

One

The river circling before him would always shimmer with lost paradises. Eighteen moons later, as he squatted in a dank jail cell and carved dim codes into the pits of discarded avocados, he suddenly remembered the blue waters streaming in the valley below. The valley stretched bright before him in a turquoise dawn. A green meadow spread open below, the river coursing at its heart, the grasses flowing beyond to the lime mountains that ringed the valley on all sides. As the governor gazed, a white bird materialized from a cloud and flapped over the river surface, circled above what appeared to be bulrushes and settled at last by their side. The governor knelt to the ground and raised his eyes to the sky. The river curved into the distance and slipped into the clouds.

From somewhere behind pealed a baby's cry. A rustling of feet rose into the heavens. The governor held up his hand. The baby cried out again and fell silent. A wind curled up among the crowd and somebody coughed. As the governor closed his eyes, whispers of distant loves floated toward him. Saplings rustled in a youthful breeze. After a long while, his pupils flickered open. The river circled blue in the valley below.

The white bird hurtled from the bulrushes and swooped alongside the river, then veered and spread its wings to glide around a tree that stood alone in the vast meadow. The valley was so green, the poet would later say, that the scent of greenness was everywhere. As green as a first love. The meadow merged with the river

and the green slipped quietly into blue. A ray of sunlight flashed off a rock and the governor blinked.

"The river would be a pretty place to play," said a girl's voice behind him. The governor rose and turned around. A hundred men shifted before him, uncertain and waiting. He searched among their hesitant eyes. Somewhere in the rear, a horse pawed its hoof and snorted. Tilting her head, a young woman stepped forward. "The river is pretty," she repeated. "Is this where we're going to settle, uncle? Is our journey over?" She pointed at the solitary tree in the meadow. "We can build around that," she suggested. Her finger trembled in the dawnlight, much as it would many moons later when the inquisitor declared she would burn at the stake if she did not confess. An orange sun inched higher in the sky and the girl wetted her lips.

The governor looked at the settlers arrayed before him. In many he saw reflections of his own face, the same pale skin, the same baroque noses, the arched cheekbones and dark eyes, the angled chins, the broad shoulders quivering beneath loads of olive trees and pomegranates. The mirror had yet to exist, he thought to himself, that would produce as many variations of his own person as stood before him in this dewdrop dawn, atop this verdant valley, before this ring of mountains. Gathering these hundred men had been an odyssean task, all those relatives to persuade, all those soldiers of fortune to lure, the criminals seeking refuge, the heretics longing for freedom, the debtors hoping to return rich men, the carpenters and mariners and blacksmiths without whom the ships could never have set sail, the livestock from all over the land, the bravest stallions and most fecund mares, the fattest cows and greenest seeds. And then, too, were the reluctant voyagers, the untested infantrymen, the scribes with sharp eyes, the slender boys kissing their lovers goodbye, the fathers somber as they stared at the covenant with furrowed brows, the mothers and daughters packing grains and flat breads, tears welling in their eyes as their dusty villages faded behind them and the burnt crimson path spiraled dustily into the horizon.

One by one he had rounded them up, promising gold to some and liberty to others, expanses of rolling lands and rushing waters, mythic horizons of infinite possibilities. The arguments were often

lost, the candles often flickered down across the desiccated eves, the last drop of wax crusting slowly on the table, and the governor would purse his lips and pick up his hat and walk silently to the door and exit into the night. So many had gone before them and died. So many had never been heard from again. And yet a precious few had returned with riches uncountable and tales of tribes and aphrodisiacs and mountains of glittering gold. And the governor evoked these wanderers of destiny and proclaimed himself one of them, thumping his chest, for he himself was an orphan, raised with nothing off the coast of another vast dark continent, he himself had sailed across the ocean as a man of but promise and returned a conqueror laden with wealth and fame and now a grant from the King to carry one hundred men and their families to rule over an area whose boundaries were as hazy as they were distant. Together, the governor pounded his fist on the table, together they would escape the limits of these arid plains pockmarked by the ruins of ancient bridges and castles covered in moss and ghosts of feudal lords and the rusting armor of crusaders still clutching shattered lances and replicas of chalices crusted in pyrite, skeletons of knights crumbled inside chain mail, their helmets still stretching vainly toward the east, and together the hundred settlers, repeated the governor, together they would journey across the ocean and found a civilization on shores as faraway and real as a childhood dream. In the indigo hues of dawn they would discover new beasts and new peoples, establish silver and gold mines and settle upon a land where green gardens bloomed eternal. An empire would expand at their feet, built with their arms, their sweat, their toil, their aspirations as high as the pyramids of old. Blessed by the King himself, unconditionally—and here the governor motioned to the manuscript on the table—he would lead a hundred families on a quest across the sea, an exodus unto the red reeds waving upon the far shores, a voyage of endless promise that was for him but truly return. And now and then he would see a gleam in an eye, a sparkle burning through the candlelight, a glimmer of lust, a dream of riches, of escape, of fame, of flight, of opportunity, a flicker of hope, a thoughtful rub of the beard, and the governor would stand up and shake their hands and step outside, gallop away under the moonlight and check another circle off in his mind.

Two years in convincing the King until at last the covenant was conceded. So many months in preparing the ships and purchasing the supplies. A few weeks in crossing. True, his wife had stayed behind. He would never see her again, he was sure of that, never gaze again at her small wrists and dark eyes, feel her damp breaths on his chin as they clutched each other in bed. And as the governor surveyed the restless settlers before him, her face did not appear. He turned around and faced the valley. The single tree in the meadow leaned toward him, beckoning. The blue of the river cascaded beyond. The governor nodded once and stepped forward down the mountain.

A slapping of packs and whips surged behind him. The settlers hoisted packages to their shoulders and swayed forward. A young girl with pigtails trotted ahead, leading a cow in one hand. A single pink flower loomed up from the black earth, curved toward her, and she knelt by its side. A drop of sweat slipped off her forehead. The flower scooped up the water and folded, the pink petals turning inwards and huddling back into dark green.

The morning heat rose slowly, the fresh sunlight cooling in the shadow of the mountaintop. A half dozen men forged ahead, hacking a path through the densest brush. The air grew redolent with fresh sap. As branches snapped before machetes and splayed awkwardly in the breeze, a liquid gold splurged out of a trunk. Into the sweetness fluttered thousands of butterflies, a swirl of suns. The butterflies swooped and soared, danced close above the settlers. The young girl stuck out her tongue at a set of wings. The butterfly brushed against her cheek and flew off, a honeyed glow disappearing into a plait of vines. The girl tugged the cow forward.

The settlers stumbled at different speeds toward the valley, grunting, dragging rough sacks, lurching toward the river hidden below. Young boys with sticks and pawing horses skittered forward. Dirt sprayed up and scattered over plants. Rocks flew into the air and tore into the underbrush. Right hands trembled on wrought handles. Rifles jutted in glints of tarnished black. The men inched ahead, peering into the forest. A vine swished down and one of the soldiers jumped.

Branches cracked and toppled, green waves crashing atop unseen bushes and thudding to the forest floor. Boughs with yellow

flowers collapsed all around. A blind girl winced with each blow, a bulky backpack jutting above her shoulders. Her bare feet dug into the moist soil, probed each step as her hands waved slowly in the air before her. An axe clanged off a tree trunk below and she started. Her toes sank into fresh moss and she whispered to herself.

A boulder dislodged and the governor stepped to one side. He pursed his lips as a soldier swore behind him, as the grunts and groans of the settlers echoed through the woods, a hundred men and their families straggling toward a valley, making no effort to disguise their arrival. Surely the indigenes were watching them now. The reports at the port had confirmed that the twin towns remained razed to the earth. The colonists had fought hard and killed without pause, but the indigenes had attacked in great numbers and could not be withstood. The few survivors to make it back to port could only stammer and collapse to the ground, the flesh around their open wounds already rotting in the brutal sun. In the dungeon many moons later, as maggots crawled out of his mouth, the governor would realize that the fate of the colonists in the twin towns was perhaps not so bad after all.

The governor swiveled his eyes backwards and glanced at the mountaintop. The indigenes were following him now, this much was certain. Yet this time the tale would be different. This time he would lead with peace. In the valley below he would create a settlement rooted in brotherhood and founded upon the covenant signed by the King. The governor cracked his knuckles and moved off down the mountain. Of course there would be enemies. There were plenty of those back home as well. Here in this world to which he now returned, these lands that had sheltered him for ten years, here at least he knew his opponents well. He had eaten with them, learned their songs, killed their brothers and slept with their sisters, smoked their pipes, drank their wines, started their wars and agreed to their pleas for peace. They were his enemies but they were also his friends. They had been his sworn killers and sweetest lovers at once, and he would smoke with them, fight and trade with them, and sit around the fires and swap the stories of old.

But back home it was different. There, the governor knew, he was secretly hated by all, the courtiers jealous of his rise to power, the explorers envious of his fortunes, the aging sailors who cursed

as they hobbled across the creaking docks and spat at the success of an orphan raised alone off an unspeakable dark continent. There above every treacherous heart smiled a kind face, a feigned respect through which only the glimmers of intense loathing could be detected. Among these very hundred men wending down the mountainside were spies doubling as scribes, traitors who would seek to destroy him, infiltrate his councils, upend his sudden control over the region, desperate men eager to gain power and prestige at his expense. Their fingers would scribble out false registers and they would hide their scrolls even as they chuckled at his jokes and nodded at his instructions. They would carry him rich dinners and fat cows and he would gulp red wine with them and laugh and tell stories of brothels and shipwrecks and then yawn and bid them fine dreams, and later that night he would slip out of his hammock and place a mannequin on his pillow, a fake head stuffed with hay, impervious to the daggers that one day would plunge desperately into it in the mistaken belief that petty assassins could outwit him, the original conqueror of these northern lands, the first governor of this pristine territory stretching from the eastern swamps through the uncharted western hinterlands. Here by the blue river he would establish a land freed from the limits of an Old World haunted by so many feudal ghosts. He would get along well with the indigenes, for their treachery would be overt, bloody and justified. His sharpest challenge would be the slash of a quill, not the streak of an arrow. And he would survive both, of that he was certain. A turquoise dawn like this promised as much. On the meadow by the single tree many a morning sun would rise, and with hard labor and just a little luck the plaza would surge forth forevermore. And his wife, maybe one day she would follow after all.

A lightness of twanging strings lifted above the tumult. The governor glanced backward. Far behind the other settlers weaved a lad with a lyre strapped over his chest and a barrel tied against his back. As the lad descended slowly, his fingers quivered over an arpeggio. The blind girl tilted her face upward. Suddenly, a torrent of butterflies swooped down and engulfed the musician. The fluttering yellow wings deflected the twangs into a lullaby. As the youth stepped around a thornbush, his fingers flew in amber and harmonized with the butterflies in gold.

A patch of light surged ahead and the governor strode forward. He held up his hand and the settlers skidded to a halt. "There is a clearing here in the woods," said the governor. "We shall rest before continuing the descent." An expanse of grass opened up before them.

As the governor stood aside, an old soldier trudged past, his left eyebrow twitching up and down. While the settlers began to untie their bags, the old soldier lifted his head toward the skies and spat straight up into the air. The spittle sailed back down into his open mouth. Humming to himself, he sat down and watched the young boys tie horses to a cluster of slender trees. A dozen sentries fanned out around the clearing and disappeared into the woods, calling out to one another through the underbrush. A settler slammed a hatchet into the green grass and soil splattered forth. A series of machetes cleaved into the ground. As women sorted through the bulging sacks, a pair of men crouched over a pile of fresh boughs, lighting a fire. A tall soldier with a shock of blond hair knelt down and joined them.

The forest canopy rustled into white clouds. A faint rush whispered through the branches, the splashes of the unseen river below. "We're halfway down," said someone quietly. The last settler to arrive from the underbrush was the youth with the lyre. The barrel lurched forward on his back, creaking against the straps. A few butterflies still fluttered around him, dodging around his fingers. He sat down beside the blind girl, untied the cords around his chest and lay the lyre gently in the grass. He murmured something to her and a soft blush spread over her cheeks.

A pair of children ran ahead and pulled avocados off a nearby tree. Giggling, they skipped back and gave the fruits to a stout woman and then sprinted away. As the woman peeled the skin off with her teeth, green pulp poured out and squished onto her chin. A young boy crouched by her side, his eyes opened wide. He pulled a tiny knife out and stripped off the dark green skins. The avocado pits rolled out, enormous and golden brown. The young girl in pigtails skipped up and stuck her hands in an avocado and pressed it against her mouth. Soft pulp mashed over her lips and caked her teeth green. The boy clapped once, laughing. As they ran off together holding hands, the governor knelt down behind them.

An avocado squashed black and green on the ground. Grunting, he tapped the pit with his knuckles. It rolled slightly in the grass. He took out his knife and dug it into the pit. The surface yielded stubbornly to the blade, but bit by bit a word etched out. Sheathing his knife, the governor grasped the pit and with a single motion hurled it forward over the clearing. The fat seed pattered like a raindrop and vanished amid the dark green distance of the forest.

One by one, the soldiers returned from the underbrush. They threw down their weapons and joined the settlers. Strips of salted fish passed around the circle. A few sentries stayed on the edges of the clearing, stuffing food into their mouths and gesturing. Young girls tugged on the udders of seven cows. Streams of white fluid poured out and the girls ran around with tin cups offering milk to everyone. A boy exploring the far side of the clearing gave a delighted yelp. Walking proudly back to the others, he held high an empty beehive. A thick golden liquid drizzled from it to the earth. Sucking his thumb vigorously, the boy set the beehive down on the grass. As the settlers laughed all around him, he struck the hive with a clenched fist. The honeycombs burst open and the girls stuck their hands inside and emerged with their fingers gleaming yellow. They ran back with the tin cup and quickly milked a cow. The women watched the children while gnawing on hard bread smeared with avocado and a glimmer of fresh honey. The old soldier cracked red seeds in his teeth and spat the juices to one side.

As the sun slid toward the west, the governor coughed once and the settlers began to stand up. Blankets were folded, axes yanked from the ground, and the children began untying the horses. The soldiers wiped crumbs from their stubble and twisted their necks forward. The nudge of a foot awakened a pale youth with a bandanna tied over his forehead. He started in fright. Someone laughed and the youth rubbed his eyes and began restrapping a pack to his shoulders. A short man with long black hair came up and helped him tie the cords. Below them a machete whirled and a branch cracked asunder. The scent of sap flowed anew over the settlers and they lurched forward again down the mountain.

The governor cast his eyes around the clearing. In a few moments the indigenes would be there, counting up the supplies, reconfirming the numbers. This much, at least, was certain. He raised

his hand once, as if in salute. Nothing stirred in the forest. The governor bowed his head and whispered something to the earth. After a long while, he turned around and reentered the woods.

Young leaves twirled overhead, splinters of bark and branch shooting into the air. An emerald bough flew upwards and sped past the sun. Clouds of dirt kicked up by the horses spun over the settlers, whirling and scattering among them. The settlers struggled to brace themselves as the descent veered sharply. They juted their feet against the soil, skidded against the slope. A twig whizzed through the air and smacked a tree trunk. The sun dipped lower in the west.

Little by little the mountain began evening out again, yielding to a soft decline filled with mosses and smaller rocks. The vegetation thinned in patches and lean trees arched into the sky. The stallions stepped quicker now and the settlers advanced with certainty. Currents of light wended through the boughs, spotting the forest floor. The hatchets ahead swished less frequently, the hum of the river grew louder. Bounding in front of the machetes was the young woman who had spotted the river from the mountaintop. Smaller boys and girls followed her excitedly, laughing forward as they carried their sacks and backpacks. The children ran through the mountainside, the earth sloping almost horizontal now. A soldier with rough sideburns drew up beside the governor and gestured through the trees. "We're almost there, sir," he said. The governor nodded and strode forward.

A burst of sunlight flooded the great green meadow. The settlers hustled forward, eyes bulging with excitement, pointing toward the river, the grassy expanse spreading before them, yielding quickly now to their feet. The sun lilted in the distant horizon, drifting in a western shimmer, floating over the meadow and the mountains circling beyond. The valley gleamed gorgeous before them, the sky mirroring the river in blue. A white bird flapped its wings and rose from the splashes, ascending like a mirage. The ring of mountains curved toward the heavens, rising above the settlers as they ran forward across the meadow. The governor headed to the solitary tree his niece had spotted from the summit that morning. The youth with the lyre and the blind girl brought up the rear, singing to each other. The elder would observe later that it was only

fitting that the musician and the poet would be the last to arrive, for they would be the last left as well.