

Chapter 18, *The Song*

With the guests' appetites sated, the serving tables were cleared. Some began speaking in hushed tones, and the phrase "*The Song*" was heard more than once. Along the back wall, those in the places of highest honor moved toward the corners, leaving a space open before the burial chamber. Manotu's daughter, with help from the two servants, moved a red-lacquered panel, taller than a man and with gilt designs, to block the space in front of the tomb's open doors. The lamp-stands in the corners of the room were extinguished, save one, which they moved behind the panel. Only the eerie and indirect light from beyond it bathed the room in muted glow.

For a long while, the group remained in hushed suspense. Shamir leaned over to Aslah and whispered, "What is this? For what are we waiting?"

"I forgot that you've not been to Manotu's *marzeah* feasts before. We wait for...*The Song*."

"Which song is that? I know such feasts have a time of music, but I've not heard there is one, specific song among them. What is the song we shall hear?"

"The question, Shamir, should not be '*what* is the song,' but rather, '*who* is The Song?'"

The young man's eyes narrowed, and his brows crowded together. "This is a perplexing question—*who* is the song? I do not understand..."

Aslah turned fully toward him and spoke deliberately. "Though easily stated, the question is not easily answered. She, whom we shall hear, *is* The Song. And why she is called that, you will only know by your own hearing. Occasionally an experience trumps, and even defies, all verbal explanation and description. On this night, you shall gain your own experience, and form your own memory, of hearing The Song."

While not yet understanding, Shamir asked no more questions.

With all preparations complete, silence stilled the hall. Into the quiet space, three figures stepped from the courtyard's entrance. In the dim light, there appeared two young women and a man. The man held a double-piped *aulos* to his lips and began a slow, melodious tune, the longer

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pipe providing a bass-drone. The music haunted, and stirred something deep within Shamir. He closed his eyes.

The woman nearest him began strumming a seven-string *barbiton* harp, and the other bowed her single-strung *rebab*. The simplicity of the strain gave way to rich harmonies, then detailed counterpoint. Each musician took their turn, flying, soaring on dizzying cadenzas, finally coming back to rest with the initial, unison melody. The women joined the tune with their voices, humming the same.

Shamir placed a red silken bolster against the wall and propped himself against it. As the music swelled, in pure, silver voice they sang in wordless accompaniment. The voices soothed and moved him. He heard some in the gathering singing along with the women, and knowing the song, they began adding its lyrics. It was a song of request, a song of longing. They sang,

*“Sweet bird, sweet bird of freedom,  
Look down upon us, far from rest—*

*Soar on wind’s bright flight  
to our fathers’ home, Dear Song,  
Where in liberty we sang you,  
where our freedom flowed  
in singing you.*

*There, under bluest sky,  
red sand hides our wealth  
There, to desert wind’s roar,  
our infants nurse and sleep.*

*Walking, riding, always moving,  
no man enslaves us  
by his bonds  
We rest not at the destination,  
Journey is our home  
We find not peace at destination,  
Journey is our home.*

*The liquid treasure,  
living, flowing,  
Lies hid in desert sand  
The heartless desert kills all others,*

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*kills our every foe.*

*They say we have no root  
—have no root—  
are rootless like the dunes  
But our roots are in the knowing  
—in the knowing—  
Journey is our home  
Journey is our home.*

*Come, sweet bird,  
sweet bird of freedom bright,  
Guide our steps  
and guard our night.”*

The singing faded, and the instruments slowed their melody, dropping out one-by-one. At last, the double-flute played alone and brought the song to a close.

Shamir leaned toward Aslah and whispered, “This was wonderful, but I thought you said it would be one woman...”

Aslah put a finger to his lips, and with obvious intent, nodded toward the red panel in front of the burial space. Shamir followed his gaze and waited. The flute player began again, floating a different melody on the air. The women accompanied him, but this time, with a small hand-drum and finger cymbals. The music hovered through the chamber, solemnity and beauty riding upon it. His eyes drifted away from the red panel, but something moving slowly in the light behind, fixed his eyes back upon it. Shadows played at the edge of the panel.

A metal object—its rim silvery and glinting in the lamp-light—peeked out from behind the panel’s edge. It moved with slow purpose in a circular arc, gradually exposing more of its shape. Synchronized to the music’s rise and fall, the circles expanded, revealing the object as a silver disc, the size of a serving platter and embossed with symbols suggestive of the moon. Slender fingers held it from behind, and continued moving it in ever-larger, hypnotic spirals.

The motion slowed, and as it ceased, a form glided out from behind the panel—the face hiding perfectly behind the moon-disc. A diaphanous pure-blue silk draped the woman’s body. Her free arm and hand undulated like gentle waves on a pool—rhythmic, measured and musical. The timbrel and cymbals continued, but the flute ended its hymn, focusing yet more attention on

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the figure. The free hand joined its twin at the disc's rim, and together, they swayed and danced with the disc in ever-dilating loops.

The outward-coiling circles gradually revealed her face from behind the edges of the disc. A partially transparent, white veil of silk cascaded over her face from black hair above. Lamps behind the panel lit the gauze in such a way as to mostly obscure her features. Shamir willed his eyes to look beyond the veil, to see the face.

Powdered lapis-stone colored the upper lids of her eyes a vivid sapphire, the lower lids green with malachite, and her lips glowed with the red iridescence of crushed pearls mixed with the blood of pomegranates. Her face, lightly dusted with more crushed pearl, glimmered in the light. Three bright-blue feathers, each the size of a fingernail, adorned the outside of the veil, trailing down from her eye like jeweled tears.

A voice, almost inaudible at first, began to permeate the chamber. Without words, and seeming to have no source, the voice rose slowly, like mist from an oasis on a cold morning. It hovered in the midst of the room before drifting out, to enter and en-trance each ear. Though no words yet graced the song, it whispered with lyrical clarity to each heart.

Slight motions began to stir her lips, and the bodiless voice floated toward the woman, finding her mouth and joining it. Word and melody merged as one, and the lyrics of The Song took shape. She sang,

*“Set me, like a seal, over your heart,  
like a seal upon your arm;  
For love is strong as death,  
for love is strong as death.*

*Its jealousy as fierce as the grave,  
Its flashes burn like fire,  
like a mighty flame,  
the very flame of the divine.*

*Many waters cannot quench love;  
rivers cannot sweep it away,  
nor floods drown it.*

*If a man—*

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*if a man offered  
For Love  
All the wealth of his house,  
it would be utterly despised.  
He would be laughed to shame;  
it would be far too lacking  
For Love.”*

The Song flowed on, relating the tale of a woman’s pure love for her man, and his for her—a Queen and her King. The stanza *Set me like a seal...* returned as a refrain throughout, proclaiming the peerless power of love.

Shamir forgot where he was, and began moving his body with The Song. He no longer sensed he sat on a cushion, on a stone couch carved from the earth’s bulk, but felt himself levitated, hovering somewhere, far beyond the marzeah. He dreamed he danced among the stars, The Song his partner, swinging and swaying before him. Her garments billowed about her, their hems and folds brushing his face, his arms. They not only danced but lived an entire lifetime together, somewhere beyond the milky road, in the indigo of a midnight sky.

He felt a tap on his arm and jerked his eyelids open, to see Aslah looking at him with puzzled eyes. All the guests engaged in conversation, and all the lamps glowed again with flames, lighting the room with a warm brilliance. He blinked his eyes twice and sat up straight, rubbing his face with his hands. Looking over to where he last saw The Song, the panel was gone and he could once again see into the burial chamber. The guests of honor—Manotu and his daughter, the uncle, the priest and the architect—had resumed their places along the back wall.

He whispered to Aslah, “What happened?...Where did she go?...Is it over?”

Aslah laughed. “I should have known you would not be prepared for the experience. Between the wine and The Song, you had no chance. This was like throwing a mouse between a leopard and a lioness. Look awake, if you can. They are about to serve the last course. I hear the King has sent over some of the best fruit from his orchards, and the finest of wines from his cellar.”

The best of all the best was again served personally by Manotu and his daughter. They drank again to the glories of the family of Manotu, and cast their bowls with vigor to shatter upon the floor. Sweet juice from peaches, pomegranates and apricots ran down Shamir’s chin, wetting and

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staining the front of his tunic. The conversations continued into the night, and the young man felt filled to the brim, in head, in heart, and in stomach.

The priest stepped to the center of the room and stretching his arms wide, pronounced a benediction upon the guests, granting them all peace, prosperity, and happiness. With nothing more to be said or done, one-by-one they left the dining chamber, to mill about on the plaza for a few moments, before finally leaving for their own homes, and sleep.