

Soroz

by J. Mykell Collinz

Less than a hundred adults remain, predominately women, along with several dozen children of various ages. Most of their men were killed in a territorial war six moons previous. They move cautiously westward into a wide canyon, looking for a defensible position, wanting to camp before nightfall. On their right, three murmuring streams cascade down from the mountain, converging at the bottom into a lake which spills into a swampy river surrounded by a grassy meadow. Tall trees appear through the mist a short distance ahead.

Their leader, a woman named Isoroz, speaks to those beside her, saying:

"We have arrived. This is my vision. Let us gather and give thanks to the spirit."

Her youngest son, Zorsoroz, laughs as he continues walking through the tall grass towards the forest.

A young woman, Evoza, catches up with him, and says:

"You laugh at your mother?"

He looks down at her without replying, admiring her beauty, wanting to lay with her in the grass.

Evoza has recently passed through initiation ceremonies led by Isoroz into the spirit world. She is anxious to search the forest for more of the special plants needed to perform their rituals. She also wants to be with Zorsoroz, to influence his thinking. He presents a challenge to her personally, she feels, and to the future of their people. By openly opposing his mother, he has created a following

among the youth, who repeat his words and imitate his mocking gestures.

The dark forest is mostly clear of undergrowth, allowing for easy access beneath the tall trees whose leafy outer canopy prevents sunlight from penetrating.

Isoroz selects a location to camp on the edge of the forest closest to the lake. Large stones, fallen from the mountain in earlier times, create a natural barrier, providing a protected living area. At a general gathering by the lake after dark, illuminated by fire pits and torches, she announces:

"We will be safe here."

Zorsoroz is pleased with his mother's choice of camping location, yet he asserts:

"We must be prepared for an attack. Be ready to fight, to hold our position here. We need a training exercise. Full participation. Everybody learns. Where to go, what to do. I will organize and command."

Isoroz replies:

"We can't defend ourselves against experienced fighting men armed with superior weapons. We need you to think beyond that. It's time to seek your inner vision, journey to the spirit world, find the future for us there."

Zorsoroz opens his mouth reflexively but immediately controls his emotions and muzzles his angry words. He can see his mother's appreciation for this expressed in her eyes as she stares back at him, waiting.

"I tried the spirit medicine," he finally speaks: "It didn't work for me, I didn't like it."

"That was then," she replies: "You were still a boy. Try it now."

Evoza filters the soluble extracts from choice roots, vines, and leaves chopped and boiled earlier in a copper kettle along with spring water. She squeezes it through a special cloth woven from dried plant fibers. She then pours the liquid into a copper bowl.

Zorsoroz sips from the bowl and is pleasantly surprised by the rich, sensual flavor. His lips, tongue, and mouth tingle as the extract travels through his esophagus and into his stomach.

This night is a special, everyone knows, and they all participate in the vision seeking ritual through music and dance, including the children. Many consume intoxicants of various potency.

The glow from their fires, along with the sound of their chanting voices and pounding drums, alerts a band of raiders, members of the same group who previously drove them from their land and killed most of their men in a fierce battle.

Looking down at the campsite from a mountain ledge, the leading raider ponders:

"It's mostly women, performing witchcraft. Something tells me we should keep moving and not anger their demons. There are better targets up ahead."

As the chanting and dancing rhythms intensify, Evoza refills the copper bowl.

Isoroz has consumed a milder potion and she watches her son intently.

Zorsoroz sits on a straw cushion with his legs folded and calmly drinks his second bowl. A welcome relaxation spreads throughout his body. He feels weightless. Suddenly, his hearing becomes muffled, his vision blurs, his eyes close involuntarily and he turns inside out, into a panoramic world of kaleidoscopic patterns, shapes, and brilliant colors. He doesn't like it, it's out of control. A loud, unintelligible voice surrounds him. It's coming from every direction at once. Faces appear and disappear among the patterns and shapes. They're all the same face. They're laughing at him. It's his own face but he doesn't recognize it at first. When he finally realizes the face and the voice are his own, he panics, thinking he has left his body, fearing he has lost his way back and he will forever be a disembodied consciousness floating helplessly in a boundless, raging, chaotic fury.

Through strength of willpower, he manages to open his eyes. He sees his mother and Evoza patiently watching him and he laughs, relieved of his fears. Yet his mind races to understand the implications of his inner vision.

"Don't fight it," his mother tells him: "Quiet your thoughts. Stop trying to verbalize everything. Answers will come in time. Let yourself go."

Her last words recede beneath the surface of his consciousness as his eyes again close involuntarily. Memories of his father, his brothers, and his friends dying in battle appear at once, not verbally or visibly, but with a new sense of awareness. He had locked the memories away from his consciousness to avoid the continuous agony they produced. This agony now consumes him. His personal desires, dreams, and illusions dissolve and evaporate, leaving nothing in their place. Yet, from this emptiness, he asserts his will to life, to continue, to learn and grow, to love unconditionally.

Feeling as though he has just awakened to the world, he finds himself floating in a viscous fluid with a cord attached to his stomach. He's being squeezed head first through a tight opening.

"This is not really happening," he tells himself: "It's a figment of my imagination."

"What imagination?" he hears a voice speaking from the other side of the tight opening: "You have no imagination. You're an oafish bore."

Finally through the opening, he falls onto the ground, covered with the sticky fluid.

The voice belongs to a goldfish, swimming through the air:

"Don't worry we won't keep you long. We'll get you up on your feet and back to your old self in no time. But first, you need a lesson on how to access your imagination. Here, see how this works. Come back any time for an upgrade."

The earth beneath him morphs. He falls backwards through a space filled with memories, sounds, and familiar images until he penetrates water with enough momentum to carry him under. He paddles to the surface to find it's early morning and he's treading water in the middle of the lake.

Evoza swims up and he feels her naked body pressing against him.

"How long have I been out here?" he wonders.

"I'm not sure," she replies: "I slept. Your mother woke me. She's worried. How do you feel."

"Good, I feel good. Hungry, hungry for love."

"You mean sex, don't you?"

"Is there a difference?"

"We can experiment to find out."

"Don't you want to know about my vision quest?"

"You have a hard on, that's all I need to know right now. Save the rest for your mother."

"I'm not sure if I even had a vision."

"You've just begun your quest. It doesn't happen that easy. It's something you learn how to do. Requiring many tries, possibly. Everyone's different. We'll do it again some time in the future. But we need to wait, let the effects of this experience become known first. It's not done with you yet. You'll start having dreams and strange imaginings. That's why your mother wants me to stay with you, to sleep with you."

"When did she tell you that?"

"Tonight, when she awakened me, asking me to come out here to rescue you."

"And you're up to that?"

"Like I said, it's experimental, we'll see. How do you feel about it?"

"It's a dream come true."

Isoroz watches the young couple walking naked from the lake as the sun breaks on the eastern horizon, reflecting its brilliant light from the water's surface. She knows their group can't stay the way it is without men. Many women have already left and others are planning to do so. She's worried about the quality of men they will bring back with them, if they do come back, and the power struggles which could ensue. She's hoping Zorsoroz will be ready for it.

