Mansur ever found the peace of mind he looked for, or whether he still wondered from time to time about the nature of his soul, or the purpose of his life, or the providence of his God, it is for none to tell. For it is with this story even as it is with life: an ending, but no conclusion. And if the telling has raised more questions than it has answered, it could not be otherwise. For it is the nature of questions, as Mansur learned, to beget more in turn: so that one leads to two, and a few to many. And if there was ever any answer either final or certain, men and women may only guess: for it was never written down in the Book.