

Late afternoon shadows crept across the city's dusty streets as the busy sounds of traders, priests and messengers gave way to the gentler sounds of evening traffic. Children shrieked and babbled as they played between the whitewashed mud-walled houses. An argument was taking place in one of the nearby buildings, accompanied by the intermittent wailing of a child. Every time the shouting stopped, the child paused too, only to resume as the dispute flared up again. A subtle, slightly sweet smell was detectable in patches, as pockets of air wafted over the city from the lake's rotting reed beds, ever more exposed to the warming spring air.

Clawfoot and Little Maize moved cautiously through the gradually emptying streets with Little Maize's brother, Indigo, and another boy called Shield of Gold in tow. They used the doorways and dingy alleys to pause and watch the dwindling crowds. The clamour of the Cuepopan district was beginning to settle down as market stall holders made their way back to the mainland via the north and west causeways. Weary porters trudged by with enormous reed baskets on their backs. Although empty now, the baskets would have contained maize cobs, fruit, string-beans, tomatoes, chillies and tortillas on the inward journey earlier in the day. The Tlatleloco market was a much subdued affair nowadays when compared with the pre-famine bustle, but people still did business there, with those who could afford to pay the inflated prices. The prolonged drought and repeated crop failures of the last four years were taking their toll. Labourers were struggling to pay for the basic foodstuffs and those without regular work were beginning to starve. Things were bad enough in the valley around Tenochtitlan, but Clawfoot had heard that rather than starve, the people on the Totoncapán plateau had been selling themselves into slavery in such numbers that the place was deserted. He had no intention of following suit, but it would be a grim summer unless the rains returned.

Clawfoot paused and looked back at Little Maize, the only girl in the gang. Like the boys, she was thin to the point of emaciation. She had a small, button nose and a chaos of tangled hair that Clawfoot found attractive in a way he didn't understand. She had a rough weave sack slung over her back that contained their meagre pickings from the day; a maize cake, dented on one side, three tomatoes one of which had partially burst open and a small wooden doll that Little Maize had convinced them she could sell to buy more provisions. At ten years old, she was a year younger than Clawfoot but already fiercely independent.

'Do you want me to take the bag for a while,' Clawfoot offered again.

Little Maize just scowled back at him.

The other two caught up with them. Indigo had been the leader of their gang when Clawfoot had come across them. Little Maize's brother had large ears and an untidy collection of teeth but he was tall for his age and with a long reach, so Clawfoot had had to use all his speed and cunning to beat him in a fight to take control of the group.

'I'm hungry!' whined Shield of Gold for the hundredth time that day. His eyes had a sunken, hollow look and he had the same kind of listless look about him that had caught hold of Flying Star before they had lost him to the hunger. The youngest member of the gang had become increasingly lethargic and then caught a cough that he couldn't shake. Then one day, Flying Star had been too weak even to cough and the others knew that he would not make it through the night. There wasn't a day that went by when Clawfoot didn't recall that night in the hovel they all shared, listening to the boy's breathing grow quieter until with a small, trembling sigh it had stopped entirely. He had listened as Little Maize sobbed gently when she too realized that Flying Star had died and there had been more tears the next day from the others when they'd helped Clawfoot carry the featherweight corpse from their dilapidated shack for the city undertakers to dispose of. Clawfoot had not cried. He had no more tears to give up for the famine.

Ordinarily, one of the gang would have snapped at Shield of Gold and told him to be quiet, but they had all gone for nearly two days now with nothing more than a tamale each and they all felt the same. Clawfoot's stomach ached and two of his teeth hurt like hell. He could only hope that they would drop out soon and take the pain with them.

For a while, the gang wandered along Coyote Street. From the high ground here, they could just see a few canoes in the distance, making their way back across the sparkling lake surface to Texcoco. Eventually, they turned north, onto Turquoise Street, where the wealthy merchants lived. The pickings would be richer here, but they would have to be more careful, the city watch was more active in this area. The passers-by went about their business, scarcely noticing the children. Soon the gang arrived at the entrance to a courtyard, the other side of which fronted the North Canal. Here they stopped and moved just inside, where they could keep the street in view.

A large man wearing the peasant hat and brown fibre cloak of a mayeque briefly held their attention. He was heading towards the northern causeway, with a rolling gait which made the sack on his shoulder swing from one side of his back to the other. As he passed the gateway that hid the lurking children, they saw that the sack was empty, so they settled down to wait.

From their vantage-point, Clawfoot could just make out the top of the Great Temple of the Sun and Rain. The twin crenellated shrines perched on top of the lofty, stepped stone pyramid basked in the full gaze of the sinking sun and radiated a fiery orange colour against the darkening purple sky. For a while the street was empty. The evening rush was at an end. Shield of Gold began kicking impatiently at the remains of a woodpile, disturbing a nest of beetles in the process. The others stopped him as they caught sight of a tall figure heading in their direction.

The man was barefoot which would have marked him out as a commoner except that he was clothed in a black, ankle-length cotton mantle that spoke of important connections. He strolled along the deserted thoroughfare with a measured, unhurried gait and paused once, briefly to run a hand through the long hair that hung below his shoulders. His long black apparel flowed easily about him as he approached the waiting children. Hanging from the man's left hand was a large dead turkey, which he held by the legs.

The children shrank into the shadows as the tall man passed the spot where they were hiding.

'Look at the size of that bird!' Indigo whispered to Clawfoot. 'With the money that will make us in the market, we can live like royalty for a week.'

'Why sell it? My father can cook it for us,' said Shield of Gold. He was the only one who wasn't orphaned although he'd lost his mother to a fever the year before and his father was infirm and incapable of any paid work.

'We're not sharing with your father,' insisted Indigo.

'He won't want a share of his own. He and I can halve my share.'

Clawfoot waved them both to silence. 'I don't like it. Why's he heading towards the centre if he's on his way home.'

'Oh who cares!' groaned Shield of Gold. 'I have to eat.'

'Yeah, come on. When will we get another chance like this?' added Indigo.

Clawfoot nodded slowly. 'Alright, take a log from that pile and hand me one too.'

The children burst forth from the courtyard at a run, their bare feet soundless on the dusty earth. Clawfoot and Indigo were in the lead. As they ran, they each wielded one of the logs as a weapon. When they caught up with the man in black, they swung at the backs of his legs with all their might. His knees buckled and he let out a cry, releasing the turkey to break his fall with both hands. Man and bird impacted the street with a thud, one sending up a cloud of dust and the other an explosion of feathers.

‘Quick!’ squeaked the Little Maize, pointing at the turkey. ‘Get it!’

Shield of Gold gathered the load and the four of them turned tail and fled, whooping with relief and delight but their joy was short-lived. Three young, shaven-headed priests with fierce expressions blocked the street ahead.

‘Stop where you are!’ commanded one of them.

‘Shit! It’s a trap!’ shouted Clawfoot. ‘This way,’ he cried and headed back towards their victim, his heart pounding a fearful quick-time in his throat, thinking they could make it past him as he lay stretched out on the ground. To his horror, the pile of black robes was unfolding eerily and getting to its feet. He glared at the children with a triumph in his eyes. Clawfoot had dismissed the stories of Catchers as nothing more than exaggerated tales told by frightened street urchins who had escaped the clutches of the clan sheriffs. Catchers weren’t supposed to exist. The priests had no mandate to keep the streets free of muggers but still the rumours persisted that they were short of offerings for the gods. These four were definitely not clan sheriffs and Clawfoot had no intention of finding out what they wanted.

Somehow, all four children instantly knew the peril. Some innate understanding between them communicated the danger they were in. Young children weren’t allowed to watch the more brutal ceremonies, but they all knew about them. Sometimes they awoke in the dead of night to the sound of drums, and often, cutting through the momentary gaps in the beat, the terrible, tearing, high-pitched shrieks.

Clawfoot and Little Maize ducked around the figure in black and ran until they were beyond his reach then stopped to check on Indigo and Shield of Gold. The shock had jolted Shield of Gold from his torpor. Deciding that the turkey would slow him down, he lobbed it at the sinister man and used the distraction to get around him to safety. Indigo had been less lucky. He was gangly and slower to react to the threat so when he finally tried to follow his friends he found his path blocked and the priests behind him were advancing to close the gap.

‘Run!’ screeched Little Maize, but it was no use. The man in black caught her brother by the arm and twisted it brutally around until he was forced to the ground. When the other three priests saw that Indigo was firmly held they gave chase.

Clawfoot grabbed Little Maize’s arm. ‘Come on!’

Together the children fled up Turquoise Street, squeezed through a narrow passage and leaped over a ditch with the sound of pursuit loud in their ears. They ran north, towards Cuepopan before doubling back into the filthy warrens of Moyotlan where they hoped the priests would not follow. They ran until their starved bodies gave up for lack of energy and hid in a disused warehouse gasping for breath. Little

Maize was wracked with sobs and tears rolled down her grimy cheeks. Shield of Gold looked too shocked for tears. He leant up against the wall of the warehouse, his jaw opening and closing as he fought to get his breath back.

‘Who were they?’ he said after a while.

‘Chachalmeca,’ said Clawfoot, using the name for the priests who presided over sacrificial rites. Nobody knew if the Catchers were the same priests who presided over the bloody temple ceremonies but the more terrifying the notion, the firmer it seemed to take root.

Clawfoot held Little Maize’s arm gently to comfort her and she looked up at him with a plaintive expression that was unmistakable.

‘I’ll go back and see if I can get him,’ he volunteered.

Moments later, Clawfoot was cursing himself as he took a circuitous route back to where they had been ambushed, loping along through the lengthening shadows and wondering why he had offered to go on such a foolish mission. There could be no prospect of recovering Indigo from the priests if they were still there but it had seemed the right thing to say, and as leader of the gang, he felt some responsibility for what had happened. He changed course slightly, deciding to try and intercept the priests at the East Gate as they would surely be making for the temple complex. Sure enough, when he arrived at the corner of a building that afforded him a view of the gate in the Serpent Wall, he saw the priest with dark clothes and the mane of black hair gripping Indigo by his wrist with one hand while in the other, he held the turkey. He appeared to be waiting for the other three priests to return from their hunt.

Clawfoot could see that Indigo was terrified. Even though he was nearly as tall as the priest, the boy was too skinny and malnourished to put up a fight. He was visibly shaking and a dark puddle was spreading over the flagstones at the boy’s feet.

‘Stop snivelling,’ said the priest in a disgusted tone.

Indigo must have said something but it was too quiet for Clawfoot to hear. Whatever it was, the priest didn’t like it.

‘Shut your mouth!’ he replied and caught Indigo with a backhand. ‘You shouldn’t have been trying to rob people then should you?’

Clawfoot wondered whether he could force the priest to let go of Little Maize’s brother. Barrelling into him might just cause him to let go of Indigo long enough for the pair of them to escape. It wasn’t a simple question of bravery though. There was a moral dilemma to work through as well. They could forage for food just as effectively as a team of three so Clawfoot reasoned that one less mouth to feed wasn’t such a bad outcome. Clawfoot didn’t waste tears on anyone since the death of his

siblings and his parents, but the thought of Little Maize's face if he came back without her brother was too much for him to bear. He had just worked up enough courage to launch himself at the priest when the others Catchers returned to report their failure to apprehend the rest of the gang. There was no way for Clawfoot to free Indigo now. He'd never get past them. Relief and guilt flooded through him in equal measures.

There was a gruff exchange between Indigo's captor and the returning search party. It was clear that the priest in black robes was very unhappy.

'Well go out and look for them again! Post a watch on the main routes into and out of the slums. They're hungry. They'll need to go out searching again.'

One of the priests asked a question.

'I don't care how long it takes,' shouted the priest at the others who were obviously his juniors. 'Stay out until daybreak if you have to.' With that, he led Indigo into the temple complex without a backward glance over his shoulder.

Clawfoot watched in dismay. Three wasn't much of a gang, he reflected. It also occurred to him that Indigo had been the better thief amongst them. He took careful note of which direction the three priests were heading before setting off on another rat run that would lead him back to their tumbledown shack without crossing any of the major thoroughfares.

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Jaguar hurled himself at the ball and missed, sprawling face-first in the dust. Ignoring the hoots of laughter from the other players, he levered himself into a sitting position and spat to clear the dust from his mouth. He was drenched in sweat and exhausted. What had begun as a friendly knockabout, supposedly just a practice session, had turned seriously competitive.

'Twelve points to eleven!' called the referee.

Jaguar allowed himself a tight smile. 'Still in the lead,' he muttered to himself. He got to his feet and returned to his position near the centreline, breathing deeply through his nostrils. Jaguar was lean and fit, but an hour's continuous play had begun to sap his strength. The ball was out of play so he took the opportunity to refasten the tie that held his black, shoulder-length hair out of his eyes. Reaching up behind his neck, he tugged hard at the knot, determined to prevent it from coming loose and interfering with his vision again.

At seventeen, Jaguar was the youngest official player of the ball game. One of the talent scouts from Moctezuma's training academy had spotted him playing in a street game three years ago. Passing through Teopan one day, the tutor had chanced upon a group of children engaging in a rough knockabout between the houses. There he had watched as the children played out their lawless version of the sacred Ullamalitzli with a homemade ball that didn't even bounce well. Jaguar was fast and agile, turning and chasing tirelessly. All of the children had been keen but none had been as committed as Jaguar. He missed fewer shots and those he hit were more accurate than his fellow players.

After the game, the tutor had invited him to one of the regular try-outs at the training academy. The others in the academy needed no persuasion after seeing the young prodigy in action. The game was so popular with the nobility and sufficiently taxing on the players that promising recruits were highly sought after. Now Jaguar was one of the most promising stars of the game and was looking forward to the day he was allowed to participate on the main circuit against the men. In the meantime, he had to be content with practice sessions and the junior competitions.

One of his team mates had retrieved the ball and was ready to restart the game. Jaguar eyed up the players in the other half of the court. This practice court was off the main temple precinct and was run by the training academy. It was one hundred and eighty feet in length and seventy five wide. An eight foot high wall ran the length of the court on both sides, and set into each wall at the halfway point, just above head height, was a large stone hoop. The opposing team of four jockeyed for position, waiting for the ball to be put back into play.

The server bounced the ball on the ground once and then brought his knee up to connect with it, sending it looping over towards the opposition. None of the players looked very spritely. In spite of the late start, the court was still warm. The walls, and even the dusty floor, had soaked up the warmth of the sun all day long and were now pumping that heat back into the still evening air.

One of the opposition intercepted the ball on its second bounce. He turned his body neatly and nudged the ball back towards Jaguar's team with his thigh. It was a good shot, too deep into Jaguar's end for him to reach. Magic River was in position to receive it though and played a return to the right-hand side just past the halfway mark. The ball caromed off the side wall gaining spin as it did so. Too tired to notice, or too tired to make sufficient course correction as the ball skewed back towards the wall after the next bounce, the player opposite Jaguar missed the ball completely. Fortunately for him, one of his team had taken up position behind him.

The rubber ball was rapidly losing impetus so the tall player had to lunge to reach it. He just managed to get his knee under the ball and knock it back at Jaguar but there was no power left in it.

It was a gift of a shot. Any other time, Jaguar would have felt sorry for the man, but his mouth was dry, his lungs were heaving and his body was simultaneously burning from the exercise and numb from the repeated impact of the heavy rubber ball. Jaguar sidestepped once and brought his knee in behind the ball aiming it up at the nearest hoop. It was a makeable shot at this range,. A ragged cheer went up as the ball clipped the inside edge of the hoop and dropped through.

Jaguar turned to the spectators' area and raised his fist to the sky. Two figures waved back at him, one of them jumping up and down in excitement.

'Game over!' called the referee.

One of Jaguar's teammates patted him on the back. 'Nice!' he said as they all made their way to the end of the court.

Magic River put his hand on Jaguar's shoulder on the way past and gave him a friendly shake. 'You did it again!' he grinned. 'I don't know how you do it.'

As the players filed through a gap in the wall, Jaguar was met by Obsidian Crocodile and Precious Flower. Crocodile got a well aimed punch to Jaguar's arm before Precious Flower threw her arms around him, oblivious to the sweat and dust that covered him head to foot.

'You won!' she exclaimed.

Precious Flower was sixteen years old and a slave in the keeping of Jaguar's family. Her dark brown hair was pinned once at the back of her head in a simple leather grip with a wooden pin through it and from there it cascaded luxuriantly to the small of her back. She wore a plain, cream coloured dress tied simply around her waist. Jaguar suddenly became aware of how much she had changed since his family had bought her at the market. When had the frightened, fragile waif developed such a perfect oval face, dark, limpid eyes and such long eyelashes? Jaguar extricated himself quickly from her embrace to avoid this troubling train of thought

'Pfff!' Crocodile made a sour expression. 'Did you see how neatly the ball was dropped at Jaguar's feet?' he scoffed. 'A blind monkey could have scored that!'

'Ooh Itzcipactli! You're rotten,' said Precious Flower, feigning outrage. He dodged her sideswipe easily.

Hey!' exclaimed Crocodile. 'You shouldn't let her out Jaguar. Ever since your family announced the end of her term of slavery she's been getting ideas above her station.'

Precious Flower shot Crocodile a venomous look from which he pretended to cower.

Jaguar couldn't resist a smile. 'What brings you two here?' asked Jaguar. He was delighted that his friends had turned up but doubted it was just to witness a practice session.

'Precious Flower wants to see Huitzilopochtli,' said Crocodile.

'Yes please,' replied the girl, her eyes sparkling, their feud instantly forgotten. 'This is the last day he's on display and the last chance I'll have to see him before Nemontomi. Crocodile came by the house to find you and when I told him where you were, he said he'd escort me here and that we could all go together.'

'You know it's just the statue on display don't you?' said Jaguar. 'Sacred Stone has done his last procession before the New Fire.'

'Oh yes, that's fine. I don't think I've seen Huitzilopochtli's likeness before. I've seen Tezcatlipoca, Mictlan and we watched the priests anoint Quetzalcoatl in the marketplace just two months ago didn't we?'

Jaguar laughed. 'All right, I can see how excited you are. Look at me though,' he said. Looking down at his dust and sweat streaked body. 'I'm filthy. I can't go like this.'

Crocodile looked him up and down then wrinkled his nose. 'You'll be fine. There'll be plenty of mayeques there, some of them even more disgusting. We'll just stand upwind of you. Try to avoid talking to us though,' he added. 'People might think we're friends.'

'Ha-ha.' Jaguar made a face. He and Crocodile had met at the age of ten at school. Crocodile was now a warrior in training and looked the part. He was a hand shorter than Jaguar but he had the well developed musculature so typical of the elite warriors of Tenochtitlan. Crocodile had a broad face with a small scar on one cheek that he had received in his first real engagement with enemy forces. He had not yet earned the right to shave his head and wear a warrior's queue but like the other young in the military training school he shaved the hair around the back of his head so that it looked like a black, upturned bowl.

Training had honed Crocodile for battle and he had proved himself a courageous fighter in several skirmishes. He had already taken three captives. One more would make him the youngest warrior ever to qualify to join the knights.

In contrast with Jaguar's very plain dun-coloured, dust-streaked loin cloth, Crocodile's was immaculately clean, cream coloured and had short tassels. It was

also embroidered with a small red eagle motif on the loose ends that hung at his knees.

‘What’s that?’ asked Jaguar, pointing at an unsightly smudge on his friend’s arm.

Crocodile looked offended. ‘I’m surprised you have to ask,’ he said. ‘Meet my namesake and god of the river, Cipactli.’ He made a flourish as though revealing the tattoo for the first time.

‘Oh I see,’ said Jaguar innocently. ‘I thought a bird shat on your arm.’

‘You just don’t appreciate high art,’ complained Crocodile.

‘High art? That looks like it was done by Rat Face or his boy down at the market.’

Crocodile was indignant. ‘It was done by Rat Face and I got a good price for it too.’

‘Well that’s a relief,’ said Jaguar because I could have slapped some bird shit on your arm for the price of a few cocoa beans.’

‘Argh!’ roared Crocodile and punched Jaguar again, this time a great deal harder. Jaguar rode the blow, grinning all the while and led his friends out onto the street where a few of the players were still discussing the game or exchanging a few parting words.

Magic River beckoned to them. Magic River was a captain in the battalion of the warriors of Island Home North, Jaguar’s own clan. As such he held an honorary rank, equivalent to that of a warrior in the Eagle Knights. He was short and stocky and his scar made Crocodile’s look like the scratch it was. Magic River’s lower lip was split where the blade from an enemy’s sword had caught it, knocked out the two central teeth and raked down over his chin. Magic River’s scalp stubble was patchy, supposedly as a result of shock from the same battle, making his round head look like the lobe of a mesal cactus. He was not often asked to look after children of a nervous disposition. ‘I just wanted to remind you two,’ he said, indicating the boys, ‘that we’re assembling at the gate to the northern causeway tomorrow.’

A cold, heavy stone of worry in the pit of Jaguar’s stomach immediately replaced the last vestiges of the thrill of victory in the ball game. He fought to get control of himself. It was a scouting party round the north-eastern end of the lake. They probably wouldn’t even encounter the enemy so far from Chalco.

Crocodile winked cheerily. ‘We’ll be there!’

Jaguar scowled. How did Crocodile make light of it so easily?

‘Good! Make sure you are,’ called the old veteran over his shoulder as he turned to go. ‘You don’t want to lose out on the chance to make your tally!’

Precious Flower looked concerned. ‘You two will be careful won’t you?’

‘Of course we will,’ replied Crocodile. ‘Anyway, Jaguar will be at the back like he always is!’ Crocodile gave a deep chuckle and then yelped as Jaguar kicked his backside. ‘Hey! You see!’ he added with a hurt look. ‘He’ll probably even attack his own side.’

‘Only if they’re being idiots,’ Jaguar retorted. ‘Come on then! Are we going to see Huitzilopochtli or not?’

Precious Flower made an excited noise and Crocodile made a long-suffering face at Jaguar over her head. Daylight was fading fast when they arrived at the Black House near the southern exit from the temple complex. A few people had gathered to see the statue which had been placed on display near the palace for one final time before it was returned to the temple in preparation for the ceremony of the New Fire. Eight stern warrior priests from the order of Huitzilopochtli stood in formation around the statue in dark grey robes and watched everyone with suspicion.

The God of the Sun and of War was about the size of a stout child of ten, seated on a blue wooden litter. From each corner emerged a serpent-headed pole, long enough for a man to bear on his shoulder. Huitzilopochtli was festooned with gold jewellery; necklaces, bracelets and anklets that hung around his sandals. The god’s forehead was blue and on his head was a rich headdress in the shape of a bird’s beak wrought of shining gold. The idol wore a green mantle and over this, hanging from the neck, an apron made of iridescent green feathers, stitched thickly together. In his left hand he held a white shield with a border of yellow feathers and upon which was mounted a cross made of white feathers. A golden banner protruded from the top of the shield as well as four golden arrows that had been sent down from heaven. In his right hand, the god held an undulating serpent staff of aquamarine from the top of which sprouted a forked tongue in vivid red.

‘Oh,’ breathed Precious Flower. ‘He’s so beautiful! I wish I’d brought some flowers!’

Jaguar and Crocodile noticed the tribute that had been laid down reverently all around the plinth on which Huitzilopochtli’s litter rested. Bright yellow marigolds, dahlias, poinsettias and even some white cactus blossom carpeted the flagstones, fresh ones overlaying the desiccated older ones from previous days. As they were watching, a wealthy family stepped forward with armfuls of silvery grass fronds and

marigolds the colour of the setting sun. The head of the family was an urbane looking man with a pronounced paunch, jowls and a shock of grey hair.

‘Who’s that?’ whispered Precious Flower. ‘That offering is worth a small fortune!’

‘That’s the Moctezuma’s uncle, Acamapichtli,’ offered Crocodile. ‘He’s a successful merchant. They say he has trading partners all the way to the Yucatan jungles and he’s one of the members of the High Council’

The three of them watched as the warrior priests allowed Acamapichtli to approach the statue where he and an extended family including two women and eleven children of varying ages placed their voluminous offering.

‘Come on, let’s go,’ said Precious Flower. She had a sour look on her face. ‘It’s easy for the nobility to be pious isn’t it?’

‘Good. Can we go home because I’m famished?’ said Jaguar. He looked at Crocodile. ‘Want to join us?’

‘I don’t think so,’ he said, serious for a change.

Jaguar knew the reason his friend was reticent. Crocodile knew that Jaguar’s family business was struggling. The proximity of the New Fire meant that commissions had dropped away entirely and the only revenue was coming from small good luck charms that were still selling in the markets.

‘Oh come on! I’m sure there will be enough to go around.’

Precious Flower chimed in. ‘Yes, please do Crocodile. Musical Reed was saying only this morning that she’s hardly seen anything of you recently.’

Crocodile gave in under pressure and the three of them locked arms and headed for Harbour Street, Crocodile whistling the tune to a ribald song about the ‘Hill of the Prickly Bush’ that Jaguar had to pretend not to know so that he didn’t have to explain it to Precious Flower.