

Skitchfu

The fifth of five stories introducing Mojolo and Sanjava and the many races and peoples of the Universe.

Ruzniel, which deals with the last three days of the universe is available from bookstores and online.

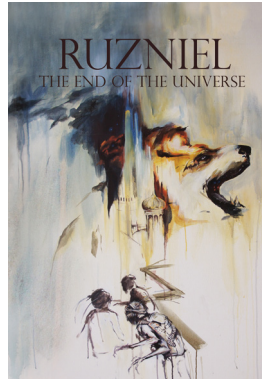
[*Ruzniel Book 1 The Laws of Magic*](#)

[*Ruzniel Book 2 The End of the Universe*](#)



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SKITCHFU

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TYPESET BY DANIEL NANAVATI

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Skitchfu

His two asymmetrical, front wings beat as his two anterior wings spread and articulated at the shoulder to keep his balance, while his tail dipped and helped him glide to a soft landing on the deserted eyrie.

Skitchfu was the last of the Jakane, the once powerful birds who looked down upon the people of the lower-lands like the flying gods those people worshipped. Distant, separated from their land-locked lives the lower-landers longed to fly like their gods. So powerful were the gods they believed they drew their sun across the sky each day with invisible chains of gold. The moon was a judge sitting in judgment of the lower-landers' dreams as they slept. Yet other flying gods moved the stars which were actually great heroes of the past given eternal life and the chance to watch over their sleeping decedents below. Hundreds had names and all the children were taught their stories. Gods who fought across the sky causing lightning, or urinated upon their cities causing rain. Their starlight was used to navigate the land and sea. They prayed to them for safe passage as sailors looked with hungry eyes at every shadow for Dolanders, the spirit people who stole away the living on land an sea. The myths were unsure what the Dolanders did to their kidnap victims, but the stories talked about servitude, torture, cooking pots and even cannibalism. Everything that lived had an appetite, even gods and demons.

Skitchfu, and his once numerous people, knew this all to be make believe for he had flown above lightning and rain storms. Many generations ago his people had modified their wings and flown to the sun. They had seen the magnificence and power of a burning star. They knew the Dolanders did not exist, for the Jakane's sharp eyes missed nothing, living or dead, on the world below them. They had journeyed far from this planet and knew of the Sangyma and the great battles of the universe. But they also knew

the myths were vital for the lower-landers for they had seen peoples driven to insanity by gaining knowledge of the truth in the universe. For thousands of years they had not wished such a fate on the lower-landers. But that changed.

Birds had been envied by all the lower-landers who longed for the freedom they imagined in flight: the ability to cross mountains in hours instead of days; to go deep over the oceans; escape famine and war by merely taking to the air, vanishing who knows where? The sweep and dive into the sea to easily catch fish, the perfect hovering in place, the quick eye and most importantly to the lower-landers, the fleetness of aerobatics that made birds hard to kill. If you had asked them from what they wished to escape they would have been vague. Uncertain. Sketchy. The brighter amongst them would have said 'ourselves.' Some bravely may have said 'the gods'.

The lower-landers had learned to trap all kinds of birds. Once they trapped an Jakane. An act of war. An adult Jakane is a large bird. Easily a match for ten or more lower-landers given their claws and strong wings. In fact they had only caught the bird by chance. The bird and the lower-landers had eyed up each other with mutual surprise. A mistake in timing by the bird, a botched attempt to capture not kill by the lower-landers.

Skitchfu had watched as a young Jakane, the many battles of the lower-landers. He had gone with others near to these battlefields, looking with careful eyes at the dead. These wars were terrible things. Many of the dead no longer looked like anything. Hacked to pieces. He and his friends had picked up remembrances and brought them back to their eyries where the Jakane looked with horror at the kinds of things the lower-landers made. The metal weapons that killed and maimed, the armour that tried to protect, the furs they ripped off other animals to keep warm. Shoes made to protect the feet and act as weapons. Gloves that hid blades near the wrist. Poisons inside rings. In these things they could see the complete history of the lower-landers. Everything

ever made that had been dropped, thought lost, left in severed hands, buried in a hurry as people ran from danger intending to come back, cast into the sea for good-luck, hidden in caves and chests and left behind when the robbers were caught; everything came to the eyries here.

These eyries were in many shapes, stretching high up into towers, with room for entire families and many entrances. Interwoven with the wood and stones were the remembrances. The young were terrified when they smelled these artifacts for blood had seeped into them all.

The Jakane kept watching and bringing samples back for the museum collections. A tradition that had been started after the terrible ancient crime of the killing of a Jakane. The bones of the bird were used as sacred markers by the priests for cutting into the soft earth to predict the future. The thinner bones were made into flutes. The feathers were made into strange headdresses. The Jakane knew from that day the lower-landers would hunt for them so they kept away and watched from their eyries. Until after long years the existence of the Jakane became a myth among the lower-landers and the few bones they had were explained away as some wandering god who had been trapped by great heroes. The paintings of this strange bird and the story of how the hunters said the creature spoke, and even the taste of the flesh, all remained in the myths of the lower-landers. Though they scanned the sky and some would go high into the hills and watch for nights at a time, no one ever saw another Jakane. The Jakane kept their distance, watched and collected so as to understand what these creatures were that killed for pleasure.

They found out much about their characters and thinking. Some thought they should go down and teach them a lesson but others argued they, too, would be killed and that there was nothing to be gained by showing themselves to the lower-landers. So the Jakane were always forbidden to meet alone with any of them. Foraging parties always went in threes so none of the lower-landers would ever see

them or catch them for the three Jakane would watch everything, move carefully, collect what they knew to be new and softly fly away. Twice they had been seen and the lower-lander who came upon them vanished from their people never to be seen again. So much changed with a single killing.

Skitchfu might never have gone alone had the plague not struck. The terrible disease that robbed them of their feathers, burned their skin and killed everyone of them. A plague that struck suddenly; spread from eyrie to eyrie; killed within hours of infection. The living could not cope with the numbers dying. All over their eyries feather were blown away to land on the ground where lower-landers would find them. This unexpected bounty had only one explanation in their minds. Other birds were being hunted by the gods, or killed, and their feathers were being dropped upon the lowlands.

Skitchfu was the only one left. He didn't know why he had survived. He had watched all his friends fade into nothingness. He had been in hundreds of burial parties as the disease took hold until he was too tired to bury anyone else. He had slept from exhaustion and when he opened his eyes everything was quiet. All the groaning and calls of pain were over. He had searched from eyrie to eyrie. Nothing. He had flown low, gone to the highest mountains, the tallest trees in the deepest forests. Nothing.

That had been seven days ago. Now he flew the skies as he had been taught, taking care never to be seen, in the dusk and in the night. He kept the pathways clean to the landing sites out of habit. He tidied his eyrie and slept when he could. Looking for something he didn't know, waiting for someone he had never seen, hoping for answers to his loneliness without knowing what he would do with those answers. He was home; yet totally lost. The most lost one can ever be. He had lost weight. He had lost purpose. Depressed and lonely he took to sleeping a lot. His dreams were dark.

His four wings folded neatly across his back and under each other. The feathers strong and healthy.

Two were from his dead brothers. He had taken out two of his own and dug their's in deep waiting for the blood to flow. Shared feathers. The sign of love amongst the Jakane. Why had he survived? Where had the plague come from? He walked the paths to and from the landing sites. He tapped his beak on the paved flooring the way his friends used to when he had been learning to fly. Trying to put him off his form as he swerved to miss their beaks which pecked close to his legs. Jakane are strong and bumping into one as they land hurts but the young still tried to put each other off because to them everything was a game. To Skitchfu the game was over. He could not conjure up his friends. He could only remember how the eyries had been when they had all been alive.

Until today. He awoke and heard voices. His heart leapt. A man and a woman. He lifted his long, green beak out of the eyrie and looked with his round, blue eyes for the voices and saw Sanjava walking amongst the empty eyries with Mojolo by his side. Skitchfu got up and jumped to the pathway his claws making barely a sound but Sanjava turned, smiled broadly, and came over.

“Excellent, maybe you will tell me where everyone is?” he asked.

“Dead,” replied Skitchfu.

Sanjava stopped in his tracks and Mojolo instinctively gripped the lariat that was always tied to her belt. A single word, and an entire world suddenly became hostile.

“How?” asked Sanjava.

“Illness,” replied Skitchfu.

“What kind of illness?”

“A feather robbing, murderous kind. We were never given enough time to find out.”

“What were the symptoms?”

“Skin irritations, the skin ulcerates, feathers discolour and fall out. Beaks break and sufferers can no longer breathe. Then the lungs fill with blood.”

“How long does this take?” asked Sanjava.

“Anywhere from a week to ten days. We had never suffered anything akin to this before. Our doctors

were unable to cope. We tried to analyze blood samples but for some reason whatever caused this illness mutated again in the samples. Blood-works looked clear and autopsies found nothing in the dead cells. No bacteria, no coinsure, no virus.”

“I have heard of such diseases. They are created on Ghirzanben,” said Sanjava.

“Crilodach did this to us?”

“Most definitely. The question is how have you survived? It doesn’t make diseases to wipe out a species and fail.”

“It didn’t fail. I am the last.”

“Did you have any symptoms?”

“None.”

“Did you stay away from the sick?” asked Mojolo.

“Quite the opposite. I was one of the key nurses. As I never got ill I tended the dying from first to last. I was the only one who could once the doctors died.”

“Have you been alone long?”

“I haven’t been counting the days.”

Sanjava walked up to him and placed a gentle hand on his face,

“Have you been taught about the Sangyma?”

“Not the hidden knowledge.”

“You are too young.”

“Four hundred winters only. I still had much to learn but now, no one to teach me.”

“I am Sanjava and this is Mojolo.”

“I have heard of you. Mojolo I don’t know. How did you get here?”

“Through the Ossendark. I expected to see many Jakane. I wanted Mojolo to learn to fly properly. I was surprised to see no one at all.”

“Now you know why.”

“No I do not. I do not know why this disease has wiped out the Jakane. I do not know why this disease is here at all or how you have survived. This is definitely a strategy of Crilodach’s. It intends something.”

“Can you find out what?” asked Skitchfu, shaking his head and showing the blue and green crest on his neck.

“We need to,” replied Mojolo, “if there’s one thing Sanjava cannot abide it’s an unanswered question.”

“Can I help?” asked Skitchfu.

“I cannot do anything without you,” said Sanjava.

“Name your needs.”

“First, I need a feather.”

Skitchfu pulled a blue feather from his leg. Sanjava took the feather by the calamus and broke off three barbs which he rolled in his fingers. He chanted under his breath and lifted the barbs to his nostrils. Sanjava sighed.

“What’s wrong?” asked Mojolo.

“We are dealing with an old friend,” he said.

“By which you mean an old enemy,” she responded.

“Jiofra.”

“I thought he’d be dead by now!”

“He has grown in power under Zibanda’s tutelage. Apparently he thinks he can take us on and win.”

“To avenge his family?”

“Maybe. Who knows the reasons why these magicians do what they do for Crilodach. I try never to get too far into their minds. They are murderous and sinister places filled with thoughts that freeze the blood.”

“I would have thought getting into other people’s minds was one of your best strengths,” she said.

“There are many people who say ideas never die but they are wrong. Ideas depend upon there being other people to take them up and peoples can die out, languages can change, disaster can strike and any ideas they had, have to be rediscovered. Look at what has happened here. The wisdom and magic of an entire species rest with one untutored child. But magical thoughts are different. Magical thoughts fly to other particles of magic. Remember, I told you Tegriël thinks every atom needs to experience being in a living body before the universe can end?”

“Yes,” she said.

“That’s the reason. The thoughts magicians have are never lost. Each and every one is preserved, exists whether we share the thought or not, lives without being imparted to others. If you get into the minds

of a magician like Jiofra, you may share their thoughts and then your own thoughts will be polluted by theirs, forever.”

“Every thought, ever?” she asked.

“Yes. It knows this. That is why It throws these magicians into our path. Hoping to infect us. Thoughts are the reason, so Hiesia told me, that life exists. She believes thoughts have weight and their mass floods the cosmos, creating the necessary matter for the universe to contract and so be reborn. Without billions of thoughts life would never exist nor would the stars, nor the planets themselves.”

“Even Its thoughts?”

“Even Its. For all we know maybe Its are more important to the process than yours or mine.”

“There are many thoughts I’ve had recently I wish to forget,” said Skitchfu.

“And you can. But that won’t mean the thoughts have been lost to the universe.” Sanjava smiled at them both. “The interesting thing about this feather,” he said holding up the broken feather, “is that there is nothing out of the ordinary about you Skitchfu to tell us how you survived.”

“I belong to the family Lenvu, an honourable and loyalful family.”

“I know them well,” said Sanjava, “but you haven’t survived this plague because of anything in your genetics. You have carefully been saved by Jiofra.”

“Why would he save me?”

“Maybe not you, specifically, from the first. Maybe something you did led him to choose you over anyone else. Whatever the reason my guess would be he wanted me to meet you, that way he speeded up how quickly I would discover he was behind this. He left his mark in your living feathers. He knows I will be coming for him.”

“How could he have even come close to me?”

“Do you remember the course of the events that led to the deaths of your people?”

“The plague hit quickly. We tried to keep pace with the disease but we were overwhelmed. I passed out in my eyrie when the last few were dying. When I

awoke ... they were all gone.”

“That’s typical of Crilodach’s minions, wiping out an entire population just to lay down a challenge,” spat Mojolo.

“More than just a challenge,” said Sanjava. “Crilodach wants a champion. Jiofra wants to be one of Its lieutenants. He has plans in his vanity because he has fallen into the greatest trap a magician can fall. He thinks he has a right to the powers he possesses and a right to have power over those who do not possess them.”

“Typical of a man,” she replied.

“When we find him, Jiofra won’t be alone.”

“Where do I find this Jiofra?” asked Skitchfu, curling his talons, his round eyes dried of all tears.

“You cannot catch him alone,” pointed out Sanjava.

“I’ve no intention of catching him,” replied Skitchfu.

“You cannot kill him by yourself either, you are not strong enough.”

“The Jakane have many strengths, I’ll go and arm myself before we leave.”

“Jiofra is not interested in you. Nor is Crilodach. This mission is dangerous enough for Mojolo and me, but for you, coming with us would be suicide. You have no purpose for them now.”

“I have nowhere else to be.”

“You have to save the wealth of your people.”

“For what? A museum? You can make a museum of everything I know from what is lying here. You don’t need me to stay and collate everything.”

“That’s true,” said Mojolo.

“I don’t want the last Jakane to die,” argued Sanjava.

“Neither do I,” said Mojolo, “and he doesn’t want to die. He wants to be useful.”

“He can be, by staying here.”

“And what of his memories of the dying? He can’t eradicate those without seeking justice.”

“She’s right. I need this fight,” said Skitchfu.

Skitchfu moved away from them to collect his things and Mojolo looked at Sanjava.

“Is this as bad as I think?” she asked.

“I am pretty sure Jiofra has some nasty surprises in

store for us. I would like to talk to him to find out who made this plague specifically to kill the Jakane and who knew I was coming here to speak with them. The timing is near perfect.”

“That isn’t coincidence,” said Mojolo.

“Jiofra could never have worked this all out alone nor quickly. I have known plots like this take generations to mature. Crilodach has all the time in the Universe so It never has to plan in the short term. I imagine someone was planted here amongst the Jakane who spent their life getting feathers and blood samples secretly to Crilodach.”

“I can search the archives to try to find out who,” said Skitchfu, rejoining them.

“I have other ways of finding out,” said Sanjava, “and their name is not of importance to us. We will have to tread carefully before we uncover all the facts.”

Skitchfu had come back with a small satchel round his neck and steel tips to his talons. Down his legs were wrappings of what looked like leather but could not have been. The Jakane had never had much time for war but in their deep past they have had civil wars and knew how to arm themselves and how to fight. The fights of winged creatures is not the same as those who fight on legs. Birds are masters of every terrain and fight as well in the air as on the ground.

“You realise Jiofra will kill you,” Sanjava told him.

“I’ll happily take that chance,” he said to them, his eyes glimmering, “for a single chance to face him down.”

“He won’t waste time infecting you with a disease that will take a week to kill. He’ll attack you, or his minions will cut your throat. Zibanda will have given him a bodyguard. We have no idea of his present capabilities.”

“Maybe we should go back and ask Fergane about Jiofra, she’ll know more about what happened to him after our fight than we do.”

“You know this magician well?” asked Skitchfu.

“When he was a child we went to test him and found Zibanda waiting for us. In the fight Jiofra’s parents

were killed and he ran from us.”

“Into Crilodach’s waiting claws.”

“Crilodach is always waiting for us.”

“But he wouldn’t have gone but for you?” asked Skitchfu.

“Of course he would. Zibanda was there to kill us as an added bonus to getting Jiofra.”

“Couldn’t you have prevented him from joining Zibanda.” There was anger in Skitchfu’s voice.

“We tried,” said Mojolo. She could see in his wish to blame someone for what had happened to his people, Skitchfu was getting angry with Sanjava.

“Your anger is understandable,” said Sanjava, who knew what Skitchfu was thinking, “and Jiofra blames me for the death of his parents because that is what he has been taught by Zibanda. But Zibanda’s soldiers killed them, not I.”

“The slaughter of my entire people comes from Its lies.”

“All slaughter comes from lies,” said Sanjava, “truth is not a general.”

“To kill us all just to get to you ... didn’t you have any idea what they were doing?”

“If I had I would have been here to warn you.”

“What’s the point of a Sangyma with all your power if all you are doing is cleaning up after the dead?”

“That’s a terrible thing to say!” gasped Mojolo.

“But fair,” replied Sanjava. “I have failed you.”

Skitchfu eased his wings back and his eyes stared at the empty eyries around him.

“Will anything we do avenge this?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Sanjava. “The pain will exist forever whatever justice we achieve.”

“Then all we are doing is making sure Jiofra doesn’t do this to others?”

“That will be part of what we set out to achieve.”

“Who is this Fergane?” asked Skitchfu.

“Our first port of call,” Sanjava said. “I suspect they are watching the eyries and already know we are here. They will try to follow us.”

“Why doesn’t he attack?” asked Skitchfu.

“Because he is not ready?” suggested Mojolo.

“A magician that wipes out an entire people should be more than ready for the three of us,” replied Sanjava.

“Maybe we aren’t everything he wants,” said Skitchfu.

“That would be my guess,” said Sanjava.

“Then, if this trap wasn’t just for us what more does he want?” asked Mojolo.

“Finding that out might give us the upper hand,” said Sanjava, as the Ossendark opened. “You have no need of your wings Skitchfu,” he told him.

He cast a silent spell with the back of hand as they vanished. The Ossendark closed with the faint smell of yellow roses gently filling the air. From the distant cliffs long bodies detached themselves and half flew half leapt across the void to smell where the Sangyma had been. Then they screamed in fright as their feet caught fire. The screams entered the vestige of the Ossendark Sanjava had allowed to close slowly and he heard them, recognizing the stench of the Gesskor.

There are creatures that look and act as if It created them in Ghirzanben but strange to say they evolved quite naturally on different worlds. The Gesskor are a race of mammals with wings, noses that can smell the answers to questions, five eyes and an energy that impresses all who know them. They can survive for weeks without food, travel vast distances without sleep, show fabulous strength despite their thin bodies and communicate without speaking. There are seven races known to the Sangyma that sought out Crilodach and pledged their lives to It before It heard about them for Itself. The ‘acid confederation’ as Tethval described them before Hiesia gave them the name all know them by, the Carcasium. The Gesskor are the first of the seven races.

Some say they are naturally vile but others point out they are little different in their appetites to anyone else. They were being pragmatic and siding with the being they thought the strongest. They had seen It wipe out whole planets and the Sangyma, in comparison, always looked on the back-foot. Always struggling to keep up.

In answer to this, yet others say, ‘wait and see what they do if they capture a Sangyma’. If they let them live, they are not naturally vile but if they kill them that will prove what they are.

The Sangyma are wiser about motivations. They know that once you have sided with Crilodach your mind is taken away from you and you will never be able to go back. Never be able to think of the kinder action or the more noble reasons. The seven races, like all Crilodach’s allies, may have joined It for one reason but they stayed with It because It would never let them go.

Sanjava was not surprised It had used the Gesskor to spy on them. He knew they were not responsible for infecting the Jakane. They were messengers, part of the network around Jiofra. Jiofra had come a long way for Crilodach to be protecting him so well. Whatever the plan, he knew for certain the slaughter of the Jakane was but the start of something much, much bigger.

They came out of the unusually warm Ossendark onto a small hillock or wild flowers, in front of them. As they walked forwards a dwelling was revealed neatly tucked between trees. Sanjava went to knock on the door when a voice from inside called,

“You’re just in time for lunch.” Mojolo smiled. That was the Fergane she remembered.

Fergane had set the table not only for Sanjava and Mojolo but also for Skitchfu. The silver bowls of soup were warm, just served and inviting as they steamed quietly in front of clean chairs. There are times when magical people meet, when words are dangerous and spells more so. You never know who is listening but you do know your enemy wants to know how you think, what you think and what you plan. On these occasions magical folk use symbols and other things to get their message across to each other. In this case the bowls were silver to tell Sanjava the soup was important. He sat down and put his hand on the table. He looked at her quizzically and she shrugged,

“Well you know full well this isn’t a lucky guess,” she smiled as they all joined Sanjava at the table.

“Who is the other place for?”

“Tegriël,” she told them, “he said he would be late but that I was to serve you, Mojolo and a Jakane.”

“I presume you are Fergane?” said Skitchfu.

“I am.”

“I am Skitchfu.”

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“The Jakane have been wiped out but for Skitchfu and we believe Jiofra is behind the plague,” said Mojolo.

“I knew he’d come back to haunt us,” said Fergane.

“Do you know of anything that can help us?” asked Sanajva.

“I’ve kept an eye on the Lacustrians who stayed here after the battle. I’ve noticed in the past year a rise in their wariness.”

“Do you know why?”

“I didn’t until a week ago. Then I found some marks on the oldest trees in the forest. Someone was marking out where I walk and where I live.”

“Don’t they all know?” asked Mojolo.

“Precisely, yes they do. So the marks were for someone who doesn’t.”

“Not Jiofra,” said Sanajva.

“No, this plot against us goes deeper than that. Jiofra wouldn’t be hiding. He has big plans. When I heard whispers he wanted to bring down a Sangyma I had a feeling you would be here soon.”

“Why wouldn’t he hide from you?” asked Skitchfu.

“What could be more normal than a son returning to his birthplace?” asked Fergane. “No one would be any the wiser and no one would be going round looking over their shoulders alerting me to something being wrong.”

“You would know,” said Sanajva.

“He doesn’t know that,” Fergane replied.

“He was been with Zibanda, we cannot assume to know what he does and does not know,” Sanajva argued.

“True, but I think he’s far a more subtle thinker than you give him credit for.”

“So alerting you was part of the plan?” asked Mojolo.

“I’d say so.”

“What does Tegriël think?” Sanjava asked.

“He told me changes were on the way. He said Sangyma would be dying before this ends and we will start to lay down the plans for the final days.”

“Did he now?” said Sanjava, with a low whistle. “So this does go all the way to Zaqui, the end of the universe.”

“Our fights often do,” smiled Fergane.

“What do we do?” asked Skitchfu.

“We take a few essentials,” said Fergane.

“And go to meet our enemy,” said Sanjava.

“Do we leave right now?” asked Mojolo, who was feeling hungry.

“Take this,” offered Fergane giving her a nut bar. Skitchfu thought nothing of Fergane having cooked a whole meal no one would eat. He assumed the situation was urgent and they had decided to move quickly. Which is, of course, exactly what Fergane wanted him to think and part of the message she had made for Sanjava.

You may have heard people tell you they cooked you a meal with love. That is only the smallest part of what you can cook when you know how. As they stood before the shallow lake an entre plan had been agreed between Fergane and Sanjava without a word being uttered, and not too far away, Tegriël was waiting for them.

The lake was one of several places that in twilight shone as if silently communicating with the stars. Thin strands of silver like webs, crisscrossed just beneath the water and moved gently with the wavelets formed by the breeze. One could almost believe a spider were on the alert at one end of the lake waiting for someone brave enough to wade across and become food. Sanjava threw a stone far into the water and Fergane followed with a stone of equal size. He gave a stone to Mojolo and motioned to the lake. The three splashes sounded loud.

“Shall I?” asked Skitchfu.

“No. Lets sit and wait,” said Sanjava.

“What for? asked Skitchfu.

“Whoever made the web,” smiled Fergane.

The four of them sat down on the rock and grass overlooking the lake. Skitchfu restlessly fluttering his wings; Mojolo intently looking for any movement; Sanjava occasionally looking at Fergane’s profiles as she seemed to become one with the night. That brilliant magic within her always resonated with nature.

“The only problem with wings is the ache in ones shoulders after an hour of flying,” Skitchfu told them.

“We all have wings, smiled Fergane, “though not everyone believes they do.”

“Then we must all have aches in our shoulders,” said Skitchfu.

“Not at all,” replied Fergane, “not all flight needs wings.”

“I only know of winged flight,” said Skitchfu.

“Yet your kith knew of flight beyond the imagination of the lower-landers.”

“We did?”

His uncertainty did not go unnoticed by Sanjava who had been suspicious of him since their first meeting. Further discussion ended as the water near their feet rose up in the form of a head which circled around them and finally hovered above their heads unattached to the lake.

“Why does a Sangyma and his followers disturb me?”

“There is only one reason we would we here,” replied Fergane.

“I know of you,” said the face without a mouth to move, “You were once favoured by the Lacustrians.”

“As you were once favoured by the great deep.”

“That’s ancient history.”

“Not so ancient that you are not still hurt by the memories,” she replied.

“We are not here to remind you of your pain,” said Sanjava, “but to find out about the pain given to others.”

“I only ever see the Sangyma when they want something,” he said.

“You demanded we stay away.”

“Yet you still buzz around my lake like gnats.”

“There are not enough Sangyma in the universe to buzz around you,” argued Fergane.

“It cuts down your numbers by the hour.”

The water swirled around them and faced Mojolo and Skitchfu.

“I smell power in the girl, a plague in the Jakane. Your magic is at a loss Sanjava?”

“Time is my enemy,” said Sanjava.

“Yet has ever been my friend.”

“You do not age as others age,” said Fergane.

“Nothing ages,” he replied, “such things only appear to be.”

“Will you help us?” asked Sanjava. The water swirled and drops splattered about their feet.

“Come then. You too Skitchfu, walk into the lake,” he said.

Skitchfu was uncertain but Sanjava nodded and he found himself floating on the silver threads.

“The dangers emanating from an old foe are easier to uncover than those from a friend who becomes an enemy,” he said.

“Have you heard something?” asked Sanjava.

“I hear many things,” the water said to Sanjava, “but a Sangyma always needs to be careful of his friends.”

“You never used to lie,” said Sanjava.

“You never used to seek help from a people you left to die.”

“If I could have saved your ocean you know I would have done so. Saving the few I did cost us another Sangyma.”

“I’ve not forgotten the sacrifice. But there are years when we feel forgotten. Years when no one brings us news but the wayfarers. No one walks upon our water but those in need of something. Years when we are barely called by our old names.”

“If we used your names It would come to hear them. It would know. It would come here for you.”

“You fear death?”

“Never my own. But the death of others because of my failure is a nightmare I face every day.”

“The Jakane floats well.”

“A plague sent by Jiofra hit his people.”

“The vile genius who calls himself the great and magnificent?”

“You have heard of him.”

“I have seen him. On the water, in the swirl of spells, along the streams of magic you weave in your battles. Jiofra is a talented creature.”

“He wants me to find him,” said Sanjava.

“And you need to anticipate his traps.”

“I thought your waters might help.”

They came to the centre of the lake and the silver threads met in a multi-sided shape, pale blue beside which a woman looked up and let her feet sink a little into the water. The two waters became mirrors. Hundreds of images flashing across the surface and bubbling up from below all around them. As they burst into the air they gave off fragrances. Sweet ones for pleasant images, sour ones for warnings. As Jiofra’s image appeared the whole area stank of Crilodach. They looked at the magician. His face was unrecognizable from the boy Sanjava and Mojolo had met all those years before on his birthday. The eyes were dark, the forehead lined, the lips two narrow lines that vanished rather than risk a smile. The cheeks were colourless. His hair, wrapped in a bun behind his head, was a million different colours. He looked right back at Sanjava. He touched the web and the image vanished.

“Why did you stop?” asked the waters.

“He would have seen you.”

“He knows we hold the waters. He doesn’t know where we are.”

“Let’s keep things that way.”

“But you did not see his plans?” asked Fergane.

“I saw the hills behind him. I know where he is. I know what to expect.”

“I saw them too,” said Mojolo, “I saw them painted on the walls of Ruz Academies. That was Wey Bebec.”

“Have you gone raving mad?” asked Fergane. “It will be waiting for you. Three Sangyma have died there. We still don’t know what killed them.”

“I know,” said Sanjava.

“Jiofra doesn’t need any other traps but your stupidity,” Fergane said.

“So they think,” said Sanjava. “So they think.”

“You have a plan?” asked Skitchfu.

“Always.”

Wey Bebec was one of the first planets ever discovered. In the time when the first thinking beings travelled out of their own solar system. They found a planet filled with life and though much life would come after, among them human beings, who would destroy life on new planets for profit, these people left Wey Bebec alone and would visit only to watch.

They were there when Its generals arrived. Finding no animals they could train to be soldiers they set up camps, built war engines from their mining operations and within a short space of time left the indigenous life forms almost extinct but for a few archipelagoes.

Here Jiofra sat surrounded by his advisers. Dilkedo, one of Its finest spies, who would tell Crilodach what his generals were eating and how many times a day they spat. Dilkedo was a tall, thin being with long hair hiding the extra ears and eyes Crilodach had given to him. His fingers though bony were incredibly strong. His voice was mellow to put his enemies at ease. He could read you a poem better than anyone else alive. But his thoughts were not on the words, but on how far away the listeners were from the daggers of his assassins.

Next to him was Jiofra’s favourite, Lugusa. A tough, scarred but still beautiful woman whose hair was wrapped in plaits that folded around her head and neck and were always the same. No one ever saw her brush her hair or smile. Some said her teeth were like those of a crocodile and rows of them went down her throat and would come out to bite her enemies in half. She never had cause to smile.

These two had been with Jiofra since his tenth birthday. They were like new parents to him. He had never been more than a few seconds away from them day and night and they had devised his plan to kill the Jakane.

Across the skies of Wey Bebec from their eyries flew the Gosskor. Raptors. Set on killing their new prey the Sangyma. In the generations to come these creatures would become known to millions as Radizlain. They formed into phalanxes and attacked from the heights. Impervious to arrows and bullets they could only be brought down by spells. They were Jiofra's gift to Zibanda's soldiers.

"They come," said Dilkedo.

"No more than two hours out, said Lugusa.

"We are ready, said Jiofra, half as a statement and half as a question. His two advisers nodded.

"Our spy has done well," said Lugusa.

To catch a Sangyma is not the work of a mere plan. You can form plans to overrun an army, a king, a country, even a world. You can martial strategy to take a whole solar system but you need to plot for years to capture a Sangyma. The mind of a Sangyma is one of the most complex of all beings as the more spells you learn the deeper the connections in the brain. Peoples often make the error of thinking the numbers of synapses make all the difference to intelligence but actually the layers of connections are the crucial sign. The complexity of intuition enhanced by magic makes a Sangyma near impossible to fool, betray, trap, evade or kill.

This plan had begun with Jiofra's birth. The spell which found him before he was eight was planted in his meat which he ate every day. Outwardly, he looked like any other Lacustrian child but within he was changed, his eyes were Its eyes, his heart was Its heart waiting to be unleashed. The fight with Sanjava, watching Fergane for any clues to Sanjava's thoughts, the battle of the planets, following Hiesia as she escaped Ghirzanben had all been part of the same plot. It was Lugusa who came up with the first idea but Dilkedo added the coup-de-grace, the disease. The one thing Sanjava would have to solve - what was the disease, who created and spread the illness and why the Jakane. Having to understand was Sanjava's weakness.

The plan was flawless but they had all forgotten

about Mojolo. Even as they arrived on Wey Bebec and the assault was launched to keep the Sangyma guessing, Mojolo was elsewhere. Approaching from another road, her lariat in one hand her eyes bright, her warrior spirit strong.

Skitchfu of course, did not now he was being used. But Sanjava knew no single Jakane would survive without being part of the trap. As they arrived, watchful and ready, Skitchfu was overcome with the spells around him activating the sinister spell within his blood stream. His feathers changed colour to a grey, zig-zag , his beak split in two and elongated into swords. His wings grabbed the two pieces and slashed at the Sangyma by his side. The madness that raged in Skitchfu took away all his kindness. Blinded him to everything but Jiofra's desires, which were Zibanda's desires which were Crilodach's desires. Crilodach's will was like a bacteria copying itself with perfect precision in its followers.

Sanjava was beset from all sides. Each weapon was laced with poison. He felt the deadly venom dripping in to his hair as he tore into the enemy. The ground was running with more venom laced in the mist. Only his shoes protected him as his spells tried to uncover the powers of the enemy and the truth of the planet around them. The planet that was no longer a planet but a huge trap. Land that was muddied with poisons, seas that had been sucked dry, atmosphere that was laced with deadly microbes. And Skitchfu, the last of his species, driven mad by a hunger that was not his own.

Mojolo came up behind them as they pressed the Sangyma with all their might. Her lariat flashed slicing Dilkedo's neck. The Gisskor tuend and attacked her while Fergane cloaked them all. From behind her spells that protected them better than shield, they fought back. Sanjava was growing very tired as the mixtures of poisons took their toll. The bacteria laced into Skitchfu's feather that he had handled to try to understand the disease, had seeped into his skin and been awoken by this planet of pure poisons.

He fell onto his knees as Mojolo struck down

Lugusa. Jiofra screamed in anger and pain as his allies died and his plans teetered on the brink of coming to nothing.

“The poison has affected Sanjava,” called Fergane to Mojolo as she ran after the magician intent upon putting an end to his spells. Mojolo sheltered under her knife and looked at the Sangyma. She took out the pouch they had given her on Ruz and sprinkled powder over his mouth. He tried to stop her. She brushed his weakened hand away and drew the poison out and into herself.

Neither Fergane nor Jiofra reappeared and Mojolo was shaking in her own death throes as Sanjava lifted her up. Jiofra stood alone in front of him.

“I have killed your allies,” he cursed the Sangyma.

“You killed yourself first,” replied Sanjava.

Then it was that Tegriel’s spells appeared rising up from Mojolo’s clothes, encasing Jiofra in the thick clay from the ground. Then fire burned the clay hard and inside the mold Jiofra burned to ash.

Sanjav alooked down at Mojolo who was coughing.

“I can only save you by sending you to a different destiny than the one I have shared with you.”

“You don’t have to save me.”

“Yes I do.”

Fergane came down, Gesskor blood on her hands.

“We have to go. More are coming,” she warned him.

“Skitchfu?”

“Lies in the heap,” she said.

A strand of his hair weaved into Mojolo’s as he put her to sleep and ensured she would not wake until she was needed at the end of the Universe. Then the Ossendark opened up and Tegriel arrived taking them all away with him as ensured none would follow.

“I have lost her, said Sanjava.

“She saved your life,” said Tegriel.

“Yes she did.

“She has great things to do in the Zaqui. The end of the universe will not go as planned without her.”

“You knew this would happen when you had us meet?”

“I may have.”

Ruzniel

Fergane bent down and touched Mojolo's forehead.
Then Mojolo vanished.