

A. M. Tuomala

Erekos

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First trade paperback edition published 2011.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
In Progress

ISBN: 978-1-936460-03-8

Cover art and design by Rhiannon Wright

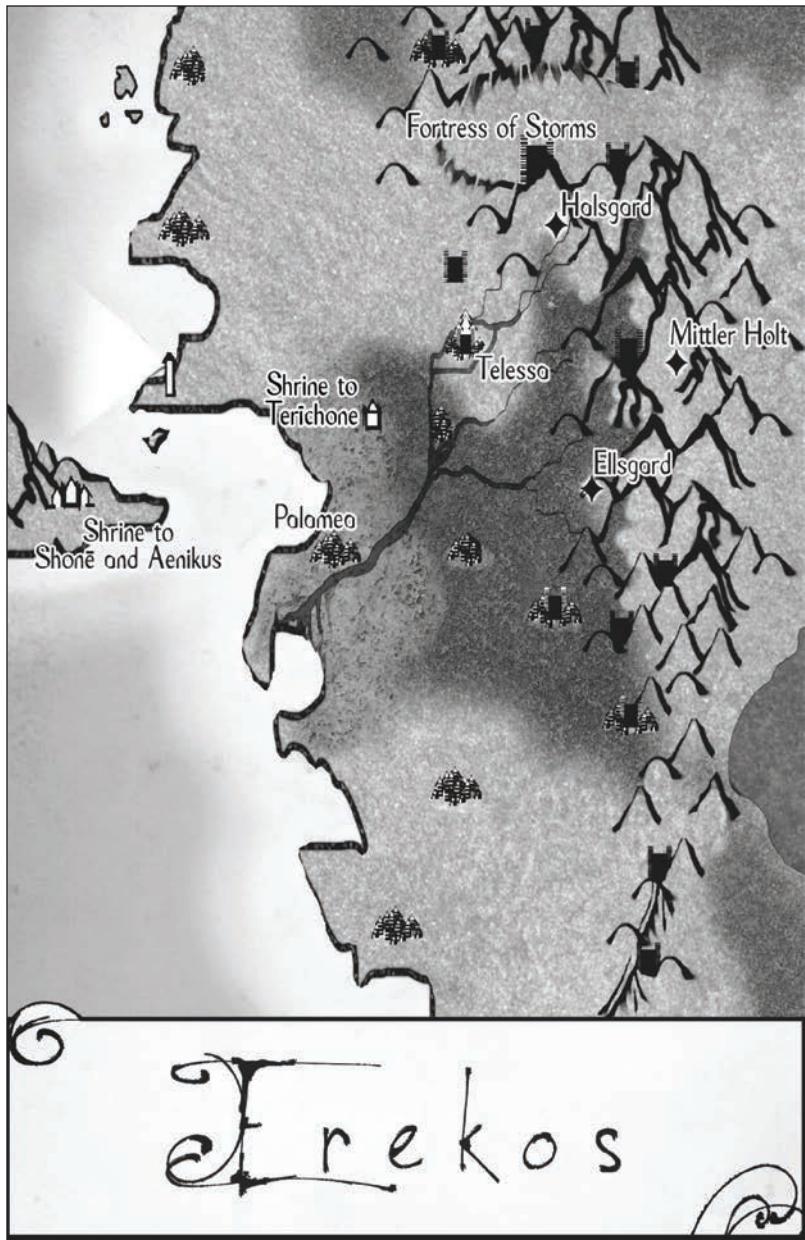
Map design by A.M. Tuomala

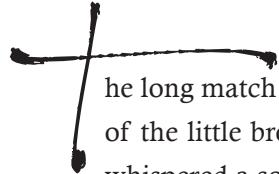
*Book design and composition by Kate Sullivan
Typeface: Calisto MT*

Editors: Kate Sullivan and Vivien Weaver

www.candlemarkandgleam.com

For Aleks, who never lost faith.





he long match fit easily through the open slats of the little bronze incense-burner's roof. She whispered a soft prayer to Shonè and Aenikus of the fire and the hearthstone as a thread of fire snaked up the matchstick. The incense caught in the center of the bronze house, and thick, grey smoke began to rise through the rafters until she blew the flame to smoldering.

The winding incense smoke began to fill the cottage. Achane took a deep breath; the spiced smoke almost drowned out the smell of rotten flesh.

Rain stroked the steepled roof of her lodging and, meeting with no rebuff, began to caress it in earnest. The water barrels would be filling at the corners of the roof, but the floats would rescue the house if the rain became a flood. The candles glowed in the darkness of Achane's cottage, while the rain soaked the blinds and dripped to the floor.

"Shonè, give me the strength of the wood," she whis-

pered, dipping her pen into a bottle of ink near her knee.

Sibar.

Heira.

Aekos.

Achane wrote the letters clearly on the papyrus as the incense smoke described the corners of the cottage. It sank into the floats and rose into the rafters to get acquainted with the herbs that hung there; it shied away from the body lying on Achane's floor.

"Aenikus, give me the force of the blacksmith." The pen bent under the pressure of Achane's fingers; the light from three candles shone on the still-wet ink and on the witch's half-shut eyes alike.

Bauke.

Aekos.

Niaa.

"Terichone, touch my soul with your light—" *the shadows moved in slow circles around Achane, cross-legged on the floor*—"illuminate my soul and make me as buoyant as the wood of your tree—" *no breeze escaped the blinds, and still the herbs moved in the incense smoke*—"and grant me the request that I make of you."

The candles went out.

Erekos.

"Shabane."

Achane closed her eyes in the tarry blackness of her cottage. She barely dared to breathe; long practice had taught her to expect nothing of the gods although she wrote the right letters and spoke the right words. She heard only her own breathing in the room, as well as the slow rustle of the herbs

overhead as they swayed in the not-breeze.

There was no reason to suppose that the gods would raise Shabane from death into life when they had refused for so many years to raise her from sickness into health, and yet Achane still listened for her sister's breath on the air. She hardly dared to draw in air herself lest she obscure the sound of Shabane waking; she sat as quietly as she had for five nights before this, waiting for a miracle that had not come.

In the stillness, the floorboards whined at trespass as footsteps tapped it. Red light flared against Achane's eyelids with such suddenness that she opened them without thinking—with hope like the hope that always burns red where death has been.

The corpse's face stared across the candle at her. Shabane's match slowly burned down to her fingers and scorched the flesh to cooked meat, and Shabane did not cry out.

Both sisters, living and dead, stared at the blackened flesh for a long, quiet moment as the wind laughed and beat the roof overhead.



The first night of the rainy season had bruised the flowers. Water and ice had pounded off the last red florets from the snakeblossom vines; they had torn away the remnants of pale, yellow flowers from the alligator palms and shaken their fronds.

The alligator palms had bent in the wind and borne the beating with grace, and they stood now over the other trees to survey the carnage of ripped-up roots and tossed-

down vines, the red snakeblossom splashes of blood. The birds flew high; they could not find their homes in the familiar alleyways, and so they circled endlessly without perching. Those forest creatures who had not been uprooted peered warily from their nests with the half-glazed look of survivors.

Soon, though, the alligator palms would drop rough-skinned little dates to the ground below them and feed the hungry. They would collect clean rainwater in their rough bark, where birds could drink freely.

At the end of the rainy season, young backwoods couples just married under the rough auspices of the tempest-god Loukaros would wade out into the swamp to seek out three alligator palms to shape into floats. They would fit the trunks into gaps in the foundations of their marriage houses, where the buoyant wood would turn a low house into a hasty raft in flood season.

Such was the infinite wisdom of Terichone, goddess of the alligator palm, that she provided for all of her children. The hungry, she fed; the thirsty, she gave water; the unmoored, she gave hope of survival. As the sons and daughters of man's race farmed her forests and drained the marshes, and as floods crawled across the newly dry land, Terichone learned new ways to care for her children.

The gods learned.

Man often did not.

Terichone could have followed a red snakeblossom path through the forest, tracing the line of the fallen vine from tree to tree until she reached Achane's cottage. The goddess could have surveyed the damage to the thatch of alligator palm fronds overlying reeds, her hands on her hips, and

clucked her tongue at the rust already spotting the pans that hung from the porch roof—payment for a few careless nights of leaving them hanging in the rain.

It was not like her child Achane to forget to bring her pots in after the day's cooking on the hearthstone.

It was not like Achane to leave the hearthstone out of doors when the signs of the land had told her for a week that last night would begin the rainy season.

Shabane's death had hit her harder than sisters' deaths hit most women, who knew that they would lose their sisters one day to marriage or accident or illness and fretted more for their own families. Shabane, though, had always been ill, and her sickness hadn't drawn the girls apart; Achane had always waited by her side with broth or fortifying bean mash or some new remedy that her research had unearthed.

Achane had never married, nor had a family, and the river people knew it as well as did Terichone. The woman had instead become a swamp witch, as did so many unmarried women who wished to live in their own way; she had scorned the black shawl that marked a healer, but not a healer's devotion to curing the ailing and the impoverished, and she had dedicated her days to nursing her sister to a health that her birth had not afforded her.

Of course, Shabane had died in time. All women died, and not even Achane of the tireless love could save her—except that she had.

She had brought her sister's soul back to inhabit the ravaged mortal body, where veins trailed dark tracks across her skin and rot had set into her legs and her delicate mouth and the place between her legs, just as the rot was even now

claiming the trees fallen in the storm.

Man, Terichone knew very well, did not learn.



The sisters used to braid each other's hair when they were young. Shabane would sit on the edge of their shared bed with her older sister leaning back against the pallet, and she would braid Achane's dark, shining hair into countless plaits that threw back the firelight like wet wood. Then Shabane would lift her slender fingers from her older sister's head, smiling a small smile that Achane was too busy standing up to see, and bend her head low so that Achane could make rule-straight rows and looping whorls of braids across Shabane's scalp. They needed no words to communicate their sympathy, and only when they had run out of the cottage to gaze at their reflections in the water barrel did they see how perfectly each had worked.

Shabane's hair had dried like grain husks upon her death, and it reflected poorly from the puddles that broke at her body's every stumbling footstep. Her body followed her sister through the woods with the muteness of one whose tongue had rotted away.

Achane had said nothing to her sister's corpse when it stared at her sightlessly with its burned fingers curled at its decaying breasts. She had only taken a swath of linen from the basket and bound the fingers with slick ointment, just as though her sister's body was still alive and could either feel pain or heal. Through eyes that had rotted out, Shabane's soul had gazed on her sister's cottage and only wished that she could cry.

Achane had insisted on sleeping on the floor and granting Shabane's body the bed, which had only stiffened the swamp witch's back and filled Shabane with guilt as she mimed sleep and stared, ever-waking, at the rafters.

Alive, Shabane had learned by morning, did not mean moving, nor eating, nor nodding at her sister's conversation over the morning tea. Drinking it would only bloat the animated cadaver that Shabane's living soul inhabited.

"If they have hearts in their chests, they *can't* shut us out," said Achane, as she fished the sweetcane gum out of the teapot and put it at the side of her plate. "The priestesses will know how to bring you back to yourself—they *will*, Shabane. This isn't the end for us." She caught Shabane's hand in her own and talked on and on about the journey that they would make into the forest, about the goodness of the priestesses of Terichone, about her endless love for her sister, and most of all about how glad she was to have Shabane alive again, even in this state.

Alive did not mean anything at all to do with Shabane's rotting body—not even love.

Now, as Shabane's body staggered into thick-trunked dendrove trees and caught its clumsy feet on the uneven places in the ground, Shabane cast forward with her mind to where Achane walked surely, gracefully as a puma on the driest patches. Her long skirt rode over her knees, tied and pinned in place for freedom of movement, and she carried a burden on one hip, a gift for Terichone's priestesses. When Shabane had been *alive*, she had often watched Achane begin on this pathway into the forest, but her living feet had never trodden the path.

Her dead feet did not know the way.

The snakeblossom vines brushed her unfeeling shoulders like gauze; they hung low after last night's storm. Red, trumpeting florets gaped at her as though she walked naked, although Achane had tied a long-sleeved wrap around her to cover the bare places. She knew that Achane had seen the maggots that sometimes showed themselves in her flesh.

Terichone of the alligator palm was merciful; she had given Shabane this not-life without twisting the knife of the jest by giving her feeling.

The corpse viewed the world through eyes that were not eyes. The soul perceived the world around it with the same senses as the body had once possessed, it was true; impressions sorted themselves into taste and scent, sight and sound, for the soul knew only those forms for understanding the living world. She did not know any longer what her body could or could not do until she tried and failed.

Achane bent under the thick vines as Shabane's body could not; the corpse brushed them out of her way and did not know whether it had been an easy feat or an impossible one.

A stone marker rose from the loose, soft soil, breaching the flesh of the earth. It stood a full handspan taller than Achane, a massive finger of rock carved with a ribbed relief of the Flood Story. At this grey marker, Achane leaned her head against a tree as though nothing else could hold her up. Her hair was falling out of its plaits, but Shabane's fingers were no longer clever enough to braid them right again.

For a long moment that echoed with the cries of homeless birds and uprooted trees, Shabane's body stood still

in the mud and watched her sister stroke the smooth, shining bark of the dendrove.

“We should keep moving.” Achane lifted her head, and her cheeks were more drawn, her forehead more lined than it had been that morning. “The priestesses will help us.”

Shabane’s body staggered onward, past the stone and past the dendrove, past a bird’s nest long empty of eggs, and ever further from home on the ragged path.

After some time—which seemed no more than the procession of trees encountered and roots stumbled upon, birds screaming and flies impregnating her neck—Achane’s shadow fell across the marble threshold of the goddess Terichone’s cottage.

The roof was thatched with alligator-palm fronds, and inside, the incense smoke that Shabane could sense but not smell told her that a bronze house was burning.



The priestesses of Terichone are seldom slender waifs who grow into tall and ethereal women; they have never worn robes of purest white silk. They know that the most powerful mystic pools come after the rains that rip the world apart, and they lie deep in the forest—not ensconced in marble, where the waters cannot touch the land.

No, a priestess of Terichone is a firm, comfortable sort of woman with serviceably ruddy arms over which she has always pulled up her sleeves. This sort has reaped the rewards of her hard work in the gardens or with the hogs or out on the boats, and she is often heavy in the solid, maternal

way of good cooks. Terichone's women know a little magic and a lot of good sense, and they often wear the healer's shawl to advertise to the people that, if they cannot work the magic to set bones or heal burns or reattach severed hands, they certainly know someone who does. The priestesses of Terichone do not flinch at work, or vomit, or death, because they cannot imagine their goddess flinching. They know that their goddess was conceived in the grim determination of two gods to heal a flooded and war-torn world, and that she did not shirk her duty even though she had not chosen it for herself.

They are not the kind of priestesses who chant a water-clock of mystic phrases in long-lost languages for the worship of their goddess. Terichone prefers work-songs rising from the rice paddy and the spinning wheel.

At dawn, the priestesses of the shrine had burned a censer of incense to the goddess and begun taking stock of the fallen trees that surrounded their cottage with its marble threshold. On another day, they would have been hoeing or weeding or building a new outbuilding to house the sick; to-day, they diagnosed the ills of the earth and rigged ropes to the tall trees that lay sideways across the land with their roots reaching out to reclaim the earth.

"It may be we can right 'n again, an' may be it c'n grow," the high priestess muttered. She stood with her boots in the mud and her hands on her hips and stared along the length of a fallen daughter of the grove. The branches hadn't been much crushed in the fall, and dirt still clung in heavy cloths to the twisted roots. "Hie up, Lytha! Knot 'n up at the next fork!"

Only three priestesses lived at the shrine regularly—three priestesses, five mules, eighteen goats, numberless plants, and a floating assortment of women whose men had done them wrong or young girls who thought that they had met the goddess of the alligator palm.

And the goddess Terichone herself, of course.

When Achane and Shabane finally reached the marble threshold that was the clergy's sole concession to grandeur, they followed the sound of shaking leaves and groaning wood to where the mules and the priestesses strained at their ropes like ships trying to run to the open seas.

When the daughter of the grove stood tall and proud again at last, the high priestess dropped her own rope and wiped her dirty brow with her even dirtier hand. "Still must pack 'n dirt around her," she said to herself, but the other priestesses were as quick as she was, and soon all three were patting the roots back down under the all-embracing soil.

Achane found it strangely fitting that she and her sister had come across the priestesses of Terichone as they worked to restore life where it had been cruelly tossed to the ground. She knelt beside the youngest priestess and lent her hands to the earth, and there she carefully flattened the ravished dirt.

Shabane was watching her, she knew.

The women stood up as one when the daughter of the grove had been re-interred, knocking their hands together to brush off the thin pottery casing of dirt.

Perhaps the high priestess had just caught sight of Shabane; perhaps she had seen Shabane from the very beginning, and only chose to react now. She stared directly into Shabane's unseeing, hollow eyes, straight through Achane's lined

forehead, and she whispered, “You’ve raised ‘n zombi, child.”



The cottage shrine was larger than most of the swamp-cottages in these parts; it held a wooden statue of Terichone with a necklace of alligator palm dates around her firm, thick throat, and the priestesses’ shared bed took up a square quarter of the floor. A potbellied stove hunched in one corner of the room, with a kettle atop it; censers kept company with long ropes of roots and herbs that hung from the rafters and brushed the floor. The cottage-shaped censer sacred to Terichone burned at the goddess’s unshod feet.

Achane and the high priestess seated themselves before the window, their arms folded on the little table so that they would not be caught reaching to refill their cups of tea to avoid speaking. They met one another’s eyes so that they would not have to meet Shabane’s body’s rotten eyes.

The high priestess broke the silence with her teacup. It struck the weathered wood of the table with a solid, hard thump. “That’n will be trouble to you, Achane. She en’t your sister any more than the leaf mould, ner any less; you should have let ‘n lie.”

“She is *alive!*” Achane snapped, even though all three knew the rot that fragmented Shabane’s body. “I brought her back, and she slept in my bed and she followed me here. Shabane’s—” Achane closed her eyes briefly so that she could lie more easily to herself. “My sister is alive.”

The high priestess smiled the hard flood-survivor’s smile; it was a smile that knew that teeth were only bones for

chewing up the world. “She moves, I give ‘n you, but her eyes see not you ner me ner the goddess in the room. She dun’t sleep, I wager, and shan’t. This ‘n is not alive, but only a body you tied ‘n’s soul to.”

Shabane shifted uneasily, and Achane ignored that the motion had appeared to be a rigor mortis nod. “Priestess,” she asked under her breath, from the low, meat-smelling part of her soul that had spent all her life fearing death. “High Priestess, I want to help my sister. I love her so much—”

“If you love ‘n, you will let ‘n die and get on with your own living,” said the high priestess flatly. When Achane raised her chin as though to protest, the priestess raised a hand to still her. “Terichone feeds the hungry,” she admitted. Her thick fingers sketched a prayer-shape on the table, collecting spilled tea into traces like writing. “But the goddess knows when the vine has died, and she leaves ‘n to feed the land. There en’t a thing she can do for a dead ‘n but lift it up and dance it around.”

Achane clenched her teeth against the curses that she so dearly longed to screech at fate—clenched her teeth until she felt them straining at her gums and her cheeks turned hard and tight. She didn’t feel the tic that dragged at the corner of her eyelid. “I want to help her,” she whispered.

She had never asked herself whether Shabane wanted to be helped; to ask it now, she knew, might undo her. She had drawn the circles in blood on her papyrus scrolls over the past long days, and she had written Shabane’s name in ink made from the bark of the daughters of the grove, and she had burned incense into the long hours of the night until her eyes had swum over the columns of letters. What couldn’t heal a

sister could raise her from the dead; what couldn't bring Shabane to life could raise the hope of life in Achane.

The high priestess read all this in the steady throb of Achane's eyelid.

"Unmake your charms, burn your scrolls, and lay 'n zombi to rest. Then, you may help your sister," said the high priestess. "Some things, you can't lay right but by laying 'n down."

Achane nodded softly as though she understood. The breeze lifted the hair that had fallen out of her plaits; it tickled the hanging herbs and waved through the dry hair on Shabane's body's head. It danced the incense smoke around in lazy curves, as though encircling a woman's body.

Achane drained her cup and stood, tying her skirt up for the long walk home already, although she had not said good-bye. "Thank you, high priestess. I've brought you and your sisters some food; I hope it will help you to serve Terichone's will, and to put the broken world to rights." She lifted her burden from her hip and passed the satchel into the heavier woman's hands, kissing the fabric so that she would seem courteous even though she was roiling like a river in flood.

The high priestess smiled in return, that bone-teeth smile that reminded Achane of her sister's face across the candle flame. "Remember what I said."

"I will." Achane had already forgotten.



The door swung shut behind the sisters departing, its wood scraping over the marble threshold and resting smooth-

ly against the frame. As she went to help her fellow-priestesses right the world, the high priestess gave Achane a look of heartfelt sympathy to carry home; she could offer no more. Shabane fell to the ground almost as soon as her bare feet had left the threshold and had to be helped upright again.

From the shade of the righted daughter of the grove, four strangers watched the proceedings with naked interest. They occupied a ramshackle mail carriage, with a young man in the livery of a page-adjutant riding postillion; the driver wore the dress of the swamp-born. Inside the post-chaise sat a man and a woman, the both of them dressed far too finely to be postmasters. The woman was slim and very light-skinned, nearly as light as the almond-eyed, thin-lipped sailors from the motherland; the man who rode at her side could only be her husband, for he was brown as new sugar and bore not the faintest familial resemblance.

The adjutant shuffled his feet as though his boots were uncomfortable—which they were; his eyes shifted back and forth across the dead girl who carefully balanced on feet that she could not feel, as though the sight was uncomfortable—which it was. The driver, in contrast, had seen zombi half a dozen times before. Seldom were the dead so decayed before they rose, and seldom did they walk longer than a day; swamp wizards found it easier to cope with their grief than to live with a zombi's unseeing eyes on them, and swamp witches felt the life that slowly left their own bodies as their magic supported the bodies of the dead. More often than not, witches and wizards chose wisely, and let the dead return to their final rest to save their own lives.

There were already lines across the young witch's

forehead that he suspected had not been there before.

The man in the post-chaise wore a crown; if not on his brow, then in his bearing and in his dark eyes, in which every man became an object. He whispered to his wife with his gaze on the women at the door. "The gods have sent us a boon," he said under his breath, and she nodded her assent.

"Come on, sister," said the witch, putting her slender arm around the corpse as though she did not feel how cold the flesh was. "Let's go home."

The king looked from the shrine, with its wooden frame and rain barrels and floats like any other cottage, to the stumbling corpse with its crusted-blood eyes gaping.

"Hold, witch," said the king, and he swung himself down from the chaise. "I would speak with you."

"So would the wind," the swamp witch answered, drawing closer to the corpse in distaste. She bore such a look of loathing that he would remember it on dark nights for many days to come. "Leave me be—I'm going home."

"Stay as your king commands." The wind shifted, and the horses stamped behind him as the speaking wind whispered to them of the dead.

She shook her head and turned away, leading the corpse by the hand. "You aren't any king of mine, if you stand between a woman and her home."

For a moment like the moment between the stab through the gut and the realization of the wound, the king stood still. His hand clenched at the fabric over the scar in his side, as it always did when he was upset; he had picked at the stitches in the infirmary until the healers had given him a medicine to dull the ache.

He should have died of a gut wound on the battlefields of the north, but Aenikus of the hearthstone had seen fit to heal him. Shonè had walked thrice around him in his sleep and blessed his pallet, and he had lived where many men might have died—he had lived, a few splinters of shattered iron embedded in his gut for reminders, and many men had not.

The gods knew that King Milaus had never brooked defeat, nor suffered himself to be humiliated.

“You and Ilaumeleus, put her on my horse. Bind her if you must.” His words were quiet but absolute, and they carried.

The adjutant dismounted and the swamp-born man slithered down from the box, shedding worries of uncomfortable boots and memories of zombi as they went, and took the swamp witch by the arms.

Milaus watched the capture through a fog over his vision like the haze of heat rising over the swamp, and so the witch’s struggles appeared as insignificant as the hum of a blood-fly as it vanished into the night. Ilaumeleus gripped her dark skin with his olive fingers as the swamp man held her like a babe in his rough hands, and although she kicked and flailed and threw her arms around in theirs, they bore her back and tied her tightly with the leather thongs that had bound the empty mailbags.

The corpse stared on in what seemed a parody of horror, but as it ran a staggering sprint toward the carriage, the uneven ground rose up to meet it and the woman’s body fell facedown in a shallow pool of mud.

The adjutant and the swamp man maneuvered the

witch to sit in the post-chaise while the king himself sat beside her; the queen looked on unseeing, and the party moved on into the forest bestrewn with mist. The high priestess, busy among the fallen trees and flooded gardens, did not know what had befallen Achane in the clearing around the shrine of Terichone, goddess of the alligator palm.