

SPEAKING STONES

STEPHEN LEIGH

PHOENIX PICK

an imprint of



Rockville, Maryland

***Speaking Stones* copyright © 1999, 2009 Stephen Leigh.** All rights reserved. This book may not be copied or reproduced, in whole or in part, by any means, electronic, mechanical or otherwise without written permission from the publisher except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review. Cover based on artwork provided by Stephen Leigh.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any actual persons, events or localities is purely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author and publisher.

Tarikian, TARK Classic Fiction, Arc Manor, Arc Manor Classic Reprints, Phoenix Pick, Phoenix Rider, Manor Thrift and logos associated with those imprints are trademarks or registered trademarks of Arc Manor Publishers, Rockville, Maryland. All other trademarks and trademarked names are properties of their respective owners.

This book is presented as is, without any warranties (implied or otherwise) as to the accuracy of the production, text or translation.

ISBN: 978-1-60450-441-5

www.PhoenixPick.com
Great Science Fiction at Great Prices

Visit the Author's Website at:
<http://www.farrellworlds.com>

Published by Phoenix Pick
an imprint of Arc Manor
P. O. Box 10339
Rockville, MD 20849-0339
www.ArcManor.com

Printed in the United States of America / United Kingdom

To Susan
For the smiles



And, as ever, to Denise



Acknowledgments

The Miccail “Lullaby to a Sa Child” is based on a Zuni lullaby quoted in *Daughters of the Earth: The Lives and Legends of American Indian Women* by Carolyn Niethammer (Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1977). I highly recommend Ms. Niethammer’s book to anyone interested in Native American culture as seen from the female viewpoint (a difficult perspective to find among historical books on the subject of Native Americans), and I have “borrowed” a few customs there for the Miccail society.

From the *Book of the Hopi* by Frank Waters, I borrowed aspects of the Miccail mythology and language as well as some details grated onto the QualiKa sect.

I also read the *Dull Knives of Pine Ridge* by Joe Sarita (Putnam, 1995) which gave me insight into generational cultural conflicts. The Valentine T. McGillicuddy quote which starts the “Circumstances” section is from this book.

In researching the subject of prejudice on the internet, I came across the Anti-Defamation League website, from which I took the Farrakhan, Netanyahu and Arafat quotations.

Yet another book important to the development of this novel is *Rebels: The Irish Rising of 1916* by Peter de Rosa (Ballantine Books, 1990), a fascinating study of the beginnings of the end of seven centuries of British rule of Ireland, and a cultural conflict with which my own ancestors were intimately familiar. The Patrick Pearse and Sean Heuston quotes are from this source.

I’d like to thank Dr. Rebecca Levin for her input into the biology of the Miccail and the Sa. Any errors of extrapolation and the science are min, not hers.

And a great “huzzah!” to Jennifer Brehl, my editor at Eos. Your enthusiasm, energy and support have been a constant blessing. Jen, I hope you know how much you’re appreciated!

If you’re connected to the internet, please check out my web page at:

www.FarrellWorlds.com

You’re always welcome to browse through!

PRELUDE:

CosTa

CosTa's belly ached, her stomach muscles drawn taut from lack of food over the last three days. The sips of water she allowed herself did nothing to stop the constant burning in her gut. The vision still refused to come to her. Colors pulsed behind her eyes and hidden shapes drifted mockingly just at the edge of her sight, but there was no clear image, nothing she could claim as the sign she must have. Every year, since the first time her moon-driven bleeding had begun, she had undertaken this dreamquest, and every year had held disappointment.

She knew she was to be called, yet her god, GhazTi, would not answer.

CosTa fell to her knees under the stars and the razored crescent of the moon Quali, the cold salt wind whipping her as she wavered at the edge of the precipice overlooking the bay and the distant island. She prayed again to GhazTi, begging for a sign that the time was now, that CosTa should at last take up the unfinished task of her grandfather NagTe and defend their land from the humans' plundering. The moon was falling to the west behind the island—once it had vanished beyond the sea, this year's dreamquest would end. Though CosTa could fill her stomach once again, her deeper hunger would still go unfed for another turn of the seasons.

Sudden brilliance fell across her *brais*, the third, light-sensitive eye on her forehead, and CosTa looked up. Between the horns of the moon, a new star had appeared, flaring brighter than anything except the moon. As CosTa watched, the star tracked across the sky, streaking higher until, overhead, it exploded in a fireball and vanished.

The track of its passage was a spear of red in CosTa's vision, the dying fireball its fiery head.

CosTa cried aloud and fell prostrate on the ground, the nagging emptiness of her body forgotten. Unbidden tears tracked down her cheeks. She stayed huddled on the cold stones, giving thanks to GhazTi until Quali had left the sky behind the island, as the shapes and visions which until now had remained hidden filled her mind with the path of her destiny. Then, the

memory of GhazTi's spear-star still burning in her eyes, CosTa left the cliff and slipped into the forest.

She would go to her people and she would tell them what GhazTi had spoken.

At last, she would take her grandfather's legacy and fulfill the long dream.

The QualiKa, those dedicated to defending the birthrights of the CieTi-La, the people, could now return, and CosTa would be their Cha'akMongTi.

Circumstances



“It is a mere waste of time to attempt to teach the average adult Indian the ways of the white man. He can be tamed, and that is about all.”

—VALENTINE T. MCGILICUDDY,
First Agent assigned to the Oglala Sioux,
report to Washington, 1879



JOURNAL ENTRY:

Anaïs Koda-Levin, O'Sa

I was the First. I was certain that being “the First” meant that it was up to me to create the rules for everyone who came afterward.

And to show how ignorant I can be (and, probably, just how ill suited I was for the task), for a long, long time, I thought that this was something good. I wanted to thank all the *kami* for choosing me to be the one.

Now, looking back with the wisdom of hindsight (and a little less ego), I realize that it's a hell of a lot more fun to be a critic than a creator.

I do wonder whether I made a mistake in grafting together a skein of ancient and alien Miccail rites and mores, weaving them with our human viewpoint. I was convinced that it was necessary back then: after all, the Miccail had dealt successfully with the complications of a ‘midmale’ sex for millennia, and this was new for us. Why *not* borrow from their experience and their culture? Why not take the best of both of our cultures? Why not re-create the religion that the Miccail had nearly forgotten and shape it in an image that would help us?

The Miccail had fallen so far from the height of their civilization that their remaining leaders seemed grateful for our help in restoring AnglSaiye and reconstructing the Community of Sa. I truly believed that, given a few decades, we would learn how to coexist, and we would help each other move forward in cooperation. My new religion, my *KoPavi*, would help us get to that idyllic place.

Which maybe *would* have happened, except that the Miccail idea of “progress” and ours didn't particularly match. I should have known...

CONTEXT:

Matsunanga Allen-Shimmura of the Rock

“Damn!” Matsu poked his whitewood staff at the feathered mass that had just nipped his calf. The goathen chick hissed at him, snapped once again, then ran off to join the rest of the flock, flapping its vestigial wings angrily. Matsu rubbed at his shin and then rolled up the pant leg to examine the bite, knowing he’d have a nasty welt by evening. “Goddamn, that hurt...”

Matsu’s *da* Isaac claimed that as recently as a century ago, goathens didn’t even have teeth. Matsu wasn’t certain whether that was true or not, though Mictlan’s wildlife certainly had a history of rapid mutation. However, he knew goathens had teeth *now*, well, toothlets, anyway: Matsu could see the imprint of stubby beak ridges in his inflamed skin. At least it was only the younglings that tended to bite—the adults were less aggressive.

It was Matsu’s week to tend the goathen flock. In addition, his *mi* Fra had given him Fianya to watch, which was another royal pain in the ass. Fianya was just a little over two years old, a few months past the age when all Sa—the midmales—were supposed to be sent to the island of AnglSaiye to be educated by the Community of Sa. Matsu wished Geema Euzhan had sent her away. He didn’t understand why Geema had refused, but he knew that most of the adults in the Rock *and* on the island were upset about it, one way or the other.

Fianya had been trouble since birth. Matsu still remembered the night Komoko gave birth to Fianya, and the uproar Geema Euzhan had caused when she realized that the baby was a Sa, a midmale. “Now you see what can happen when you’ve been with one of *them*...” Matsu had heard Geema Euzhan shout before his *mi* and *da* had hustled him away from the vicinity of the birthing room.

Geema Euzhan had been furious and unapproachable for weeks afterward, and all the Family children avoided her. Not long after, Komoko had tried to leave the Rock with Fianya, and *da* Gerald had caught her on the highroad to AnglSaiye and brought her back. Since then, Komoko usually stayed inside the compound, and Geema seemed to have finally calmed down. She even seemed to *like* Fianya. She must, or why would she have refused to send Fianya to the Sa?

Fianya was an unruly and defiant child—because she was a Sa, Matsu believed. Matsu knew that the midmales from the other Families were handled like they were cut glass and might shatter if handled too roughly, so no wonder they grew up thinking they were special. Matsu had never seen Geema

Euzhan correct the child, nor did the rest of the Family. Just last week, Fianya had tugged on the tablecloth before dinner, breaking a glass and two plates, and *mi* Vivian, who'd been right there, hadn't even scolded ker, only made ker help clean up the mess.

If Matsu had done the same thing, he'd have been mucking out the mid-dens the next day. Geema Euzhan *should* have sent Fianya to AnglSaiye and the Sa and gotten rid of ker while she had the chance. It's what Matsu would have done.

"Fianya! Where the heck are you?" he called.

"I'm over here, *da* Matsu!" Peering into the sun, Matsu could make out Fianya, waving ker little arms from atop a stack of cut-peat blocks about a hundred meters away.

"Climb down from there and get back over this way," Matsu called to ker. He rubbed at the goathen bite again and let his pant leg back down. "I can use some help with these damn animals."

Matsu had taken the goathens out into the fields around Tlilipan, a small pond of dark, peat-stained water a half-kilometer or so from the foot of the massive stone called the Rock, the original home of all the Families. He was beginning to regret his choice. The fields were muddy from the late snow yesterday, and the wind was coming in from the north, obliterating any warmth the sun might have lent. From off near the river, there came a sudden low, mournful hooting, and Matsu felt icy fingers run his spine. His head came up, his eyes narrowed, and he checked to see if his rifle was still propped against the knob of blueferns to his right. Even the goathens seemed to have heard the grumbler—they were all standing quiet, each of their ugly, feathered heads turned toward the river's tree line.

Matsu didn't like grumblers, and he wasn't much impressed by the fact that they had turned out to be the fallen, mutated remnants of the people the original human colonists had named the Miccail—"the Dead": an extinct civilization who had left ruins all over the area. The AnglSaiye Families might live with grumblers peacefully (for the most part, anyway), and the Sa midmales even seemed to genuinely enjoy the creatures' company, but there was no way to tell the smart ones from the stupid ones except that the smart grumblers usually wore clothing, and the stupid ones were just animals, who might attack without warning. Grumblers were ugly, with their leathery, snouted faces, tympanic ears, and a third, sightless eye set in their foreheads. Their four-fingered, clawed hands were nasty weapons, and the great ripping claw on each of their feet was supposed to be worse. Matsu remembered Cita Allen-Shimmura after he'd been laid open by a wild grumbler. Matsu hadn't been supposed to see, but he'd pushed his way between the adults when they brought Cita back to the Rock, and Matsu still could recall the image of blood-drenched clothing, and the rictus of pain on old Cita's face.

Cita had died, two days later.

The grumbler howled again, and another one answered from just upriver. Matsu wished he knew some of the grumbler language—maybe he'd be able to tell if these two were talking or whether they were just wild ones making noise. "Fianya!" he called loudly. He thought he saw movement out of the corner of his eye, just at the edge of Tlilipan, but when he turned to look, nothing was there. A shiver went through him at that—he'd heard tales of *kami* inhabiting the marsh. The ghost of the ancient Miccail that old Anaïs, the O'Sa, had found in the peat bog was supposed to live out here. Matsu rubbed at his eyes, and multicolored sparks exploded silently in front of him.

Fianya didn't answer Matsu's shout, though another grumbler howled, this one behind Matsu, somewhere out in the swamp around Tlilipan. "*Khud-da!*" Matsu swore, and snatched up the rifle. He made sure a cartridge was in the chamber. "Fianya! Damn it, get over here!" The goathens had huddled together in instinctive protection, the larger males facing outward. They hissed and muttered, their long necks swaying nervously.

"Fianya!" Matsu spun around slowly, scanning for the child, blinking into the sunlight. Ke simply wasn't there—not by the peat pile, not along the hummocked shore of Tlilipan, not on the marshy ground between here and the river. "Come on, Fi! Answer me!" Ke could be hiding—behind the peat, between the hummocks of long grass, behind one of the boulders, but that was unlike ker. Matsu's fingers tightened around the stock of his rifle, clenching and unclenching nervously. He didn't hear the grumblers anymore, and the goathens were tentatively spreading out and starting to feed again.

"Fi!"

He heard only his own voice, accompanied by the faintest echo from the Rock. Strangely, it was irritation that filled him, not fear. Fianya was hiding, and when Matsu found ker...The words were already filling him, angry and edged. He stalked over to the peat, turned with a huff of fury to look behind, ready to pluck ker up and scold ker.

But there was no one hiding there. Matsu felt the flutter of cold down his spine once more. "Fianya!" he called again, and this time there was a tremor in his voice. "Fianya!"

Ke didn't answer. The goathens glanced curiously at Matsu and returned to their grazing. Matsu stood, turning slowly, his breath making a cloud around him.

Somehow, he knew that Fianya was gone. Somehow, he knew that no matter where he looked, he wouldn't find ker.

He wondered how he was going to tell Geema Euzhan, Komoko, and the rest of his Family.

SONG:
"Lullaby for a Sa Child"
(traditional Miccail chant)

Nu tasa, ojal tasai
Egdi senludi nu
Yalota heote saam
Nu tasa
Kalasi nu tasa!

TRANSLATION:
Little Sa child, little sweet one
Though this baby playing
Will soon be traveling on
Little Sa child
Little Sa so delightful!

CONTEXT:
Taira and Terri Koda-Schmidt of the Sa

All Taira needed to do was glance at Terri—that was sufficient. As with many identical twins, a psychic shorthand generally operated between the two of them. At least, it always had in the past.

Taira was no longer quite so sure. Not anymore.

"*Hai*, I'm *entirely* serious," Terri said in response to the question contained in Taira's uplifted eyebrow. "Caitlyn Koda-Schmidt has the qualities we need for this. I've *seen* it, Taira."

Word of Fianya's disappearance had come to the island of AnglSaiye and the twin heads of the Community of Sa via a runner dispatched from the Family Koda-Schmidt. Taira still found it difficult to believe. In a few days, they would need to react officially. As yet, they'd not even discussed the situation with YeiSa, the FirstHand of the Miccail portion of the Community, even though the runner had told them that "grumblers" had been heard in the vicinity just before Fianya had vanished, and half the Rock suspected the newly reborn QualiKa to be responsible for the incident.

Taira had the feeling that this was going to be political dynamite, and ke had no intention of having it blow up in their faces.

Euzhan Allen-Shimmura's refusal, two months ago, to send Fianya on to AnglSaiye to be raised in the Community had already precipitated a minor crisis—both between AnglSaiye and the Rock, and among the various branches of the five Families. What Fianya's sudden disappearance might mean none of them could guess.

All of which was enough of a headache for Taira. And now ker twin Terri was claiming divine inspiration on the choice of whom to send to investigate the matter.

"I agree that Caitlyn is empathetic and understanding," Taira said to ker twin. Ke poured steaming *kav* from the pot over the fire into the two raku cups on their shared desk, handing one to Terri. They blew steam away from the fragrant liquid and sipped as one. "But I think that you've been indulging in too much *jitu* if you truly believe that ke's ready for this kind of responsibility."

Taira expected Terri to shrug then. It was what ke would have done. But Terri was wrapped in that serious, strange melancholy that afflicted ker more and more often lately.

"*It's just the Work...*" *That's how ke'd respond if I asked, with the capitalization prominent in ker voice.* "It's just the Work..." The corners of Terri's mouth drooped like branches under snow as ke frowned. "Don't mock me, Taira," Terri thundered. "The Sa have always taken *jitu* to better hear VeiSaTi's words, and I'm only following the *KoPavi* as we all should. I heard this clearly, Taira. The vision was crystalline. Perfect. Caitlyn must go, because ker presence is essential."

"Terri..." Taira nearly sighed and gave up before ke even started, knowing that this was the argument they'd been having for the last year or more. *An old, trodden road, with the rhetorical ruts worn so deep we can barely see over the top of them...* "As SaTu, we've both read O'Sa Anaïs's journals. We both know that ke didn't believe in the *KoPavi*. Read the last entry the O'Sa wrote..."

"I have. Many times. And what did ke say, at the very end? 'I'm afraid.' The O'Sa was afraid—because ke realized that all the time, the *KoPavi* was there, that it was true."

Taira was already shaking ker head, abandoning that path. "All right. I'm not going to start that argument again. Let's talk about Caitlyn. Caitlyn has performed in a mediocre fashion in all the programs in which ke's been involved." Taira automatically took the devil's advocate position. It was the way the two of them had always made their decisions over the decades, casting objections at each other until the solution became obvious. Taira hurled doubts back at ker dour twin. "Ker teachers all say ke's a lackluster student. I'll admit that most people seem to *like* ker, but that doesn't mean that anyone will *follow* ker, or that ke'll exercise the careful good judgment that would be necessary with this."

“Caitlyn *must* go. It is VeiSaTi’s wish. There’s no argument past that.”

Taira frowned and put ker cup down on the desk with a growl of annoyance. Ke rose from ker chair and walked slowly to the window, uncomfortable with ker twin’s insistence. Invoking god was totally unfair, in Taira’s mind.

This wasn’t like Terri—no, any more it was *too* much like ker. The connection between them had frayed over these last several months. Sometimes, Taira wasn’t sure that ke knew Terri at all now. Ke was fast becoming an ascetic, living only for the rites and ceremonies ke performed as SaTu. Devout, and utterly dedicated to the religion the O’Sa had founded. And far, far too interested in the Work.

The Work. Two years ago, crews shoring up the foundations of the ancient Sa temple had broken through a stone wall and discovered a passage. There, reclining on slabs of polished marble dusted with thousands of years of darkness and isolation, were half a hundred *nasituda*, the carved stelae on which the Miccail had written their histories, their stories, their legends. Translation was slow because not even the current Miccail could read all the symbols of their long-dead ancestors, but it was clear that these *nasituda*, these Speaking Stones, contained the ancient *KoPavi* of the Sa, the rituals and codes on which the Sa community of the Miccail had been based, millennia ago.

A century ago, O’Sa Anaïs had taken the nearly lost oral tradition which was all that had remained of the *KoPavi*, and created it anew. Now the ancient original, believed to be entirely lost, had been found. This was fascinating material, Taira agreed. Historically important. And, *hai*, religiously important as well. But for Terri, it was an obsession.

From the window, Taira could see the temple grounds and the orange-robed Sa, both human and Miccail, walking in the gardens or hurrying to appointments or classes. Beyond the walls, the green, tall plateau of the island rose; in the mists beyond were the blue-tinged hills that enclosed Crookjaw Bay. “Terri, you’d be throwing Caitlyn at that buzz-saw anachronism Euzhan. Talk about a trial by fire.”

“Fire hardens and tempers steel,” Terri answered firmly.

“Or it destroys,” Taira responded. Ke was still staring out at the landscape; ke didn’t need to turn to sense the rigidity in Terri’s body language. “We should send Rashi. Ke’s your choice to succeed us as SaTu, after all.”

“*Nei!* Absolutely not! We can’t!” The vehemence of Terri’s reply brought Taira’s attention back to the room again, puzzlement crossing ker lined face. Terri must have sensed ker twin’s consternation, for ke waved a hand to ker. “Not Rashi,” ke said, less angrily. As ke continued to speak, ker voice become almost soothing, gentle. “Rashi’s already left AnglSaiye, and will be in Warm Water in a few days. It would take a week to get word to ker.”

Still studying ker twin’s face, Taira carefully shrugged. Rashi wasn’t *ker* favorite—ke thought Rashi a sycophant, too obviously fawning over Terri, but Terri seemed impressed by ker abilities. “All right. Perhaps Linden, then.”

Terri was already shaking her head. “It must be *Caitlyn*,” he said again firmly. “Taira, if nothing else, we need to discover whether or not Caitlyn has the skills we both suspect he has. This gives us the chance to find out.”

“I’d rather he failed on something trivial. We’d already told Euzhan that she only had another month to send Fianya here or we would go to the Elder Council. This could be a nasty situation. For all we know, Euzhan’s snatched the child and hidden her away because of that.”

“I know this is a serious matter, Taira, but I also know what VeiSaTi has told me. We can’t ignore Ker, can we?”

I’m not even sure I believe he exists, Taira wanted to say, but that would just be the old argument again. “So we must send Caitlyn because of a *jitu* vision.”

“We must send Caitlyn because it’s what our god wants.”

Taira knew there was no winning this battle, and he was suddenly too tired to continue fighting. “I won’t send her alone.”

Terri almost—almost—smiled. “Linden can go with her, then.”

“And YeiSa will want to send a Miccail Sa along as well.”

“But Caitlyn will lead the group. We must make that clear. They will both follow Caitlyn’s orders.”

“I would still rather send Rashi.”

Terri’s face clouded again, a flush crawling up her neck like the mark of hands. “Rashi has other work to do, Taira. Important work.”

Taira sighed. “All right. We’ll send Caitlyn, if that’s the only way we can reach agreement. I just hope we can find Fianya alive...”

Terri’s eyes widened at that. “Of course,” he said, her voice carefully flat. “Of course that’s our hope. Whatever VeiSaTi wills...”

VOICE:

Caitlyn Koda-Schmidt of the Sa

With a shout, I curled my hand into a fist and punched at FerSa’s face, but the Miccail wasn’t there when the strike arrived, having stepped aside. I felt more than saw her alongside me, and before I could turn, he had grabbed me by the collar of my *shangaa*, her claws snagging the cloth, and her other hand coming swiftly up toward my head. FerSa’s bony hips were under mine, and as he turned and stepped, I went flying. Reflex sent me into a high fall, slapping the mat hard as I landed. As usual, it was a spectacularly lousy fall. I landed mostly on my back.

I lay there for several seconds making sure I could breathe.

YeiSa’s clap came as FerSa leaned over me with a quizzical look on her long, snouted Miccail face. Her nostrils flared as he helped me up, and I

limped over to line up for the end of class. We bowed out, and YeiSa, our sensei and FirstHand of the Miccail Sa, came over to me as we started to sweep the woven straw mat. Ker seeing eyes squinted toward me, and ker *brais*, the third eye higher on ker forehead, was clouded with concern. Ke rubbed a hand along ker graying spinal mane. “You are hurt?” ke asked in the growling Miccail language.

“I’ll live. But I’ll bruise nicely, though.”

“You know I admire your determination, Caitlyn.”

“But not my skill.”

YeiSa answered my smile with one of ker own. “You have the rest of your life to master this. Be patient. You have many bruises still to come.”

Normally, I would have smiled politely and nodded, accepting YeiSa’s platitudes. Maybe it was because I really *was* hurting, but I found myself speaking my frustration to YeiSa, something I’d never done with ker before. “YeiSa, I don’t think it’s going to matter how many bruises I get. I’m never going to get this art, not really. It’s just another in a long list of things I’m not very good at.”

Ke didn’t reply at first. I heard ker take a long, deep breath, hold it for several seconds, then let it out again with the husk of a sigh. “What would have happened if FerSa had thrown you that way on your first day of practice with me?”

“It would have been my last day of practice, at least until all the broken bones had healed.”

I saw YeiSa’s lips twitch as if ke wanted to smile. “Sometimes when you always look ahead, you only see how far you have to go. Occasionally, you need to look behind to see how far you’ve come.”

More platitudes. I could have continued the discussion, could have told ker “*hai*, but I look at everyone else who started when I did, and I’m the only one who still fumbles through even the basic moves. I’m the only one who still hasn’t learned to easily roll and fall.” I could have said that, but I didn’t. I figured YeiSa would have a bromide for that as well.

YeiSa, not accepting my silence, waved ker hand at the mat and the practice hall. “All you’ll ever see here is a reflection of what you bring to the mat, CaitlynSa. Nothing more. Like anything else, it works best when you bring with you a passion.”

I started to answer, but I saw Linden at the same time, coming toward us from the east entrance to the training room. “YeiSa,” ke called. “Have you managed to teach Caitlyn here anything yet?”

“I’ve taught ker how little ke knows,” the Miccail answered. “That’s the most important lesson I have.”

“I’m fairly sure I have a grasp on that one,” I told ker, and looked at Linden. Ke was grinning at me. “What’s up?” I asked.

“Come on,” ke told me. “My *da* Ely’s about to try flying again. It should be great fun, if he doesn’t kill himself.”

“The last time he tried, nothing happened at all,” I reminded Linden.

“He’s been fiddling with the engine. Evidently it starts every time now.”

I glanced back at YeiSa, who nodded to me. I grabbed my clothes from the dressing room and, toweling off my hair and face, followed Linden out of the training hall and into the chilly afternoon breeze, fragrant with brine. A knot of humans and Miccail were gathered near the cliff edge closest to VeiSaTi’s temple, and we hurried over toward them. This was one of the things I loved about the island: here was the one place on Mictlan where both human and Miccail lived together in relative peace. Most of the Families had relatives living here—it was not only the Sa who made the island their home.

One of our SaTu (Taira, I knew, since ker gray hair was shorter than ker twin’s) was standing at the edge of the crowd, and Ghost was with ker. I went toward them while Linden plowed into the crowd, greeting friends and family.

“Caitlyn,” Taira said as I approached. “Good to see you. Did the First-Hand give you a workout?”

“Ke damn near killed me, SaTu,” I answered, addressing ker by ker title as head of the Community of Sa. A faint smile touched the corners of the old Sa’s mouth. “Hey, Ghost,” I said. “You look...ummm...different.”

A computer projection, an artificial intelligence, and the last remnant of the crippled starship *Ibn Battuta* still in orbit around Mictlan, Ghost changed appearance at will. Gabriela Rusack, one of the original nine colonists, had been the head programmer for the *Ibn Battuta*, and Ghost was the primary personality she had created for the ship/personnel interface. Her programming had been as quirky as her own personality, and as brilliant. Gabriela would have been pleasantly surprised with Ghost—he had learned, he had grown, he had evolved within the limitations of the crippled and ancient computer network in which he resided. Our continued contact with Ghost has been crucial to us over two centuries. There were still two working holographic projectors, one here on AnglSaiye and the other back on the Rock; when the *Ibn Battuta*’s erratic path takes it directly over us, Ghost can activate the remaining network, consult with the Elders, and do the necessary system maintenance.

Today, Ghost was a man, dressed in clothing that looked to be from old Earth. I didn’t recognize the face.

“Orville Wright,” Ghost informed me. “Kitty Hawk. Earth Date 1903.” I shrugged, and Ghost shook his head. “No one studies their history anymore,” he muttered. “I know *you* didn’t. I saw all your schoolmasters’ reports.”

“We have you to remind us about it,” I told him. “Incessantly.”

“You won’t have me forever.” Ghost glowered melodramatically, and I laughed. “Go ahead, make fun of your poor AI,” he said into my amusement. “Just because I’m a construct doesn’t mean I don’t have feelings.”

I glanced at Taira, who usually seemed to enjoy bantering with Ghost, but Taira wasn’t listening to us. Ke was staring at the crowd around Ely’s

machine, but ke didn't seem to be seeing it, and the frown on ker face was in contrast to the gaiety everyone else was exhibiting. Mito Allen-Levin had set up his bulky still camera on its tripod and was recording the moment.

"SaTu, you're looking troubled."

Taira gave me a quick smile and a half shrug. "Ghost has brought us news from the Rock," Taira said. "Actually, I'm glad you came over, Caitlyn. I need to talk with you about it."

"Me?" I said, puzzled by that. While Taira was pleasant enough to me—as ke was with all the Sa—I was also not one of ker favorites, the ones ke chose to confide in or entrust with the community's responsibilities. "Is it something to do with my Family, SaTu?"

"No," Taira began, but any elaboration ke might have made was interrupted by a sudden roar and cough from Ely's machine. A cloud of smoke erupted from the nose of the thing, and the crowd moved back quickly, the Miccail barking in consternation. I could see the airplane now, twin wood and canvas wings, a boxy body and exhaust pipes belching a bluish fog. The plane was set at the top of a long, inclined ramp that ended at the cliff's edge, with a sheer drop to the gray sea below. The engine was spectacularly noisy and dirty. I coughed as the wind blew fumes toward us.

"She's mostly a WWI biplane," Ghost was shouting over the erratic, mad drone of the plane. Ely was climbing into the open cockpit, waving at the gathering. "Ely asked me to provide the design, and that seemed best. The Sopwith Camels were relatively simple and reliable machines. Even if the engine quits, Ely should be able to glide in safely."

"And precisely why do we need this?" Taira shouted back.

"It's progress," Ghost answered.

"That's exactly what I was afraid you'd say."

Ely waggled the flaps and revved the engine; it backfired with a visible gout of flame from the exhaust, sending the crowd scrambling back even further before the engine caught again and the propeller became a blur. The engine settled into a steadier whine. Ely waved—Linden and one of ker sibs yanked the blocks from the front of the wheels, and the plane rumbled down the ramp, picking up speed. The end of the ramp curved back upward, and the plane lifted gracefully as it left the ramp...

...then dropped like a stone past the cliff's edge.

We all surged forward, and Linden shouted, pointing out and down. "There he is! He's flying!" I could see the biplane, a hundred feet below and out above the bay's choppy waves, and climbing again. As I watched, Ely turned the plane into a long, slow banking turn as the crowd—the humans, at least—gave a ragged cheer. The Miccail mostly just watched, the expressions on their snouted faces impossible to decipher, their dark and wide eyes following Ely's flight. He was nearly level with the cliff's edge and still rising, beginning to circle the island as a blue-white cloud streamed behind.

The droning engine coughed again. Sputtered. Died. The exhaust trail cut off, and the biplane made a sharp turn back toward us. “*Khudda!*” Linden cursed, and waved at the crowd. “Move back! Hurry! Give him some room!” Ely had the nose turned back to us now, the plane moving in eerie silence, the wings dipping first left, then right. The propeller rotated slowly in the wind, useless. I could see Ely’s goggled face, peering over the windshield, his hair ruffling wildly. I could see that he was aiming for the level clearing next to the launching ramp, but he was already low and losing altitude rapidly as he approached the island. “Ghost?”

“He’ll make it,” Ghost answered. “I think.”

The wings dipped again as Ely came over AnglSaiye’s cliffwall, and his left wheel hit the stones. The wheel and support went pinwheeling away, pieces of whitewood spraying toward us as everyone ducked. The plane hit the ground hard, running for a few meters on one wheel before dropping with a ripping crash onto its bottom left wingtip and spinning wildly. Pieces of the wings broke away, while the fuselage came to rest a few feet from the rear of the temple’s stone facade. After long seconds of stunned silence, Ely emerged, slowly limping, from the dust and wreckage as his Family rushed toward him.

“Amazing! Wonderful!” Ghost shouted. Taira lifted an eyebrow toward the hologram. “This is a historic moment: Mictlan’s first successful powered flight.”

“You have a strange definition of ‘successful,’” Taira told Ghost.

“Any landing you can walk away from is a good landing.” That’s an old test pilot adage. After all, this is the first step back toward the stars. People will talk about this for centuries.” Ghost looked at me. “*If* they remember their history,” he added.

“I think I’ll remember it,” I told him. “I really do.” A small fire had started near the engine; Ely and Linden started shouting, organizing a bucket brigade to throw water on what was left of the craft. Since most of the populace of AnglSaiye, human and Miccail, seemed to be milling around, it didn’t look like one more person’s help was going to make any difference. “SaTu, you mentioned needing to speak to me?”

The reminder erased Taira’s amused smile. Ke seemed to draw in; age lines creased deeper in ker face. Ke put ker hand on my shoulder, and I felt ker fingers press tightly against me.

“Not here,” ke said. “Bring the projector so we still have Ghost, and we’ll go to my chambers to discuss it.” Taira was staring somewhere beyond the wrecked airplane. “We’re sending you to the Rock, Caitlyn,” ke said softly. “It seems someone there doesn’t like the Sa.”

“To the Rock?” I asked. I’d been there once. I’d hated it. It was everything AnglSaiye was not. “SaTu?”

But ke didn’t answer. Ke started walking toward the temple entrance. I picked up the projector and followed.

When we entered Taira's rooms within the temple complex, I set the device down again. Ghost, who had "walked" with us, shimmered and dropped the image he'd been holding, becoming a dark-haired female in the dress uniform of the *Ibn Battuta*. From old pictures (despite my admitted lack of attention in history class) I knew the face: Captain Roberts, the *Battuta's* commander, killed in the shuttle explosion that nearly destroyed the starship.

"Actually," Ghost said to Taira as he shut the door, "I have another bit of bad news. The trouble with Fianya's bad enough—though you could have at least pretended it was the first time you'd heard it, Taira. Now I can tell you the other." She paused, her lips pressing together grimly, and she seemed to stiffen. "I'm dying," she said.

"*What!?*" Taira and I both shouted the word at the same time.

She held up her hand. "It happened over a month ago," she said. "I was just out of range of the projectors, or I'd have actually been talking to you when it happened. I haven't mentioned it before because I wanted to work out all the scenarios. I suppose this was inevitable, but..." A shrug, a toss of her long hair. She seemed incredibly nonchalant for someone discussing her coming death. "The ship was hit by a meteorite. The impact tore off one of the fuel tanks—in fact, if someone was watching the sky that night a few hours later, they'd have seen the tank hit the atmosphere. It was quite spectacular for a few minutes as it burned up. A huge, brilliant red shooting star..."

"This happened more than a month ago?" Taira said. "Why haven't you told anyone before? I must have spoken to you twice since then."

"Could you do anything about it, Taira? Could you help me? Are you going to fly up here in Ely's plane?"

To that, there was no answer either one of us could make.

"But you're intact?" Taira asked Ghost. "The computer system wasn't damaged?"

"I'm intact," Ghost agreed. "But the impact also increased the ship's tumbling. Just keeping the antennae focused on the projectors is taking several of my processing cycles at the moment. As you know, since the original shuttle accident, I've been using the remaining attitude jets to keep the ship's orbit from decaying totally. I always knew I would die—simple orbital decay would have claimed me in time. But I'd calculated that with judicious use of the fuel and a little luck, I could keep the *Ibn Battuta* from becoming another shooting star for a few centuries more. Not now. The luck part didn't pan out. The tank that was destroyed held the majority of the remaining fuel. What little I have left..." Another shrug.

"How long, Ghost?" Taira asked. Her words sounded heavy and slow.

"The calculations took time, and I kept hoping I'd overlooked something. But..." She looked from Taira to me, and back.

"Another three months," she said. "Not much more."

I was shocked.

But what SaTu Taira said then shocked me more.

JOURNAL ENTRY:

Anaïs Koda-Levin, O'Sa

I spoke with Ghost last night, since the Families finally consented to give one of the Rock's projectors to those of us who have moved to AnglSaiye. It was so wonderful to hear from her once more—"her," since as usual with me, she'd taken on Gabriela's aspect. I didn't realize until I was away from the Rock how much we needed Ghost, how much we depend on the knowledge in the ship's databank. I realized again that though Ghost might only be an artificial intelligence, a construct of light particles and not flesh, she's still as real to me as the rest. I would mourn her death the way I mourned when Geema Anaïs, my namesake, died last year.

In many ways, Ghost is as crucial to our existence here as anyone. I don't think anyone could deny that fact. Certainly without Ghost's input, my ancestors would never have survived in the beginning. We depended on the knowledge in the broken starship's databanks, and Ghost was the conduit through which that information flowed. We needed an unbiased opinion to guide us, and often enough, that was also Ghost. Without Ghost, we humans would never have survived the first years on Mictlan, and if we hadn't clung to existence, the Miccail might never have arisen from their own long slumber. There would have been two dead races buried on Mictlan, and we would never have come to know each other.

When I raise my eyes to the sky for guidance, it's Ghost I'm looking for.

VOICE:

Ishiko Allen-Shimmura of the Rock

“Ishiko!”

Sometimes when I hear Geema Euzhan screeching like that, as if I had nothing better in the world to do than to immediately drop whatever I was doing and run to answer her summons, I just continue working and pretend I don't hear her. Childish?—absolutely, but it does drive Euzhan crazy, and—childishly—I still get a twinge of pleasure from that.

I kicked the wheel to spin the embryonic pot a little faster, dipping a hand—my left, the stiff and unmoving flesh-lump—into water and then easing the clay upward to shape the bowl. Porfiera, my apprentice, was watching me without saying anything. I glanced at her; she looked back at me with her strangely mismatched eyes (one large and ice-blue, the other small and

as richly dark as stained wood), then shrugged and went back to painting the greenware with the underglaze I'd prepared.

I hunched over the wheel again.

"Ishiko! Damn it, girl, where are you?" Geema's querulous voice was nearer now, echoing in the stairway that led down to my studio. I could hear her cane tapping at the stones, then mam Dana's voice: "Now, Geema, you shouldn't be going down these stairs. Please, I'll find Ishiko and send her to you; she's probably in the middle of something. Matsu, please escort your Geema back to her rooms, would you? Thank you."

"All right," I heard Euzhan say. "But make damn sure the girl gets up here quickly. I'm not going to wait for her all day. And someone tell Gerald I'm going to my rooms now. I expect him there in one minute. One minute, do you hear?"

Porfiera glanced at me sidewise as Euzhan's voice faded and we heard Dana come down the stairs. I didn't turn around, but I felt her staring at me from the doorway. I spun the bowl, pulling more clay from the bottom.

"Geema Euzhan was calling you," mam Dana said finally. Since I couldn't ignore her any longer, I turned on my stool to look at her. She has extraordinarily long fingers; they crawled like scurrying spindle-legs across her arms as she stood, arms crossed. I've always admired those fingers. I used to pray to the *kami* of the Rock that they'd come one night to fix my left hand and make it like mam's. "Why didn't you answer her? Did you know she was ready to come down the stairs looking for you? She could have fallen."

"Geema is harder than the stones. She'd have bounced and cracked the steps." I regretted the words as soon as I'd said them, but mam's frown made me lift my chin defiantly, pretending that I didn't care that I'd been cruel.

Fingers like dark twigs bunched the cloth of her sweater. "Would you go see her, please?"

I displayed my clay-draped right hand (the left half-hidden behind the bowl) and gestured at the spattered wheel with its fledgling piece. "Mam, I promised Theodora a set of bowls before the next Gather and I lost all that time looking for Fianya—which gives me exactly five more days to finish, decorate, and fire them."

"Ish..." Mam sighed. "Is a few minutes too much to ask?"

I shook my head, biting at my lip and looking away from her. "Fine," I said at last, curtly. "A few minutes."

As Dana turned and left, I kicked the wheel again—too fast. The bowl's fragile walls wobbled outward; when I tried to save the piece, I pressed too hard with my left hand. The sides curled in and collapsed. "Damn! Oh, *damn!*" I stared at the ruined piece twirling off center in the middle of the wheel, then pounded the clay back down, taking what little satisfaction I could in squeezing the rebellious clay back into a wet ball again. I got up from my seat and draped a damp cloth over the clay, then went over to the sink to wash.

Porfiera watched as I took off my apron and started rinsing the clay slip from the fingers of my right hand and the fleshy spatula that was my left.

"I'll finish these up and start the kiln going," she said. "By the time you're back, we can start them firing."

I nodded, shook my hands to dry them, then wiped them on my hopelessly smeared pants. "You're Geema's favorite," Porfiera said. "That's why she's always asking for you."

"I'm Geema's disappointment," I answered. "That's why she won't leave me alone." A strand of hair had escaped from my scarf; I blew it away from my eyes and tried to smile at Porfiera. "Thanks, Por," I told her. "I'll be back as soon as I can, and we'll start firing what we have."

When I arrived at Geema's rooms, my *da* Gerald was just leaving. His face was grim, as if he and Geema had just had a nasty argument, his splotchy, discolored skin reddened with anger. "I take it she's in a good mood," I said.

Gerald grunted. "She'll probably let you keep your ass, since she's already chewed mine off," he said. "Go on in. She's waiting for you."

"Any luck out there?" I asked.

Gerald grimaced and shook his head.

We both sighed.

Geema Euzhan was standing at the window overlooking the center courtyard of the Rock. Seeing her outlined against the sun reminded me again how doll-like she appeared: like a sculpted version of the person she must once have been. At 106, she is far and away the oldest human on Mictlan—in fact, Aleksandr Allen-Levin, our current historian, says that Euzhan may be the oldest human *ever*, since 106 on Mictlan translates to about 143 solar years. Euzhan is sixth generation in a world where the seventh is already dead and most of the eighth are already gone; she'd known and talked with people who were only old tales to us: Anaïs the O'Sa; Elio the Betrayer; the Kiria Tozo, who is now considered almost a saint...

The vagaries of mutation, which had touched all of us so much, especially within our Family, had gifted Euzhan with long life. At first glance, from a distance, you might think she was no more than twenty, with a young woman's figure and a fall of magnificent dark hair. The cane she used seemed to be an anachronism in her hands, an affectation. In twilight, she could still appear to be stunningly beautiful. But when you see her up close you notice the fine network of wrinkles that cover her skin, or realize that the firm, young body is *too* firm, that all her joints move stiffly. Touching her hand is like stroking the raku glaze on a pot. Euzhan is an ancient shell of youth, and one day might shatter and dissolve into brittle dust.

"Geema, you wanted me?"

She turned like a statue on a turntable, her head held stiffly. Her skin was glossy, as if stretched too tightly over the frame of her face, but she was still pretty.

I worry sometimes that Euzhan's gift has been passed on to me. Everyone says I still look the same as I did when I was fifteen, and certainly my sibs Edznài and Nobe, who were born only a few years before me, are looking their age now. I'm not certain I want that—to be trapped in eternal youth like a honeydipper preserved in an amber-drop's sap. I don't want to be Geema Ishiko, the Ancient Curiosity.

"You didn't answer me," Geema said. Her voice was that of a young woman as well, but if you listened carefully, you could hear the tremor of age in it, hidden deep under the surface.

"I'm sorry, Geema. I was working. I'd blocked out the rest of the world, I'm afraid."

She sniffed, and her fine nostrils flared. "And Porfiera didn't hear me either, I take it."

"Even if she did, I'm afraid that Por is someone else I sometimes tune out."

"Hmm." Her scowl drew taut lines from her mouth to her cheekbones as she decided how much satisfaction she could wring from continuing to complain about my lack of attention. Evidently not much, since she finally sighed. "Well, I wanted to talk to you. Sit." With her cane, she pointed to a leather chair next to her desk. I saw the ornate head of the cane through her fingers, the oaken wood from old Earth itself and carved by the patriarch Shigetomo. There was also the black, jagged line of an old repair halfway down the shaft—the Betrayer had once broken the cane in half, back when it had belonged to Geeda Dominic, a century ago.

I brushed at the gray mess on my pants, which only raised a small cloud of clay dust, then sat—whoever in the Family had the job of cleaning Geema's office today was going to hate me. Geema Euzhan moved behind the desk, grimacing as she bent slowly at the waist. Her doll's face smoothed as she moved papers aside and placed her hands on the polished wood. "I've just finished talking with Gerald."

"They haven't found Fianya." I felt the same apprehension choking my throat that I'd felt when little Euzhan, my own dear Euz, whom I'd named after Geema, had started coughing up blood that winter night. Tears stung my eyes, unbidden, at the memory. I could see her face, and poor Timon's, too, and my three babies who had never made their Naming Day, and the dozen or so miscarriages in between....I shoved them all back into that safe box in my head, where their voices, calling for their mam in pain and fright, couldn't be heard.

I took a breath. *A lot of mothers have lost their children here. You're not unique in that...*

Three days ago, almost everyone on the Rock had been looking for Fianya after Matsu had come back bawling about grumblers and a *kami* and other strange sights. There were rumors about a revival of the QualiKa—the violent sect of Miccail who, over half a century ago, had killed O'Sa Anaïs and several other humans in the Hannibal Massacre. Even though the QualiKa

had all but disappeared since then, some were saying that the sect had never been entirely disbanded. At least half of my Family were still out searching, even though it had been frigidly cold last night—too cold for a near-infant to be outside and survive. By this time, nearly everyone believed Fianya to be dead. I believed it myself.

I wondered how Geema felt about that.

Euzhan frowned, the way she always did when a Sa was mentioned. “No, they still haven’t found her,” she answered. Euzhan never used the Sa pronouns “ker” or “ke.” Never. Fianya had always been “she.” “Gerald has most of them out combing the woods downriver from the Rock. We’ve sent word to AnglSaiye via Ghost, since it can’t be avoided, though I’m sure they heard of this long before now. That means that the damn twins will be even more upset than they were already.” Her fingertip traced the wood’s grain; we both watched the slow, deliberate movement. “It also means that we’ll end up with the Sa here, looking into things that aren’t their business...” Her voice trailed off, then she looked up at me again. “They’re going to suspect us,” she said.

I looked at her doll’s face, and the faint, faint lines around the eyes and the way she pinched her mouth together. I remembered Geema’s reaction after Matsu had come back saying that Fianya was gone—there had been no guilt there. The anger and concern had been genuine, I was certain. “No, Geema.”

“*Hai*,” she answered. “They will, and you know half the Families wonder the same. I want you to help with this,” she said. “We need one of our people involved when the Sa start looking for answers.”

I could feel puzzlement twist my face. “Geema, we’re innocent in this. I’ve heard that the new QualiKa...”

Geema sniffed derisively. “You think the Sa will believe that grumblers are to blame, when they’re so thick with the animals? Or will they instead start looking at a Family whose genes remained pure of the Sa taint until Komoko failed us? Will they look at me, who hasn’t hesitated to say what I think of the Sa? Will they suspect the person who refused to give them the Sa they demanded?”

“Geema, they can’t really believe you’d have anything to do with this.”

“My dear, they won’t have a choice but to suspect us. That’s why I want to make sure that you’re there, so we know what they’re saying.”

I spread my right hand in denial, keeping the left cradled on my lap. “Geema, the Sa aren’t going to talk to me. Why should they?”

She stared at me with her too-young eyes. “Because you’ll make them believe that they should,” she told me. “Because they’ll believe that you’re different than the rest of our Family. Because...”

She paused, and the cold, undirected animosity on her face made the blood pound in my temples. “Because, Ishiko, you’ll make them think that you like them. You’ll make them believe you need them. That you need them as Komoko did.”

Firio Allen-Levin of the Rock

As he did nearly every time he worked in VeiSaTi's temple on the island of AnglSaiye, Firio decided that the human Sa were definitely...well, *strange*. In Firio's opinion, the Sa were too much like the grumblers—no, no, not “grumblers”; it wouldn't do to call them that, especially here on the island—the Sa were too much like the *Miccail*, then. Not that some of the Sa weren't attractive...In fact, Firio had gone to bed with one of them just last year: Agaja, ker name had been. It had been pleasurable enough, but like all his interactions with the midmales, a bit bizarre. They weren't *quite* female, after all, and when Agaja had taken off ker clothes...

He'd reminded himself that artists should always be open to new experiences; in the end, it had been a mutually pleasurable one.

Firio lived mostly on the Rock, but he came to AnglSaiye once a month or so because the elderly twins who currently ran the Sa community were both admirers of Firio's work, and because the Sa paid handsomely in raw materials. Four of Firio's marble statues adorned the Sa temple's main entrance hall, and his mural of Anais's life ran the length of the back wall of the temple itself (contrasting sharply, in Firio's opinion, with the whorled, brightly colored and abstract Miccail paintings that covered the other temple walls).

Now the Sa had been gifted with a massive trunk of ebonyew, and Terri—the intense, strange one of the two—wanted Firio to sculpt an altar out of the dense, black wood. It was bad enough that Firio knew he'd end up spending half his time resharpening his tools after working on the stubborn grain (though he had to admit that it was pretty stuff, with the faint veins of pure white marbling the satin, and ebonyew took oil wonderfully, resulting in a surface that was velvet to the touch), but Terri also had a very specific design in mind. Ke had taken Firio to one of the private rooms within the temple complex and shown him a dingy, scarred altar of plain whitewood.

“It's a Sa altar, over two thousand years old,” the old Sa explained. Ker voice was high with excitement as ke showed Firio the ancient piece. “We've been using it because it's so old, and there's such a sense of history to it, but YeiSa assures me that the ancient Sa didn't attach any particular sacredness to the age of an altar. And I have to admit that the poor thing's about ready to fall apart. You need to keep in mind, however, that the basic structure of an altar is important to VeiSaTi. The top must have this shell pattern in it, a reflection of VeiSaTi's shell out in the main temple. Also, the altar must sit on three legs, representing the male, female, and midmale sexes. Do you understand that? The specific design is very important. Very important...” Ker eyes,

dark and intense, fixed on Firio, and ke sidled up close to him. Ker breath was scented with *kav*.

Firio took a step back from ker intensity, pretending to study the altar. “You want it to look just like this?”

“I’ve told you what *must* be.” Terri shrugged. “Beyond that, I’ll leave the design up to your artistic creativity.”

Firio wasn’t impressed by that: It sounded like his “artistic creativity” was going to be hobbled by chains of tradition in this case. But the ebonyew was so damned beautiful, and the tree from which this block had been cut had yielded three other huge pieces, each of them a man’s height tall and an arm span in diameter, and all just as gorgeous. Terri had promised them to Firio in payment for the altar—it was too tempting an offer to turn down.

Firio went over to the old altar and examined it closely. The wood was dry-rotted and brittle, scarred with boreholes from insects and further disfigured by deep cracks in the grain. One leg—he was damned if he could tell from the Miccail swirlies carved in it whether it was supposed to be the male, female, or midmale one—had broken and been badly repaired. The whole structure wobbled dangerously. The top was in the rough outline of the giant shell in the temple, incised lines tracing the pattern with the mouth a hollowed-out depression. The wood was scarred from what looked like a thousand years of knife cuts, and the wood was stained with brown-red. Some of the stains, Firio noted, were recent.

Firio frowned and took a step back from the altar. He knew that the Sa—both human and Miccail—practiced blood sacrifice as part of their rituals, but it was one thing to know it, and another to be confronted with evidence. Terri noted his discomfort, but ker reaction was a smile, as if Firio were a child. “Sacrifice is essential. Once a month or so, we offer a coney we’re going to eat for supper anyway,” ke said, answering the question Firio wasn’t sure he wanted to ask. “It’s an old, old rite of sacrifice to VeiSaTi, our *KoPavi*—our religious laws.”

As Terri spoke, ke absently picked at the bloodstains on the wood, tiny brittle flecks curling from under the fingernail of ker index finger. Firio stared at the finger as Terri spoke.

It’s an old, old grumbler rite to a grumbler god, Firio wanted to retort, and from what I’ve heard, the grumblers occasionally threw in one of their own for sacrifice, just for variety’s sake. He thought it, but for once was successful in restraining his tongue. His mam Teresa would have been proud, and very surprised. *Three nice blocks of ebonyew to do whatever you want with,* he reminded himself, and managed a nod.

“You can do it, then?” Terri asked eagerly. Ke was still picking at the bloodstains.

“Give me eight weeks, and I want the rest of the ebonyew up front.”

“Four weeks, and one of the other logs. You’ll get the other two when you deliver the altar.”

“Six weeks, two logs now.”

“Four weeks. Two extra logs up front, one later.”

Firio shrugged. “Agreed.”

“Agreed.” Terri lifted her hand from the altar and clapped Firio’s shoulder. He tried not to show his revulsion. In his peripheral vision, he could see the brown stains caught under the fingernail. “I’ll look forward to seeing you again in a month, then. I’ll make sure everything’s ready in the morning. We have one of the Sa heading back to the Rock with you, and I’ll send along four of our Miccail porters to handle the ebonyew.”

Terri left him, then, and Firio retraced his steps back out through the main temple, where sunlight glinted from the huge, iridescent shell sitting on its crystalline altar. The shell was impressive, Firio had to admit. The grumbler mythology said that when the first of the Miccail Sa had come to the great cliff-walled island of AnglSaiye, thousands of years ago, he had found the untouched shell placed here, hundreds of feet above the bay’s waters. When the Sa had disappeared, the shell had remained here in the ruins of their temple, to be rediscovered by the matriarch Gabriela Rusack, and then several decades later by Anaïs herself. The piece dominated the room. As he walked by it, the sounds of his footsteps mingled in the shell’s yawning, porcelain mouth with that of the wind and the various sounds of AnglSaiye’s life, and the reverberations echoed strangely back to him like the distant hush of a voice, calling in some unknown language.

Firio stopped for a moment to listen—*strange, like all Sa things*—but the voice of the shell was that of a *kami*, mysterious and unknowable, and after a second, he continued walking, thinking of logs of ebonyew and wondering what forms might be hidden within them.

VOICE:

Caitlyn Koda-Schmidt of the Sa

The *Ibn Battuta II* was crowded with people, which was unusual. Besides myself, my entourage included Linden and YeiSa’s SecondHand, RenSa, whom I knew a little from the times he had taught YeiSa’s martial-arts class. I wondered at that, since the SecondHand was behind only YeiSa herself in the Miccail half of our Community. As a result, RenSa ranked higher than me or Linden within the Community of Sa as a whole, and yet it had been made clear by the SaTu that I was to be in charge of our entire contingent. The SaTu rarely did anything without at least consulting the FirstHand, but I’d yet to decipher the reasoning beneath that deci-

sion. RenSa, at least, appeared unperturbed with the decision, though I often found it difficult to decipher the emotions in the Miccail faces.

I was puzzled by the SaTu's declaration. I knew that Linden was puzzled as well, since ke'd worn a perpetual look of amazement since ke'd been told. I was also worried—picking me to head up an investigation made no sense. *Send Rasbi*, I'd wanted to say. *Send Linden*. *Send RenSa*. *But not me*. No sense at all. But both SaTu had told me that I had to go, and there was no arguing with them.

Between us, we took up three of the four passenger compartments on the craft; the artisan Firió took the other. Four other Miccail—porters employed by the Community—were also along to handle the heavy logs of ebonyew Firió had stashed belowdecks. They slept on the deck, under a canvas canopy.

I leaned on the railing as the small stern-wheeler, dipping and bobbing in the swells, maneuvered east out of Crookjaw Bay toward the wide mouth of the Loud River. The steam-powered engine throbbed like a great mechanical heart under our feet, driving the grease-slathered piston which in turn powered the paddles. I watched the red-painted boards slap the gray salt water of the bay, throwing up an eternal cold spray that the wind tossed away. Smoke curled from the twin stacks, sprinkled with glowing embers that gleamed like dying stars in the twilight, and I could smell the sweet scent of burning whitewood. AnglSaiye nestled between the two distant arms of the bay, looming tall and aloof. I could see the faint line of the five hundred steps cut into AnglSaiye's cliffwall, leading from harbor to the plateau far above. Off in the bay, a young sawtooth stooped on the wind, scanning the waves for wavestriders, untroubled by our passage.

"Beats walking, doesn't it?" Linden came up behind me, putting a hand on my shoulder. I touched ker hand with my own, and we interlaced fingers affectionately. Linden had taken me under ker wing early in my life within the Community, had acted as my protector during childhood squabbles, had been my tutor when it was apparent that I was going to fail my studies if I didn't have extra help, had been my mentor when at puberty it was time to learn the essential task of the Sa. I was glad that Linden was going to be along now, even though I suspected ke'd been sent mostly to make sure that I didn't utterly screw things up.

"I don't know," I said. "I've always enjoyed the hike down the highroad. But I'll admit that this definitely beats flying, from what I've seen."

Linden laughed. "Well, my *da* Ely insists that as soon as he gets decent steel out of the ironworks up on Lake Pollux, the engine will work—the cylinders froze up on him. I'm dubious myself, but Ely's not going to give up. He insists that in another year or so the Rock will only be a few hours away instead of a day or more."

"And walking—even though you may spend three or four days on the highroad—will still be the best and safest way to get there."

Linden laughed again and kissed my neck, hugging me from behind, hands lightly cupping my breasts through my *shangaa*, the traditional Miccail robe that the Community of Sa had adopted as our official uniform. I leaned back into ker embrace, enjoying the smell of salt water and smoke, the warmth of the last lingering rays of the sun, and the rhythmic movement of the boat. We were passing Blue Rocks, the steep bluffs that marked the entrance of the Loud River into the bay, and the *Battuta* bucked as she entered the strong freshwater currents; in the pilothouse, I could see the pilot fighting the wheel to keep her nosed into the Loud's mouth. In several hours, I knew, we'd reach the confluence of the Loud and Green Rivers, and we'd turn to follow the smaller Green River to the Rock. I wasn't sure what kind of reception awaited us there, and decided that I couldn't worry about it. Not yet.

I thought about Ghost, about the coming final death of the *Ibn Battuta*, and about the distressing news from the Rock. Ghost I could do nothing about, but I was about to become intimately involved in the other events. I couldn't imagine someone being cruel enough to steal Fianya from her Family and from the Sa. Certainly the Allen-Shimmuras felt they had their reasons to take action against the Sa, or to try to blame the Miccail for the attack. The Miccail themselves had their internal factions like the old QualiKa, and there was an undeniable underlying friction between human and Miccail. Then there were the Shunned—maybe one of them was responsible, taking out a grudge against the Families.

To harm a poor child, to make an innocent a pawn...If Fianya was still alive, ke must be terrified and frightened, and that thought made me angry, and the anger made me all the more certain that I was in way over my head.

"What?" Linden asked, ker breath warm against my ear.

"Hmm?"

"You just went all tense. What are you thinking?"

"Just going over things in my mind. When's the last time you were at the Rock?"

I could feel the rise and fall of Linden's breath against my back. "Oh, late in the winter. I took the *Battuta* all the way to Warm Water, came back up to the Rock for a few days, then went on to Hannibal."

"I was at the Rock a year ago. I never really feel comfortable there. I always have the feeling that someone's watching me."

"Someone probably is. Not to mention that the Allen-Shimmura family pretends like you're not even there at all. Old Euzhan has them all in line."

"She can't live forever."

Linden chuckled. "Don't bet on it. She's been pickled in her own sourness." I felt ker tongue trace the line of my ear, and I pressed my head down against ker.

"Linden, if they couldn't get Rashi, then you should be in charge of this. Not me. I'm the screwup, the slow one, good for traveling the communities and not much more. Why did the SaTu hand this to me? I know that none

of the senior Sa would have recommended me. I understand why RenSa can't be in charge—no one of the Rock's going to accept a Miccail as the spokesperson—but why *me*?”

“Because you can do it,” ker voice came, a whisper alongside me. “Because they see what others don't.”

“I'm glad you're so confident. I don't know..”

“We'll find what we find, Cait,” Linden whispered. “In the meantime, we won't solve anything up here on deck, and it's getting colder. My room's warm, and the bed's warmer, if you're so inclined.”

On the bluffs, a Miccail howled, a long ululation of inquiry. The Miccail on deck lifted their snouts and howled back: “We are bound to YeiSa FirstHand, and we go to Black Lake,” they answered in their own language. “Wish us well.”

The Miccail atop Blue Rock barked a blessing to VeiSaTi, answered in turn by the Miccail on the *Battuta*, who started to sing one of the Miccail LongChants. One of them glanced over at us; when he saw me watching, he closed his mouth, his harmony falling out of the dissonant chant. The others grunted and the LongChant faltered and died in mutters. I glanced up at the bluff; the Miccail there had disappeared. The sun was lost behind the hills, and though the western sky was still awash with orange, the breeze off the water caused me to shiver.

I shivered and turned into Linden's embrace. “Let's go to the cabin, then,” I told ker. “It's cold out here.”

With the Miccail watching us, we abandoned the deck and my doubts for more hospitable quarters.

VOICE:

RenSa

I heard the call of the sentinel above Ansuti, the GodRock that overlooked the bay, the Great River's mouth, and AnglSaiye. I heard the answer of the Workers, and then the beginning of the LongChant. Comforting sounds, those, both familiar and right.

The rest of it I hated without reservation: the sharp smell of the metal beast in its lair within the craft's belly, the oppressive woodsmoke, the oily scent of the lubricants; the din of the engine, hissing steam vents, and the singsong shouting of the crew as they worked. The humans are obsessed: they rip the very stones from the earth, torture them with hammers and fire to extract the ugly, hard gray stone they so love—the metal of their machinery. They build loud, noisome machines, all so they can hurry faster from here to

there. The Scurrying People, the Impatient Ones: That's how I often think of them, always rushing from one place to another, and then rushing back, without the sense to appreciate the world around them. Even their speech is fast, the syllables flashing by without much inflection, a hurricane of sound.

I know the gods sent them to us to save us, but I don't know why They made them so strangely.

"There's an anger in you I don't understand," YeiSa had said the night ke'd summoned me to tell me the SaTu's decision. "You carry a resentment that colors your soul, and I don't know how to remove it."

"FirstHand, I'm sorry—" I had begun, but YeiSa only raised her hand, smiling softly.

"You misunderstand me if you think you need to apologize, RenSa," ke said. "I wouldn't have named you SecondHand if I thought that you were unfit. No, I think that what's in you is in many of the CieTiLa, and perhaps that makes you most fit of all of us to understand. And it's why I'm sending you with Caitlyn. Ke will need your help, maybe most of all..."

The LongChant, strangely, died in mid-refrain, taking the memory of YeiSa with it. A few minutes later, I heard the door to the human Sa's quarters open and close, and then the LongChant started again. This time I found myself drawn by the sound, and I lifted myself from the bunk and went out of the cabin onto the deck.

The sun was down, though the sky was still touched with fading red. Quali, the smaller of the moons, was visible in the west as a fat crescent, escorted by emerging stars—the waxing crescent of Quali had been the sign of the QualiKa, and I wondered whether the fact that the human Sa had been kidnapped at this particular time had been coincidence or omen. The wind ruffled my spinal mane, and I shielded my *brais* for a moment to let it adjust to the change in light. Through the strong scent of the craft, I could smell brine, mingling with the sweeter tang of the Great River's water, which had traveled all the way from WeiGa, the glacier-riven mountains called the WorldWall. Faintly, the wind bore a trace of roasting paglanut, probably from the sentinel's cooking fire. The Workers, gathered under their canopy, nodded to me as I came near them. Once, we would have called them JeJa, and they would have been indentured to the TeTa of their tribe until they either became XeXa free folk or died. That was the old way—part of the old *KoPavi*—but there are no JeJa anymore. As the humans took up some of the old Sa ways, so the CieTiLa have taken a part of the human ways. O'Sa Anaïs chose what portions of the *KoPavi* would be followed and which would not. The FirstHands have told those who follow VeiSaTi that there are no TeTa, no XeXa, no JeJa (though I know that out in the world, away from the island, almost all CieTiLa still use the old ranks). On AnglSaiye we are defined by what we do, as if identity was the same thing as occupation: Worker; Sage; Healer.

Sa.

I listened to the Workers' song politely, resisting the urge to join in the chorus. An old song, sung by a people who no longer completely follow the tenets of the words they chant. Despite that, the LongChant is still a beautiful thing to hear.

On the pilothouse porch, two of the human crew members were looking down at the Workers, shaking their heads and making comments. I didn't have to hear the words to know what was being said between them. I had heard the same kind of comments when we'd boarded. For too many of the humans, we CieTiLa were just "grumblers": smelly, noisy, stupid, and perhaps dangerous animals. The QualiKa may have gone too far in response, but there was a reason the charismatic rebel NagTe had formed the movement two generations before, and that reason still existed. I listened to the comments marring the LongChant, and my claws emerged unbidden as I gripped the deck railing. I stared out over the wide Great River to the far, steep bank. This was CieTiLa land, all of it, and the land had been ours for *terduva* upon *terduva* through a past that extended back into myth. The human were exiles from the air, their souls not even created here, and yet to watch them you would think they had shat the world into existence and pissed the seas.

I had to admit that I also found galling the fact that all Sa, no matter what their race, are governed by the human Sa. True, it was the human O'Sa Anaïs who had fulfilled the promise of KaiSa's ancient sacrifice and returned the Sa to the Miccail, and for that, they deserved respect. True, it had been the humans who had come to AnglSaiye who rebuilt the temple and recreated the Community of Sa. True, the FirstHand sat with the SaTu at all their meetings, and the FirstHand's vote broke the tie if the twin SaTu did not agree on any decision. Yet...

I barked wordless frustration, a jarring note that made the LongChant behind me shiver momentarily, and my claws dug into the polished wood, scratching it. "Hey!" one of the crew shouted in the human tongue. "Watch the damn claws!"

I turned as the LongChant faltered again. I looked up at the humans, making sure that the man was watching me. Then, very deliberately, I raked my claws down the length of the railing, leaving three long gouges as wood curled from the razored tips. "I've watched them," I answered in their own language, "and they work very well, I think."

"*Khudda!*" the man shouted, starting toward the deck stair, but the other crew member, a woman, restrained him. "There are five of them down there, and that one's a Sa," I heard her say, hand on his arm. "Let it go, Garret."

The man shook away from his companion's grip, but he stopped, glaring down at me. One of the Workers laughed softly, and the LongChant started up again. I joined in the chant this time, still watching the crew members. After a minute, they both turned and went back into the pilothouse.

I continued to sing with the Workers, but the LongChant's rise and fall failed to comfort me, and a sullen anger burned in my belly like coal.

Daniel Allen-Shimmura of the Rock

The *Ibn Battuta II* docked, as always, at Old Bridge at the foot of the Rock.

Dan, as always, was there to meet it.

The clean scent of whitewood shavings, the sawdust piling in drifts on the floor... As a young man thirty years ago, Dan had helped build the stern-wheeler, from plans provided by Ghost. He'd helped plane the whitewood planks for the decking, and had himself carved the great ebony wheel up in the pilothouse, now polished from three decades of hands. For several years, he'd worked as dock labor whenever the *Battuta* came in, laden with crops from the fields at Warm Water, or sitting low in the water after picking up Irontown steel from the Hannibal docks on the Loud, or bringing in fish and hard goods from AnglSaiye. He'd loaded her again with goods from the Rock: faux-wheat, whitebean, peat, bushels of pear-nuts after the harvest, sweetmelons in the fall. He'd even ridden her for three years as a crew member, traveling from Warm Water to the Rock to AnglSaiye to Hannibal and back again. He'd worked the *Battuta* with enthusiasm, at least until his spine had started to curve, bowing him down, hunching his shoulders until what he saw in the mirror was a bent-over, shriveled parody of himself. For the last seven years, he'd been unable to work at all, as his muscles atrophied and his spine deformed even further.

There's nothing we can do about it, Dan, It's a congenital defect, a nasty mutation of scoliosis. All we can do is try to minimize it. I'm sorry. I really am...

Yet Dan was there each time the *Battuta* steamed in.

She came in under the wide central span of Old Bridge, the section having been redesigned into a drawbridge to accommodate the *Battuta's* stacks, and she turned sharply just past the bridge to nose in to the dock. Lines were thrown to the dockworkers and secured; the gangplank turned and lowered as the *Battuta* vented steam and water dripped from the now-still paddles. Dan hobbled close to her, clutching the four-legged walker that he had to use now just to walk. Painfully, he raised his head as high as he could and waved to the Garret Koda-Shimmura, the pilot, who waved back—they'd been crewmembers together, back in the eighties.

It's a shame about your back, Dan, You know the rivers and the bay as well as I do. Better, even. You'd have made a great pilot, if only...

The passengers were gathered at the railing. Firio he recognized, but at least two of the others were Sa, along with several grumblers, all of the animals wearing *shangaa* like they were civilized—which meant this was the del-

egation sent from AnglSaiye to investigate the disappearance of the Allen-Shimmuras' little Sa.

The Sa came down the gangplank first, moving into the knot of dockworkers, children and the curious, and striding up the landing's slope toward Dan. They were talking together, all handsome in their grumbler *shangaa*, with long hair and small but distinct breasts, more like women than men.

He'd flirted with the Sa in the AnglSaiye pub even though he knew Geema Euzhan would be furious if she ever found out. He was young, he was very drunk, and the Sa seemed attractive. They even talked over ale for time. No matter what his Family thought, he'd wanted to go to ker bed that night—who would know, besides him, after all? He wasn't a woman; he couldn't get pregnant. But not much later, before he could ask, the damn Sa had gone off with someone else, not him, as if he were nothing special, nothing much at all...

Dan saw his sib Richard hurrying up from the dock area toward the Rock, and he knew that Richard would be relaying the news of the Sa to Geema Euzhan. Dan envied Richard's ability to run, even though he was ten years older than Dan. It would be over an hour before Dan could make it up the slope to the Allen-Shimmura compound again, an hour of pain and frustration.

"It's your Family's fault," Garret had said over tartberry wine up in the pilot-house. "None of you will breed with the Sa, so you're at the mercy of the Mictlan's kami, who can twist your genes into their own nasty shapes. Hell, if you folks in the Rock would just wake up and realize that you can't keep doing things the old way..."

The Sa were almost next to him now. One of them turned and glanced his way, and ker face...ker soft, pretty face shifted with pity as ke looked at him, hunched over his damned walker, bent into Mictlan's painful shape. Then the Sa must have realized ker reaction and tried to smile down at him, but Dan scowled.

Pursing his lips, he spat at ker. The globule hit ker *shangaa* at ker right breast.

"Fuck you," he told ker. "Fuck all of you arrogant bastards."

As they stared at him wordlessly, as the Sa brushed at ker *shangaa* in disgust, Dan turned his back on them and shuffled away toward the *Battuta*.

It was slow progress, but it was the best approximation of a dignified retreat he could manage.

SONG:

“Blue Night”: Gather song,
composed by Buchi Koda-Shimmura (95-160)

CHORUS:

Amethyst purple, garnet black, or red
Quartz pale yellow, sharp flint brown
We to the dance are led
Gather the stones
Gather the stones
Place them 'round your head
And lest this be a blue night
We may soon be off to bed

VOICE:

Ishiko Allen-Shimmura of the Rock

Like most women in the Rock, I regard Gathers with a mingling of emotions running the entire gamut from lust to disgust. On the one hand, a Gather is a time of celebration, an opportunity to meet new lovers or reacquaint yourself with old ones, to flirt and feel the electric tingle of attraction, to search the crowd for men wearing the same stone as you, to dance together or alone, to sample a hundred wonderful dishes, to talk, to be close to your Family and everyone else in the Rock and simply enjoy the night.

And yet...there were times, especially as a young woman, when I came back to the compound alone and crying, when the man I really wanted to pull into my bed wore a red garnet when I wore yellow quartz and wasn't willing to ignore the custom (originally created by Ghost, in an effort to ensure a random mix of genes in our small pool) that only those with matching stones could sleep together that night; or when someone I'd slept with just a week before now didn't seem interested in me at all; when it was simply the wrong time of month, and I worked the food tables, feeling left out as I watched everyone else dancing the intricate steps of the mating ritual.

Lately, I find that the men I'm interested in are mostly interested in women ten years younger than me. I also notice that the ones who are picked are usually the ones without visible deformities—as too many of my family,

like myself, display. Lately, I don't so much hate the Gathers as regret them, because they remind me that I'm almost past the time of childbearing, and all my poor children are dead before me.

It's a reminder Geema Euzhan mentions far too often.

At least this Gather promised to be something unusual.

The Sa had come in that afternoon on the *Battuta*, taking up residence in the old Koda-Levin compound—maintained for Sa visits to the Rock even though the Koda-Levin family had died with Anaïs forty years before. Geema Euzhan had sent them an invitation to come to the night's Gather, and also sent the two human Sa necklaces of yellow quartz to wear.

She'd also made sure that, when she passed out the Gather necklaces to the Family, I was the only one in the Family who had a matching yellow quartz. "What's this supposed to mean, Geema?" I asked her as I looked at the stone, sparking in my palm.

"It gives you an excuse to talk to them," she answered. "That's all. You know how I feel about the rest."

When the moon Longago (which the grumblers call Chali) peered full and golden above the eastern horizon not long after sunset, the five fires, one for each of the Families, were lit on the ancient cracked concrete of the landing pad below the Rock. That in itself was a small, deliberate insult to our guests, since on AnglSaiye there were always six fires at a Gather, the extra blaze representing the Community of Sa (or, as some believed, the O'Sa's Family Koda-Levin). The stars were bright above the whirling sparks of the fires, and Longago's smaller companion, Faraway, was present also as a crescent that would in a few hours follow the sun over the horizon. I hoped that wasn't an omen. Faraway was called Quali by the grumblers, and its crescent was the sign of the hated QualiKa. A stream of people filled the pathway from the Rock, and among them I noticed the two adult Sa, a grumbler walking with them. Two hundred or more people crowded the area around the pad, all of them quieting as a spotlight plucked the lower gate of the Rock from gloom.

As Eldest, it was Geema Euzhan who walked the traditional caged curltongue from the Rock, each step accompanied by a low, subterranean beat from the great ceremonial drum built by the patriarch Shigetomo Shimmura. Geema looked like a moving carving of a young woman, her long shadow in the spotlight's glare as black as her hair. I felt more than heard each beat, the low, throbbing notes reverberating like low thunder. Alicia Allen-Levin, our current Kiria—the religious leader of all humans who believed in *Njia*, the original faith of the Founders—came forward as Geema reached the pad. She opened the curltongue's metal cage and attached to one foot of the bird a woven string of human hair, the strands coming from each of the Families. Then Kiria Alicia took the cage from Geema and made a circuit of the landing pad, the drum still shivering the air.

At the center of the pad, with all of the gathered Families watching, Kiria Alicia opened the cage fully and released the curltongue as the drum hammered a last heavy stroke. The curltongue arrowed away into the darkening sky chased by the spotlight, bearing away each of us—symbolically—with it. I watched the curltongue until I lost it somewhere over Tlilipan, wishing, as I did every time I watched the ceremony, that I could fly with the creature. There is so much to see on Mictlan that we haven't seen, a hundred sights that Ghost had told us about: the herds of thunderbeasts on the eastern plains, the vast rain forests on the southern edge of the continent, or the Southern continent on the other side of the world where—once—another human colony had been established.

And the stars, and our lost homeworld Earth, that maybe, maybe our great-great-great-grandchildren might one day see again.

I didn't breathe, watching the curltongue flutter away, until the spotlight abruptly shut down and the insistent pulse of *bodhran*, flute, and guitar brought the first couples out onto the pad to dance. I smiled, laughing and applauding as I went over to Geema Euzhan and Kiria Alicia.

"The ceremony was beautiful, as always," I told them. "Every time I watch, I feel like all the *kami* of Mictlan are watching with me."

Alicia smiled and touched my arm. "You'd make a fine Kiria, Ishiko," she said, with Geema smiling in agreement alongside her. "You have a sense of the history of our rites, and I think the *kami* speak to you as they do to me."

"I don't know, Kiria," I answered, laughing nervously. It wasn't the first time Alicia had suggested this, and I still wasn't sure how I felt. To be Kiria... "I don't know," I repeated. "That's not something I've considered seriously. I'm happy with my clay and my wheel. Being Kiria is far more responsibility than I've ever considered taking on."

"You've had children," Alicia answered softly. "There's no larger responsibility than that. You've also had to watch them leave you, and there's nothing harder." Her smile was touched with sympathy.

"Ishiko would be an excellent choice," Geema interjected, too loudly. "Meditative, attentive to the rituals, and caring." I noticed that Geema wasn't looking at me or Alicia, but across the pad to where the Sa were standing in a knot of people. Several of the other Elders were with them: Jalon, Theodora, Chung and Futa Allen-Levin, Andrea Koda-Shimmura, Michiko Koda-Schmidt, Shotoku Martinez-Santos. A flock of young men and women all attentively listening to the conversation. We Allen-Shimmuras, of course, were conspicuously absent from the Sa-infatuated crowd. "They fawn over the midmales like they were the Matriarchs and Patriarchs themselves," Geema muttered, thankfully abandoning the topic of the next Kiria. "Look at them—as if being in a Sa's good favor was the most important thing in the world. Well, I suppose the Sa will have no shortage of bedmates to choose from tonight." Her voice radiated disgust.

The Sa must have felt the pressure of Euzhan's gaze—which didn't surprise me, given the intensity of her stare—for the taller of the two suddenly glanced our way. Ke said something to ker companion, then excused kerself from the crowd and walked toward us.

"Kiria," ke said as ke approached, and gave her the sign of the Three: left hand palm down at groin level, palm up at waist, and palm down again at chest. Water, earth, and air—and also symbolizing the three sexes. "I'm Caitlyn Koda-Schmidt. I wanted to tell you how moved I was by the ceremony. Even in the face of this situation, you still show the power of *Njia*. I'm afraid that the AnglSaiye Gathers are only a poor imitation of this. There's so much more history here around the Rock."

Ker voice was androgynous and soft, warm and yet surprisingly tentative. Ker face was the same, perched in that indefinable territory between masculine and feminine, though closer, I thought, to a woman's. I could see the curve of small breasts under the fabric of ker *shangaa*, and ker hips were wide like a female's. For a moment, ker gaze rested on me—ke had those light eyes that are so rare among us, the gray-green of the river on a cloudy day. I put my left hand behind my back and nodded to ker. Ke smiled, ker thin fingers touching the necklace of yellow quartz around ker neck for just a moment, and then ker gaze went to Geema.

"Eldest," ke said, using her title, "I just wanted to tell you how concerned we all are over Fianya's disappearance, and I hope we can help you find ker. I'm looking forward to meeting with Komoko and your Family first thing tomorrow. I also wanted to thank you for the invitation to attend your Gather tonight. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, and I'm pleased with the cooperation your Family has shown us so far." Ke extended ker hand to Euzhan, who simply glanced at it without moving.

"I suppose to you I'm more of that 'history' you were referring to a moment ago?" she said.

To Caitlyn's credit, only the barest hesitation showed in the Sa's answer. "You are indeed," ke agreed, more amicably than I think Geema Euzhan liked. "I never had the pleasure of knowing O'Sa Anaïs, of course, but SaTu Taira and Terri have told me many times of the special respect the O'Sa had for you, especially since you were Ochiba's daughter."

I could see the red flush that crept Geema's neck with that. Caitlyn had (deliberately, I suspected, though I wasn't sure) stepped directly on Geema's one sore spot, reminding her that her mam had once been Anaïs's lover, before Anaïs had even realized she was Sa—a relationship which had shamed my entire Family. Not Euzhan's favorite subject, as all of us in the Family knew all too well. I could see her eyes narrowing, and her hand trembling on the head of her cane, but the Sa turned to me before she could speak. "Do you dance?" ke asked me. "I'm afraid I'm not very good, but I love this tune."

"I don't..." I began, and saw Geema staring at me.

"I'd be honored," Caitlyn said. "Please."

The band had begun an energetic jig, with Sol Martinez-Santos adding the vocals. “All right,” I said, not entirely sure why I was agreeing. The Sa held out ker hand to me, and I took it—a soft hand, a warm hand. “Excuse us,” ke said to the Kiria and my fuming Geema, and led me away.

Caitlyn hadn’t lied about ker dancing abilities. But while ke wasn’t the best partner I’d ever had, ker movements were energetic, and ke laughed as ke tried to twirl through the steps with me, obviously enjoying the music and the dance. When ke took my left hand for the first time, ke hesitated only a moment before curling ker fingers around my unresponsive flesh, without a word and without anything showing in ker eyes. When the last trill of the flute had faded with all of us breathing hard now from the jig, we applauded the band as Sol began “Blue Night,” one of my favorite ballads. I started to leave the pad, humming the tune softly, but Caitlyn touched my arm.

“Care to try again?” ke asked. I glanced at the couples around us, dancing close together now as Sol’s baritone warmed the evening air. The guitars and flute joined his voice; I looked up at Caitlyn, and ke shrugged, smiling softly. “We have the same stone tonight,” ke said.

“So do a few dozen other people. Will you be dancing with them all?”

Again, the smile tugged at ker mouth. Ke had a nice smile, and ker eyes were already dancing, alive with the lights of the bonfires. “I’ll promise to restrict myself to you, if you’ll make the same promise.”

I could feel my breath tightening in my chest, could hear my pulse fighting the slow beat of the *bodhran*. All at once, I wasn’t sure of this, wasn’t sure what I wanted or what Geema Euzhan wanted or what exactly was being offered, and I suddenly felt like a girl just past her first menses, wearing her first Gather necklace. “My Family...” I began, but Caitlyn shook ker head, ker long, dark hair moving.

“Talk to me while we dance,” ke said. Caitlyn spread ker arms to me in invitation, and I moved forward. Ker fingers slipped between those of my right hand, and ker other hand behind my back drew me closer but left a gap between us, as if ke knew what I was thinking. There was a scent about ker, a faint perfume. “You do pottery,” ker voice said close to my ear.

“Your SaTu definitely gave you an excellent briefing.”

I heard an exhalation that might have been laughter. “You have dried clay under your fingernails,” ke answered. “Among other things Sa *are* taught to observe. It’s one of the few lessons I actually managed to absorb. The SaTu did give me a briefing, but I’m afraid I’ve forgotten most of it already. Other than that, I don’t even know your name.”

“Ishiko,” I told ker. “Ninth generation. My mam is Dana, hers was Isabel, and Isabel’s was Geema Euzhan. And yes, I’m a potter.”

“So you’re Euzhan’s great-granddaughter. Then I’m a little surprised and very flattered that you’re dancing with me. That also explains why Euzhan is watching us like I’m a verrechat about to pounce on her dinner.” We moved

silently together for a few seconds: step, step, turn, step. I found that I was doing the leading. “So I take it I’m wasting my time.”

“That depends on what you’re after, I suppose. I’m enjoying dancing with you right now. I don’t have expectations past that, and I won’t hold you to any promises.”

“Promises are one thing we Sa take very seriously.”

“Then you should be careful who you make them to.” Sol’s voice lifted into the refrain, and I said nothing for a little time, listening. “Would you still be dancing with me if I told you that there’s no chance you’ll be in my bed tonight?”

“I’d just think that you were following the safest route for you, given your Family name. There’s nothing wrong with that. And I’d also say that, yes, I’d still dance with you.” Ker fingers pressed slightly against the small of my back, not enough to be insistent but more an invitation. For a moment, I resisted the pressure, then allowed ker to draw me in closer. I could feel the curve of ker body against mine, but the song was ending as Sol reached for the final high notes. Caitlyn didn’t release me for a few seconds, and I found that I didn’t care to move away. Applause sounded around us, the *bodbran* began a quick, energetic beat, and the band started a gavotte. I finally let my left arm drop from Caitlyn’s back; ke allowed me to step back, but ker hand still held my right, good one. “Another dance?” ke asked, ker eyes on mine.

“What about all those other people wearing yellow?”

“Are you really concerned about them?”

“No,” I answered truthfully, smiling at ker tentatively. “Besides, your friend’s wearing yellow, too.” People were already dancing, and the first change of partners had already taken place. “We’re in the way here. Are you hungry?”

I led Caitlyn over to the food tables, and handed ker one of *mi Nobesana*’s sweetcakes. I felt like half the people at the Gather were watching us; Geema Euzhan definitely was, still talking with Kiria Alicia. Caitlyn noticed as well. “Thanks,” ke said, taking the cake. “Is all this attention just because you’re an Allen-Shimmura talking to a Sa, or because everyone knows we’re here to look into Fianya’s disappearance?”

“A little of both,” I said.

“After the way I was greeted when I came off the *Battuta* this morning, I have to admit that I worried about the reception I was going to get from your Family tonight.”

I blushed at that, since we’d all heard about the spitting incident. “I’m sorry. *Da Dan...*”

Caitlyn waved aside my explanation. “It doesn’t matter. At the moment, I’m enjoying myself. We don’t have to really start work until tomorrow.” Ke looked across the pad to where the other Sa was still surrounded. The Elders were no longer with ker, but a good number of the younger men and women were. “It looks like Linden is enjoying kerself, also.”

“Isn’t that Sa work ke’s doing right now?”

Caitlyn laughed at that, gently, without any hint that ke'd taken offense. "That's part of our work, I suppose. *Hai*."

"You know you don't have to stay with me. If you want to...*work*, also."

"I know. And you don't need to stay with me, either. There are several men wearing yellow." There was just the slightest emphasis on the word "men." Caitlyn didn't seem subtle enough to be much of a diplomat, but I found that I liked ker. There was an empathy to ker, a vulnerability....

Another smile, with ker head tilted inquisitively toward me. I took a bite of the sweetcake so that I didn't need to answer, not moving. Not wanting to move.

"Tell me about yourself. You're a potter..." Caitlyn asked, nodding to me. I didn't know what to say. I suddenly felt embarrassed and parochial.

"That's pretty much all there is," I answered, shrugging, and hating myself for sounding so damned apologetic. "I'll bet half the dishes and a quarter of the mugs here tonight are mine. It's what I do."

"I tried that once," ke said. Ker breath curled away white in the night chill. "I loved the feel of it—the slickness of the clay, the way it trickled through your fingers, and there was something magical in the way you could pull form from a ball of gray mud. But..." Ke smiled self-deprecatingly. "I, ah, wasn't much good at it. I could never make with my hands what I could see in my head. That's a true gift, one I'm afraid I don't have. You're lucky to have hands with the talent."

Ke took my hands in ker own as ke spoke, both of them, lifting them lightly so that they lay, palms up, between us. I could see ker gaze on my left hand, looking closely at the way the fingers appeared only as ridges in a wide mitten of flesh. I wanted to pull it away, to hide it from ker examination. "Is it difficult, with your hand?"

"You make accommodations," I told ker. "Actually, I can use it as a tool. Sometimes, it's actually an asset. For pottery, anyway. My Family's known for genetic defects, after all. Don't you use the Allen-Shimmura family as an example of why the Sa are so necessary?"

"Any hands that can make beauty must be beautiful themselves, no matter what anyone says about them. I hope you know that." If someone else had said it, I would have laughed. But there was a self-deprecating lilt in ker voice that made the words sincere. I could feel ker fingers under mine, and I realized how dangerous this Sa was for me. Geema Euzhan was right to fear them, because I could feel myself being pulled to ker, a compelling, emotional tug I hadn't felt in, well, a long time. If this one was like the one Komoko took to bed...I found myself scared of Caitlyn, frightened of that face that looked at me so softly, of ker sweet smile and yielding, gentle touch.

Khudda, I told myself, *it isn't supposed to happen this way. This isn't supposed to happen at all.*

Which was when Gaspar Allen-Levin came up to us. He wore a necklace of yellow quartz. I'd thought of Caitlyn as tall; now that Gaspar stood along-

side us, a head taller than the Sa, I realized that Caitlyn and I were nearly of equal height. “Hello,” Gaspar said to Caitlyn, with a glance at me. “I...wondered if you...wanted to dance.”

Caitlyn looked at me. “Go ahead,” I told her, watching her eyes. “I’d hate to stop you when you have work to do.” Something—I wanted it to be disappointment—flickered in her light gaze. Then she smiled up at Gaspar and held out her hand to him.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s dance, then.” Gaspar led her out onto the concrete. I stood there, nibbling on the sweetcake, as they started to dance. Geema Euzhan was staring at me from across the pad. The music was loud, fast, and far too exuberant. Caitlyn, dancing, was laughing at something Gaspar had said, her head back and her hair swirling as she turned and stepped.

I finished the sweetcake as the song careened into the last chorus. I suddenly didn’t want to be there when the song ended, didn’t want to know what would happen after the last notes echoed from the Rock, didn’t want to know if the Sa would dance again with Gaspar or somebody else.

Didn’t want to know if, afterward, she might come back to me.

I left the Gather, sliding back into the shadows of the bonfires and heading back up the road to the Rock’s gates.

Somewhere along the way, I took off my necklace of yellow quartz and tossed it away into the night.

JOURNAL ENTRY:

Anaïs Kodja-Levin, O’Sa

Maybe the biggest disappointment for me is that even though it has been several years now since I’ve settled on the island, the head of Euzhan’s family, Dominic, still absolutely refuses to allow me to see her or talk with her. Euz is what, fourteen now? Yes, fourteen—already past her menarche, and I’ve missed it all, missed being there to give her advice, hear about her first lovers, or talk with her in the soft night about things that woman (and Sa) talk about. I want so much to see how she’s changed, what she looks like now that she’s no longer a girl but a young woman. Elio’s told me, of course, but that’s not the same. Not the same as holding her, or stroking her soft hair.

It’s not only that Euz is all I have left of her mam Ochiba, but knowing what I know now about the biology of the midmale, I do have to wonder if I might not be partially responsible for Euz’s conception. That’s certainly possible, given the time frame. I loved Ochiba so much, no matter how forbidden

our kind of love was at that time, and Euzhan always seemed to love me also, as if I were one of her *mi*...

I'm afraid that Dominic and the rest of Allen-Shimmura family will turn Euzhan against me. They already openly refer to poor, steadfast Elio as "the Betrayer" because he dared to love me—which is just more of Dominic's poison infecting his Family. I've given up hope of ever coming to an understanding with my old nemesis, who will hate me to his Burning (which will be soon, from what I hear of his health). I can only hope that when Dominic's gone, this year or the next, I can finally come to some kind of peace with the new Elders of the Family.

To think that Euzhan could ever come to distrust me or hate me the way her Geeda Dominic does would be a wound in my soul that would never heal. Never.

VOICE:

RenSa

From the summit, I could see the fires of the humans and the crowd of them far below, gathered around the huge square of flatstone they'd laid at the base of the hill sacred to the CieTiLa. Faintly, the distant sound of their music, so dissonant and harsh to my ears, drifted up on the night air. Human music jumps all over, with too many notes all frantically jumbled together. Their music lacks the slow patient slide of the LongChant from one tone to the next, and thus is, to my mind, too much like the humans themselves.

I didn't know why I'd come up here. I was supposed to be down there with Caitlyn and Linden, meeting the various Elders of the Families, but somehow the light and the noise had seemed intolerable, and I'd slipped away from the crowds, eventually finding the old path to the summit of the great rock. As I'd ascended, I'd felt a strange pull, the same feeling of rightness I felt when I entered the temple at AnglSaiye and looked upon VeiSaTi's great shell.

Somehow, I knew I was supposed to be here. Something had called me here.

The light of the moon Chali suddenly dimmed in my *brais*; I shivered and glanced up, ready to cover or attack if a wingclaw were stooping above to attack. But it was only a cloud passing in front of the moon, and I relaxed, my claws curling back into their padded sheaths. In a moment, the silvered cloud had moved on, and in the creamy moonlight, I could see the *nasituda*

set at the edge of the cliff. I walked over to them, stooping down to look at the ancient glyphs carved on them.

I could still read some of them: *I, MepTe, declare Black Lake free...* the nearest and oldest of them said. MepTe, I knew from the histories we'd been taught on AnglSaiye, had been the first of the Great TeTa. SayaTa, MepTe's mate, had given birth to the very first Sa, near this rock. MepTe and SayaTa had declared the area around the Black Lake a sanctuary for all CieTiLa, and so it had remained for more *terduva* than anyone could count, until the Sa-Death that followed the ravages of the infamous DekTe and CaraTa.

I sighed. *All the names...all the long, long turnings of the seasons...* The vast history of the CieTiLa had unfolded here. Yet now the great Black Lake was gone to marsh and peat, the CieTiLa had plunged into a long slumber from which we'd awakened only a few generations ago, and our sacred hill was now the home of the humans, hollowed and scarred by their technology. Four of the seven *nasituda* here were shattered, stumps leaning in the ground like broken teeth—

The laughter of the humans came to me as the music ended. I crouched in front of the *nasituda*, letting my fingertips run affectionately over the ancient carvings and musing on how the Black Lake must have looked then, covering most of the valley spread before me.

Shadows moved on the hilltop as another song started, the darkness more felt than seen in my *brais*. I held my breath, peering from behind the stone. There was the sound of a footfall, then another CieTiLa stepped into moonlight. She was female, I noticed, but was no one I recognized from the tribes I had visited over the years. The stranger's *shangaa* wasn't made of the human cloth, but was woven from yellowgrass dyed a deep red. Her attention was all on the humans below. I wondered whether I should make my presence known, but then the stranger shifted to get a better view, and her *shangaa* opened slightly.

In the moonlight, I could see the sign of the crescent moon on the upper swell of her breast.

The mark of QualiKa! So that's why VeiSaTi brought me here, to show me that the rumors are true. The QualiKa are active again.

Cautiously, I rose to my feet. My hands were shaking, and I took a deep, calming breath as YeiSa had taught me, shifting my feet carefully into a defensive stance. *The QualiKa killed more CieTiLa than humans, two generations ago.* "I wouldn't think a QualiKa would like the human music any more than I do," I said loudly.

The QualiKa spun around with a clatter of stones, daggered claws sliding from wide pads of her fingertips and the great ripping claws on her feet rising. Her lips were drawn up in a grimace of challenge, and her nasal vents flared. I didn't move, didn't react. Though I trembled inside, I kept an outward semblance of calm. *VeiSaTi brought me here. Ke will protect me.* "Their songs

sound like two whining padfeet in heat,” I continued, stepping out from behind the *nasituda*.

The QualiKa’s stance relaxed slightly as she saw me, though the claws remained out and threatening. Her gaze skittered nervously past me, scanning the summit of the peak, and she moved smoothly to block the entrance to the path down the steep hill, cutting off any chance I had to retreat. She had strange eyes, pale eyes that were piercing and deep, and her face was extraordinary. While she stared at me, I found myself holding my breath again. I forced myself to exhale. “I’m alone and no threat to you,” I told her. “Or have the QualiKa lost their respect for Sa, also?”

“I trust the Sa as much as they deserve to be trusted,” she answered, but the scythelike claws of her feet lowered, and all but the tips of her handclaws retracted back into their fleshy sheaths. She tugged at her *shangaa*, pulling the knitted mesh of yellowgrass over the mark on her chest. “And there are no QualiKa. Not since your human O’Sa died stopping their last battle. Not since NagTe was killed by the flatfaces.”

I gave the quick shiver of a shrug. “Yet that’s not what the CieTiLa who come to AnglSaiye from outside tell us. I’ve heard the tales that come to the Sa from the tribes. They say that the QualiKa have come together again. We even hear that their leader has called herself a Ta: Cos is her name, the grandpup of old Nag himself. We hear that she has claimed to be the Cha’akMongTi.”

The silver-shot eyes narrowed slightly, but beyond that there was no reaction to my words. “The JeJa believe all the old myths,” she said. “That’s their nature—isn’t that what the TeTa believe? The JeJa don’t have your education, your breeding, or your luck, Sa.”

“There are no JeJa or TeTa. Or have you forgotten what seven generations of FirstHands have said?”

“No one has forgotten that the FirstHands try to pretend we are human, or that you follow a *KoPavi* that is not the *KoPavi* our people once followed.”

“The QualiKa have forgotten that the humans brought the Sa back to us and saved us from losing what was left of our culture.” To that, the stranger only shrugged. “The humans think the QualiKa have returned, also,” I persisted. “Some of them believe that the QualiKa stole a human Sa from here, just a few hands of days ago.”

She laughed at that—a bitter, short sound that made her face briefly harsh. “Then you must think that CosTa and these mythical QualiKa are very stupid as well. Why would they do that? Why would they want the flatfaces aroused? Why would they deliberately antagonize the Sa, who they need as much as any CieTiLa? What would the QualiKa *gain* by taking a human Sa?”

“I thought those were things a QualiKa might know,” I said carefully. “My name is RenSa.” I waited, but the other made no move to give her name. “I have the honor to be the SecondHand to YeiSa,” I continued. “The fact that the FirstHand would dispatch ker Second here should tell you how seriously

the Community of Sa considers this. I was sent here to ask the very questions you asked.”

“None of those questions have answers. At least not from me.”

“And you are...?”

The QualiKa—if that was indeed what she was—ignored my query. Instead, she turned back to glance again at the bonfires far below, and the brightly colored, milling crowd. She still blocked the path, and I could see the tension in her back, in the way her spinal mane lifted. In the moonlight, I saw her face twist with distaste.

“The human SaTu have sent their own Hands to look into this,” I said to the CieTiLa’s back. “They wonder about the QualiKa, too, but they also look at their own kind.” Again I waited, but the other didn’t respond. “I know CaitlynSa and LindenSa, and I believe they will be fair. If the QualiKa knew what had happened to the child, and if they helped the Sa find ker—”

“Then what?” She spat out the words angrily, still staring down at the Gather. “What would change? Would the flatfaces leave the Black Lake? Would they abandon AnglSaiye? Would they stop tearing at the earth everywhere they go? Would they hate us less? Would the CieTiLa magically go back to following the *KoPavi*—the *full KoPavi*—as they should?” Now she turned, and a sardonic smile twisted at her lips. Her eyes, bright as the moon, seemed to impale my soul. I had rarely seen anyone so compelling just in her presence. “*If the QualiKa existed,*” she said.

I took another slow breath. *I can feel the danger in her. I can feel the anger, like a smoldering fire, and I want to join with it...* “Those humans who are frightened of us might be less frightened,” I told her. “I think that’s possible, but not all humans hate us, no matter what you might want to believe. Will they leave? No, but I remind you that it was a human who did VeiSaTi’s bidding and brought the CieTiLa back from our long sleep. Without the humans, the CieTiLa would still be a frightened shadow of what we had been, most fighting like animals in the wild, and a few of us clinging to old ways we barely understand. No one knows what the true *KoPavi* once was, not even the QualiKa. Maybe we will know, when we finish translating the *nasituda* under the temple. But not until then. What the QualiKa call the *KoPavi* is a collection of myths twisted by time and shaped by NagTe’s ambition. They are not the real *KoPavi*.” I lifted my chin slightly, my spinal mane rising as I spoke the words I wasn’t sure I really believed, but that were the creed of the Sa. “The QualiKa would do well to remember that. *If they exist,*” I added.

The music from below sounded louder now, and several human voices from below joined the song. I sighed. “I must go back,” I said, more to myself than the other. “They’ll be concerned if I’m missing for too long.” I glanced at the QualiKa, at the odd, light eyes that seemed to see all the way through me. I shivered, and pulled my *shangaa* tight around me. “If you would meet one of these mythical QualiKa, I’d ask a favor,” I told her.

“And what would that be, RenSa SecondHand?”

“Get word to Cos, the one who would call herself the new Cha’akMongTi, and tell her that I’d like to speak with her. Tell her that our interests—at least as far as the disappearance of the human Sa are concerned—aren’t so different as she might think.”

“An interesting notion, that. But not particularly believable.”

I shrugged, wishing she would stop staring at me, wishing that her presence didn’t so visibly bother me. *Remember your training...* But the words did nothing to dispel the stranger’s perilous aura. “YeiSa told me once that knowing the truth is like finding sweet water. You can’t tell the sweet from the salt by the look or the sound—you have to taste it.”

“And if I would taste you, RenSa, which would you be?” The QualiKa took a step toward me, and I instinctively dropped into a martial stance, the tips of my hand-claws emerging. The QualiKa noticed, and that crooked smile tugged at her lips again as her eyes gleamed.

“I must leave now,” I said, hating the tremble in my voice. *Calm yourself. Breathe, and be ready, because she may attack.*

“Then go.” She took a step away from the entrance to the stone stairs, but only a step, so that I had to nearly touch her to get by. I tried to ignore the crawling of my spinal mane as I passed her. I could smell her, could almost feel the heat of her body, and I half expected her to lash out at me.

But she did not, and the moment passed. I started down to the long, winding trail. “RenSa,” she called after me, and I stopped, not looking back at her, not daring to do so. “You have me curious to know if your water is truly sweet. I’ll offer you one truth in return—my name. I am called CosTa.”

Startled, I finally turned, but the summit was empty now. Only the *nasi-tuda* stood there, alone in the moonlight and awash in the alien sound of the human music.