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# Under a Horned Red Moon

by Kevan Kenneth Bowkett

Cothiryan land spreads under southern skies  
*And Ihvakalu flows down white through the hills*  
 And there grown men and women arise  
*Down through the hills to the welcoming Sea.*

1.

Among the Israga people who dwell along the Western Threshold of the realm of Cothirya, it is custom for young men, as part of their coming of age, to ascend a hill in the moonlight to seek a treasure. Those who return with one are regarded as men. Those who fail to find or win one almost never come back. The few who do return empty-handed are not considered men. They are dealt with most savagely.

Among the girls, those who seek to be warriors must endure the same rites as the boys. Those who seek to be mothers must have a child: that is their initiation.

The far-famed and estimable professor Zal, correspondent of the *Philosophical Transactions* of Gav Ra, seeking to pierce the secrets behind the faces and deeds of folk, once asked the Israga why they had such a rite. They were taciturn, but eventually one of their shamans said, “Our forebears dwelt in a land of silver and glass beyond the Moon. Everything they wished for came to them there by a wave of the hand. They had all they needed or desired, but they became feeble from lack of exertion. So they established this custom so that only those who were strong and skilled would become women and men and reproduce. And our forebears say we are to maintain these customs, whether in a naked land like this where merely to eat and not be slain by foes is no mean feat, or in some other place again of glass and silver where our desires are met by the mere wave of a hand.”

And they told Zal this tale pertaining to their custom:

Once there was a young man of the Israga called Koru (which is Boy in their language), who endured all the pains of battle and hunting and torment and hunger and thirst that are the first part of the coming-of-age rites. His night came for ascending the hill. He knew he had all of the skills and strength and cunning needed by his people.

But he also knew no treasure awaited him above. He knew he would not find one.

So he walked away from the Israga lands. There was no danger in that; the danger was in returning and being recognized. He would be slain or butchered (probably castrated).

But in walking away his heart broke: for he loved his family and his people.

What did he do in the lands of the Segga (that is, the lands of those not Israga)?

He worked as a hunter.

And he was a soldier in the armies of the petty princes who then consumed the realm of Cothirya.

He was again a hunter and tracker on a vast estate in the southern mountains.

While there, there occurred a moon horned red — reputed to be magical in the lore of that land. And under it was sighted the rare black bison. This creature was said to grant wishes, and the female black bison had horns whose possession gave power to summon and command spirits.

It was known that bison by the thousand dwelt in the central plains of the great continent of Senquaith, far to the north beyond the sun-drenched lands; but almost never was one seen here in

the far South of the world. Then the lord of the estate and his guests and hunters all rode out on their great riding llamas and pursued the black bison through the valleys. But she was too fast and strong for them, and finally only Koru and the lord were on her trail, and the lord's llama was spitting blood.

"Haste on!" he cried. "Haste! Bring me back her horns, or I'll hunt you out of the land!" For he was of a cruel and cowardly line.

Koru — Boy — hastened on. Down dale and up hillside he chased the bison. It was a long flight under the magic red-horned moon. But at last she stumbled, then rose, then sank down exhausted among clover by the bank of a bullrushy pool. Boy drew his long knife.

"Do not slay me, O man," said the bison.

"I must, for my master, having failed himself to catch you, at least wants your horns. I must slay you, or I shall be cast out and hounded," he replied.

"Do not slay me, and I shall give you a gift," she said, wheezing.

"A wish?" he asked.

"If you wish," she said. "But I have also another power, which is to appear in someone's life at its most crucial moments, in the form they most need."

Boy looked at her black shadow limned by moonlight on the reeds beside her. Presently he said, "This is a night of magic, and you may be right. I am not yet a man and have not yet a man's wisdom. So I shall not harm you, and please give me the gift of the 'crucial moment'."

She rose. "I shall," she said.

And he fled.

## 2.

Far away in the lowlands of the Plain of Spices Koru came across a burning inn. He helped bring out people trapped on the second floor, daring danger beyond sense—for he felt that he little needed his life.

"Are any left?" he shouted and coughed from the smoke.

"Please, sir!" cried a little girl. "My gran is up in the garret."

"She's old and sickly," said the innkeeper, tossing her burned hair. "She's likely died by now."

The girl shrieked and turned and wept against a tree. Koru shrugged and went up again through the ferocious flames, and the stairs fell in a torrent of sparks once he'd passed. He found the old woman, up in a tiny burning room at the top of the place, half-slung half-tied her on his back, and clambered down the outside wall. The climbers were ablaze halfway down, but the people below threw buckets of water up over them, and they made it to the ground without falling.

Boy was ill for some weeks after this. But he was strong and presently he was up and about again. On the day before he left the district the young girl came to him and gave him a small bean seed like a silver pearl.

"Oh sir," she said. "My gran died after all from the smoke and the burning. But she lived one day longer and gave me this bean seed to give you. She said that 'If you can eat it on the hill,' it will help you. She said you'd know what that means."

He nodded.

"You must first soak it for a day in water from the well of the Western Threshold," she added. "Then eat it."

"Thank you. I shall."

She curtsied and went; and the next day he departed.

He went to the Western Threshold, the great desert that extends from the Empire to the ocean of the sunset, the desert of the rivers that begin proudly, tumbling down from high green hills, and then run into the sands.

He went to an oasis, a three-day trek out from the edge of the green, to a ruin where the Well was, and there he purchased a small flask of water from the reputed sorceresses who dwelt there, who oiled and tied their hair into strange shapes and said they were thus copying the pattern of the desert waters.

Then he went to the march of the Israga territory. Disguising himself as an elderly trader of the Plain of Spices, he entered his homeland.

He was set upon and bound up, and his possessions taken from him, for the Israga trust no Segga people and often rob traders. Even the flask of water was taken, even the seed. He knew this might occur, but he was in despair.

"Isn't this the crucial moment, O bison?" he whispered. "A little help would be handy now."

He sensed nothing. But he was stronger than the Israga knew, for they thought him old and had bound him accordingly. He half-broke half-untwisted his bonds and escaped from the tent where they had kept him. He stole away to the chief's hut, went silently within, and lifted his pouch from beside where the chief slept. The woman wedded to the chief saw him and was about to sound the alarm, but he saw suddenly that she was his sister, and that she recognized him, and she said nothing, but looked away.

He stole back into the night and made his way to the hill.

There, on the lower hillside, he placed the silver seed in the water from the Well. He waited in a thicket while the day rose, and came overhead, and sank again into the west; and he waited while the night walked by above him.

On the second sunrise he took the seed, which had cracked and begun to sprout, and ate it. Then he began to climb. But he did so without hope, for the same knowledge had come over him as he had felt before on the hill: that no treasure waited for him above.

He trudged on, however.

About halfway up the hill he became sleepy. He lay down to rest.

He dreamt that he went to a land before the dawn and there was allowed to pick a small green fruit from a wonderful tree. He had many other adventures there, but when he woke they were hazy. On waking he felt in his hand a fruit, and looking and smelling he knew it for the same fruit he had picked in his dream. It was evening twilight now, and the young moon was a horn of red. He got up and ascended the hill the rest of the way. There, he planted the fruit beside a mossy stone.

That night, under the still red moon, he watched a magnificent tree grow up from the top of the hill beside the stone. After a time it formed fruits, and he was stretching out his fingers to pluck one—his treasure, at last!—when the tree said:

"You may pick one; it is your right. But if you refrain, a shower of blessings will fall from me upon the people, which otherwise are consumed in your picking one."

"But this is my treasure—this is how I win my right to be a man!" he cried.

"It is so," said the tree.

He wept as he stood there hesitating. But as he looked down at the mossy rock he realized he could live as a man among the Segga; he had learned how. And if he forewent his treasure, he knew he gifted his own people as a man or woman should, though the people might never know it.

He shrugged, then took some steps away from the tree, heading for one of the downward trails.

There was a whuffling behind him.

He turned.

The mossy rock rose up, and it was the black bison.

"Here is the moment," she said. "Take my horns. *That* is your treasure."

He went to her and lifted the horns from her head, and they came away mounted upon a crown, which he set upon his own brow. He looked again for the bison to offer his thanks but saw only the mossy stone at the great tree's foot.

So he was horn-crowned under a horned red moon at the foot of the tree of treasure. He spent the rest of the night on the hill, in a vigil, and in the first rosy flush of dawn he went down as a man to lead his people.



*Ellessar* by Daniel Thompson