

## Pilgrims

Taratok has very long hair down to his knees, Mercendia has short hair, Fabio has no hair at all, and Sapota keeps hers under a three-cornered hat.

Taratok wears red trousers, Mercendia wears purple, Fabio has a green skirt they wear half the week, a yellow one for the rest. Sapota enjoys colours that do not fade.

Taratok talks loudly and is sure that people want to listen. Mercendia talks in a whisper, a silken whisper like a sigh, with a quiet crack on the edge of her words as her tongue hits her teeth and bubbles of spit pop in her cheeks. Fabio talks carelessly, without much thought for who he's talking to, or what he's talking about, and waves his hands about with gusto to make up for these shortcomings. Sapota doesn't say much, but will if forced to answer, thinking carefully before shooting her words into the world on a silver bullet.

The four live together on an island battered by icy winds. Waves rear up and slap themselves upon harbour walls, roaring at townsfolk who cower in ramshackle houses. Waves, that boil up beaches, depositing carnivorous boon on sandbanks. Waves that whip and grind the crumbling shoreline, bawling, shrieking, pummelling at chalk and sand and mud with foaming fists clenched, shoulders hunkered over, sucking themselves back, teeth still chattering, shattering tiny stones as they go. Jabbering waves, with faraway stories to tell. Furious waves, drafted for imperial gambles, plundered for oil and fish, filled with the detritus of lives they care little for. Waves, lifted from themselves and turned to clouds that must wait for a time when they will fall, broken and scattered, back into the big-mouthed belly of their undivided clan.

Only when a wave finds land or ship to smash against, to throw around, can their true power be felt. Only when their fury is vented will they rest. Door frames in the town rust up their hinges with salt in protest. Meanwhile, the townsfolk have other problems.

For many years the estuaries of the island had been filled with fish. Sea birds had circled the harbour dipping and climbing into the tops of waves, hoping for a silver lick of lunch. Now though, they hoped without end, as the fish had turned their fins from the bays of the island, so wild the winds and treacherous those waves of the ocean had become. Now, the island people were starved.

The four sit around a table in a carpeted inn on the outer most edge of the island, where the wind is wildest, the clouds are fastest, and the way to the open ocean is shortest.

It is said that one glimpse of the Kankara stone brings an end to many. Its touch may be a blessing or a curse. It has been known to shatter an unwitting soul, tear them bone from bone, throw their parts about the universe, dismembering even the greatest of warriors, tearing off their heads, disembowelling their sons and daughters. But to hold this stone rightly in one's palm, to touch it, to place a kiss on its rough edges, rightly timed, rightly questioned, rightly listened for, quells a rancorous blaze, softens a cruel heart, turns a jealous eye towards beauty, delivers love to a dark queen so that light and dark might find themselves in equal measure. It might yet save an island from drowning, keep its townsfolk from the jaws of starvation.

The four had been chosen. Called by the waves and the wind and the empty ocean to journey to the desert lands beyond the horizon where the eight suns dipped, and the seven moons rose. The four were to fold themselves between the line that divides up there from down here, and roll themselves over its precipice. For now, one or two things were being decided.

‘Well sir, for some there may indeed be hope,’ said Taratok. ‘There may be belief and a fighting spirit, while others simply see it as their fate. These things do happen, you know. There will always be some folk in the town who are well-fed and well-housed, securing their families a safe nest egg, plumping their cushions and lining their pockets, mark my words, but only thanks to the open seas around them, open seas and the gentle jangle of optimism, resourcefulness, and enterprise. Thank the eight suns we can rely on them to keep our town afloat!’ Taratok said all of this smugly, being of landed gentry and himself entitled to a great fortune. ‘The jingle jangle of pennies in the can. Got the pennies and you’re a free man, right Fabio?’

‘Right’ - said Fabio.

‘Wrong,’ said Mercendia. ‘Here we are on this island - free persons all of us, and yet we starve...’

‘For want of pennies...’

‘For want of fish, Taratok. Where are these ones with families well fed and comfortable down by the harbour, in around the market, you to go on and show me? Show me a house where a child’s been born alive and pink and humming this past year. What’ll we do with pennies when my mother’s ribs are done sticking out of her dress and there’s not a fish to buy in the market?’

‘All’s I’m saying,’ said Taratok, ‘Is that some make their circumstances, others have circumstances thrust upon them, right Fabio?’

‘Right’ said Fabio.

Mercendia rolled her eyes and clicked her teeth, ‘Wrong Fabio,’ she says.

‘I...’

‘Exile,’ states Sapota.

‘Exile?’ Mercendia and Taratok replied, turning to look at the Highway-woman.

‘Yes. We must leave. Leave the island. Go in search of the Kankara Stone, ask it for the means. Return with the seeds to grow our own food, here on the island.’

‘Grow our own?’ scoffed Taratok Herman Rakitt. ‘You’ll not get a fig from the ground here. Barren, so it is. Year on year they’ve tried to grow things in the ground on the island, all sorts - fruits, yams, turnips, chillies, cocoa beans, coffee from the highlands and rice grains, wheat and barley, all of it. You’d be better off laying your shirt right here Sapota and strolling naked into the sea with cannonballs chained to your ankles, for all the good exile will do.’

‘Right!’ said Fabio, ‘Shirt off Sapi!’

‘Not taking my shirt off, Fabio...’ - said Sapota.

‘Shirt off Sapi! Go on!’

Sapota looked him. He grinned wagging his eyebrows. She looked away, aimed her pistol, and shot a hole through the wall above his head.

‘Next time,’ she said, ‘Next time, I’ll aim more carefully...’

Fabio froze, before exploding with a roar, ‘Crazy bloody Sapota! Bloody crazy ass Sapi! You could have blown my bloody head off!’

‘We have to leave’ Sapota said.

Nobody moved.

‘I’ve got it! We must cross the frothy waters and find the Kankara Stone,’ Taratok cried, ‘We must leave. Immediately!’

‘We’re leaving!’ Fabio and Mercendia cried in return. Sapota rolled her eyes, shook her head, swore under her breath, and gathered up her things. The four drained their glasses, and made their way to the water.

They climbed aboard a raft made of coconut palm, Taratok Herman Rakitt leading the way, shouting loudly all the time. Fabio Tocapino came next, holding tight to Mercendia Moon, bulbous as she was and so full of watery cushioning that standing too close to Sapota Gustava Morello with her Highwaywoman’s pistol and casket was not a position the other two would so willingly risk. Sapota brought up the rear, rifle at the ready to thwart danger should it arise.

The waves were unruly, but the four floated on, steering this way and that through the currents, to the very centre of the world. The water receded. The raft ran aground and the four lived out their days in the desert.

Perhaps that's not quite right.

They waited.

They waited until they were buried in sand up to their necks. Taratok roared into the emptiness, and Mercendia cried softly into her cloak, and Fabio did nothing but sit and stare into the distance, while Sapota emptied her pistol in rage into the storms. Until one night, when the four were set to sink into the desert and never return, the stars were covered over suddenly by a light that came from nowhere.

They were stunned. Sat, awed by the light they saw in everything, everywhere. It was a light so complete that it touched the insides of things, and they were warmed by it. And suddenly, like that, all things knew the -ingness of being. The Kankara Stone was there in the sky. But, they had waited too long. And meanwhile, a great army had arrived, and they too sought the power of this Stone. Their General cut it from the sky and took it for himself, and he and his soldiers galloped over the land, seizing everything, burning villages, and plundering all that they desired. The world was plunged into chaos and greed. In one corner, the greenest, most beautiful corner of the world, where fruit poured off the trees and waterfalls gushed with sweet water, the armies came to rest. The General laid the stone in the ground and called it the Jewel in the crown of the Empire. But vain as that General was and tired from all his battles, he fell asleep beneath the lulo fruit trees, in the grass, in the sun. The four spied the General through a crack in the wall of the garden.

“What’s say, we just run in and steal the Kankara Stone from under him?” whispered Taratok.

“Risky business,” said Fabio.

“Couldn’t we just wake him up and explain how we need it? Tell him that the island is starving?” asked Mercendia.

“I think not,” said Fabio, pointing to a gallows in a courtyard before a palace, where soldiers were pouring villagers into cauldrons of bubbling tar. Mercendia looked behind her where neat rows of stakes had been topped with purple heads. Taratok gawped at the lolling tongues and the blood and the creamy pus dribbling from the corpses. A shiver ran through his bones.

“We can’t stay here!” Mercendia muttered softly, panicked.

“We’re not leaving without that Stone,” Taratok replied.

“I’m right behind you” said Fabio.

“Good. I’ve got an idea. Mercendia, you make your head appear like a lulo fruit and turn your cloak into a Rosemary bush. We can hide under it and we’ll all slip through the trees over there together, take the Stone and run.”

“A wonderful plan!” said Fabio.

But Sapota wasn’t so sure.

Sapota wondered to herself, and said, “I’m not so sure.”

“About what, oh misty eyed Sapi?” Taratok answered, as the three busied themselves with their disguise.

“I see all this, and I wonder. We didn’t exactly find it, did we? We didn’t do anything. We were lost, and the Stone appeared?”

“Precisely. So it’s our job now to rescue it.”

“But tell me then, if one touch of the Kankara Stone either heals or destroys, how is it that the General can rule in such a vile way and still sleep so soundly with it next to him?”

“Perhaps he has some dark power. A power we can’t understand,” suggested Mercendia.

“Maybe he liked the way it looked Sapota. It is without doubt the most beautiful Stone I’ve ever gazed upon. Perhaps because he loves it so, so it loves him in return?” Fabio suggested.

“If one need only love for wisdom to appear, why the hell have we come all this way?” Sapota sat down with her back against the wall.

“Stop all this nonsense and ready your pistol. We must be quick, and stealthy, and without any more doubt.”

“Taratok? Don’t you see? It wasn’t only out of hunger that we came. We came for the means...”

“...to make our own food...” said Taratok.

“...because the island is starving Sapota, remember?” finished Mercendia, rolling her eyes.

“Yes the children are very hungry!” added Fabio.

Sapota did not mind that they thought her stupid. She was caught by her question, and so she asked it. “Could it not perhaps be, that perhaps we have stumbled in on a dream?”

“What under all eight suns and all seven moons are you prattling on about!” laughed Taratok. He had stopped climbing into the cloak and was staring her down.

“Think about it? All this appeared after we saw the light in the sky. The General, the cauldron, the garden, this wall. How can it be that in one moment we were lost, the next we were completely taken by the -ingness of Being? Just like that? Are we not completely deluded?”

“The town has tasked us to retrieve the Kankara Stone, so this is what we shall do!” exclaimed Taratok.

“No. The town asked us to find the Kankara Stone and to ask it for the means...” ushered Sapota.

“A jewel seems like a decent means to me,” retorted Taratok.

“And what happens then after we’ve sold it?” asked Sapota.

Taratok fell quiet.

“We’d be back to square one...” Mercendia offered, tentatively, not wanting to fall out of favour with Taratok.

“Exactly,” Sapota puzzled.

“What would *you* suggest then Sapota?” spat Taratok.

“Well, suppose we were to simply leave it all, and just go back home?”

“Leave the Stone?!” Fabio cried.

“Preposterous,” said Taratok.

“It makes all this seem like rather a waste of time, don’t you think?” wobbled in Mercendia.

“Perhaps,” Sapota replied. She took off her hat, and rubbed the front of her forehead. Something had changed in her. She was full to bursting with questions as she tried to remember what had happened when the light had appeared in the sky, before the General had carried it off and called it the Jewel in the Crown of the Empire. Though she knew very little, she was quite sure that this stone lying next to the Giant in his garden was not the Kankara Stone. Or at least, not all of it. She put her hat on her head, picked herself up resolutely, and pushed her way through the gap in wall of the garden.

“Where on earth are you going Sapota!” Taratok shouted frantically, leaping to his feet. Sapota walked slowly over to the sleeping giant until she was close enough that she could feel his sour breath on her cheek. The jewel glinted at her between his fingers. A thousand faces of shimmering topaz called out. She gently laid down her Highwaywoman’s pistol next to the Giant’s temple, and just like that, the jewel disappeared and the flesh of the sleeping giant softened back into clay.

“Just as I thought” Sapota muttered to herself, pulling off a red round handful of earth and stuffing it inside her cloak. Future’s are made of the things we can mould, not hardened jewels of the past. Back beyond the garden wall, Sapota stole a glance at her three fellow travellers. Seeing their fury and confusion, she carried herself off back down towards the beach and the raft, without a word.

Taratok stood in stunned silence. Fabio looked to Mercendia and asked her silently whether they should follow the Highwaywoman. Mercendia shook her head quietly. "...An illusion? All just an illusion?" she muttered, bereft.

Taratok began to roar. He picked up a stick and beat the wall. And ran at Fabio and began to beat him too, but Fabio took the stick and tossed it away. "Never!" cried Taratok. "I shall not leave this island without that Stone in my grasp!" NEVER!" and he ran around touching all the things in their places to reassure himself of their firm and solid existence.

Taratok Herman Rakitt ran about until the day was over. Then he burned his eyes out, and hanged himself from a tree.

Mercendia and Fabio meanwhile floated back to the raft where Sapota was waiting. Together they pushed the vessel out into the waves, and made a slow crossing back to the island on the other side of the ocean.

It is said one glimpse the Kankara Stone brings an end to many. Its touch may be a blessing or a curse. Mercendia called it all a dream, locked herself in her room, took off all her clothes and let her head float off to join the seven moons in the sky. Fabio never spoke again, though his body had been filled with a little of the Stone's grace, and he danced a beautiful and melancholy dance back into the ocean. But Sapota exchanged her pistol for a pencil. And the winds were calmed. And the sea was warmed. And the fish returned. And the people could eat. Because while the travellers had been gone, the people had learned to hope, and they had learned to trust. The people of the island read Sapota's poems, and were glad. They were reminded of those who cross deserts and return with wonder.