

# Brezlun



Chris Mason

# Brezlun

By Chris Mason

Copyright 2012 by Christopher A. Mason

This ebook is an authorized free edition from [www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)

Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright laws. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author's written permission nor offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this book, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand a refund and report the transaction to the author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and events are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to any persons living or dead, businesses, incidents, or locales is purely coincidental.

## **Table of Contents**

### [Part One: The Mediator](#)

[Kethrin Decade](#)

[The Littapo Fair](#)

[Rite of Departure](#)

### [Part Two: Felittaka](#)

[Tiggleday](#)

[Nabitha](#)

### [Part Three: Tongatka](#)

[Tongat Rites](#)

[The Shadow of Mount Kibbith](#)

[Promises and Threats](#)

### [Part Four: Sevessaka](#)

[Thistlegull](#)

[Living Legend](#)

[Queen's Favor](#)

[Flip on the Tail](#)

[Hupamoy](#)

### [Part Five: Mertaka](#)

[Kondalen Clan](#)

[Caravan](#)

[Dross Cave](#)

### [Part Six: Babaka](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Place Names](#)

[Cast of Characters](#)

[Notes](#)

[About the Author](#)

## Part One: The Mediator



## Kethrin Decade

Miako paused outside Suzata's house, tucked her flute case under her arm, and slowly performed the rite of leave-taking. She was in no hurry to get home, but she'd had enough of the party, and her friends—understanding without either condoning or condemning her antisocial tendencies—had let her go. The drinking would go on in her honor into the small hours of the morning. It was the evening of the first day of the first week of the year, her birthday and her choiceday; more than enough reason to celebrate.

When she'd completed the right hand flourish that ended the ritual, she took the flute case by its handle and paused. The case had been carved from a solid block of mahogany, embellished all over with shallow, abstract designs that somehow evoked melody. It had been made by her father's frenik, Tapadak Wheatgrinder, who had been like a second father to her. He had presented it to her exactly ten years ago today, and instructed her solemnly to take it to the farthest edges of the world; to make music for the strange women who lived without men, and for the men who stopped fighting each other only long enough to get all their wives pregnant, and for the magicians who lived up on the ice.

She had never taken it farther than Littapo. Her mother had called last week to say that Tapadak was dead, burned and scattered in the fields he loved at the age of one hundred and one.

Feeling as if she'd disappointed the old man—a man who'd been old her entire life, old when she'd been born—she denied herself the release of running home. Running was her normal reaction to sadness, or any unpleasant feeling, but she felt she didn't deserve it today, and anyway she was a decade past choiceday and still living in Felittaka. Past time to grow up.

The moon was up and nearly full, dragging fog off the high tide in Arrow Bay. She couldn't see the sea but she could hear it and smell it, though it lay a mile away. The section of Littapo where she and Suzata lived was not fashionable or wealthy. The houses were modest, uniform ceramic spheres, one-third buried in the rocky soil. As she walked down the lane, passing into and out of the cones of light thrown by electric lamps, the fog thickened and wafted around her, hiding her neighbors' houses and threatening to obscure the moon.

She couldn't resist the melancholy any longer. She stopped midway between two lights, standing in the middle of the deserted lane, opened the case and took out her flute. It gleamed in the inconstant moonlight. She put it to her lips and played the opening bars of the Shadow Waltz, closing her eyes and letting the feeling flow from her heart to her lungs and fingers and out of the instrument.

"Miako!" someone yelled from far behind her. "Stop playing that sad shit and go home!"

Miako laughed, blew one final, rude note, and returned the instrument to its case.

Her house was just like its neighbors, except for the color; no two seemed to be quite the exact same shade. Hers was the aqua of shallow tropical water, slightly nubbly like stucco but made of an incredibly tough ceramic that never needed to be washed or

repainted. The perfect sphere was punctured by windows, doors, and ventilation openings, partially buried so that the front door was just at street level. She paused on the threshold of the dark house and performed the rite of homecoming, then opened the unlocked door and went inside, setting her flute case on the small table in the hall.

Above that table a tall mirror hung. Miako stared at the dim reflection of herself. Bronze skin, black hair pulled back off her round face, large eyes—and thirty years old. She remembered the child she had been, running wild and barefoot all over her parents' farm, her mother's despair that she would ever grow up to be a proper woman, her father laughing at her unruly hair and dirty feet, and their relief on choiceday that she had not done what everyone expected, and chosen kethrin to Tongat. Instead she had merely moved from the farm to the city, and still saw her parents occasionally.

She heard a slight rustle in the living room and turned to peer into the darkness. She jumped when a deep, resonant voice said slowly, "Miako Tomaza Seeker."

"Who is it?" she said.

"Miako Tomaza Seeker... a Seeker who does not seek."

She didn't recognize the voice. It was very strange, almost mechanical, with disturbing harmonics.

"What do you want?"

"I seek a Seeker."

"I am Seeker."

"Yet you do not seek."

A light clicked on and she saw a tall, hooded figure sitting in her reading chair. He held a book on his lap—an atlas, open to an overview map of Gebertala. From where she stood, Miako could see the star that marked Littapo in the point of Arrow Bay. The man closed the book and reached out a long arm to replace it on the shelf.

"You have quite a library for a Felitta," he said. "You are a puzzle, Miako."

"I'm sorry, sir, do I know you?"

"No, but I know you."

"Have we met? Is there some way I can be of assistance?"

"We have never met," the man said. "And yes, you can be of assistance, by allowing me to assist you."

"I don't understand. Who are you?"

The man stood up and Miako realized just how tall he really was. She was average height, just under five feet tall, but this man must have topped six. Possibly seven. She had never seen such a tall person before. Then he threw back his hood.

She gasped and froze. His face was almost human, but looked unfinished, or perhaps melted. He had no hair, not even eyebrows, and his eyes were pure black. There were no nostrils below his thin nose, and no lips. The ears were simple flaps, without the convolutions of a person's ears. Miako fell to her knees and prostrated herself.

She tried to remember the proper forms, but though her brain was racing nothing was coming to her. "I'm sorry, sir," she mumbled into the tile floor. "I cannot recall the proper obeisance."

"Stand up," he said. "I require no obeisance. I keep hoping you Felitta will give up on your silly rituals, but it seems to get worse every time I come back." She kept her forehead flat on the floor. "Stand up!" he said firmly, so she did. But she couldn't look him in the eyes. "Look at me," he commanded, so she did.

"I am not divine," he said. "I'm just a Mediator. You don't need to bow to me, and I'd appreciate it if you would talk to me normally."

At that moment Miako remembered the ritual she had not practiced since her early school days, the ritual every Felitta learned and never expected to use. No one had seen a Mediator since before her father's great-grandfather had been born.

She began the steps and the flowing hand gestures uncertainly, not sure if he would reprimand her again. The Mediator sighed and crossed his arms, resigned to waiting her out. By the time she reached the final step she felt more confident, and finished the last movement beautifully.

"Thank you for the welcome," he said, completing the ritual, releasing her. She sagged against the wall. "Come in here and sit down."

She gratefully took the guest seat and he returned to her reading chair. They looked at each other for a moment.

"Please ask me for help," he said.

"I don't understand."

"I know. Can you simply repeat a phrase for me?"

"I will gladly do whatever you require, sir."

"Good. Say this: 'Baba, please send me a new Mediator.'"

She hesitated; he gestured. She said, "Baba, please send me a new Mediator."

"Thank you. Let us wait."

She waited with him quietly. After ten minutes he sighed.

"Well," he said, "it was worth a try. I have no way of knowing if it's the uplink, the downlink, or both." He held up a hand: she was about to repeat that she didn't understand. "Do you pray, Miako?"

"Of course, sir."

"How often?"

"Not often. Once or twice a year."

"Are your prayers answered?"

"Very seldom, sir."

"But sometimes."

Miako thought that this was the strangest day of her life. She felt as if she were about to drift sideways out of her body. She closed her eyes and took a deep, ragged breath. When she opened her eyes the Mediator was standing over her, offering a glass of water. She hadn't heard him move. She made the rite of minor gratitude, a brief passing of hands with a grace note to acknowledge that the favor was done by someone above her station, and took the glass.

"Can you guess why I am here?" he said softly in his complex voice after he had resumed his seat.

"No, sir." She sipped the water.

"Can you guess why no one has seen a Mediator in four hundred years?"

"No, sir."

"Did you know there's an old legend that a female Seeker will lead the world into the Fifth Age?"

She choked on the water. "No, sir," she sputtered when she got her coughing under control, "I've never heard that."

"It's a Sevessa legend. I guess they thought it would be one of them."

“Please, sir, I’m very tired.” She’d been a little sleepy when she left Suzata’s, but now she felt exhaustion like the weight of a ship on her head and shoulders.

“I know. We can finish our conversation in the morning. I want to leave you with one thought to sleep on, however.”

“Yes, sir?”

“This is what I want from you. I want you to come with me—leave your home, and your friends and family, and live up to your name. There is something I must find, and I need a female Seeker to find it.”

\* \* \*

When she awoke in the morning, the sunlight streaming through the sheer curtains of her bedroom made the whole encounter seem like nothing more than a disturbing dream, born of sadness at Tapadak’s death, regret at not having done more with her youth, and too much beer. But when she’d finished the rite of waking, the rite of bathing, and the rite of dressing, the Mediator was sitting just where she’d left him.

“Good morning,” he said solemnly.

Miako didn’t know a rite to make God’s representative go away. All she could think was to offer him breakfast.

“No, thank you,” he said. “Please eat something and then we can talk.”

“I have to go to work.”

“You can work after we talk.”

She made a simple meal of coffee, fruit, and bread with jam, taking more time than usual on the rite of food preparation. Perhaps she ate a little slower than usual, and took more care with the rite of thanks for the meal to be eaten and that of the meal completed. She peeked into the living room when she was done. He was still sitting in her reading chair.

“I am done waiting,” he intoned, and she scurried into the room and quickly sat down across from him. “I have been waiting for you for ten years, Miako. Ten years, plus two thousand or so.”

“Please, sir,” she said. “I don’t understand.”

“Tell me why you didn’t choose kethrin to Tongat on your choiceday.”

This was exactly what all of her friends and teachers had asked her ten years ago. Miako had no better answer now.

“I was not ready, sir, to leave my family and my homeland.”

“Then why did you choose the surname Seeker?” She couldn’t answer, and stood to dance the rite of hopeless confusion. When she’d seated herself again, he said, “What you seek is not in Tongatka.”

“Perhaps, sir. But perhaps I simply...”

He finished the sentence for her. “You don’t know what you’re seeking.” She nodded. “I have been waiting ten years for you to realize that you chose the wrong path. I can wait no longer. You chose to stay in your birthplace and waste yourself on meaningless work instead of migrating to the land where you would have been happiest and done the most good. You chose your name; now it is time to live up to it.”

“Last night you said you were seeking something,” she said. “May I be permitted to know what?”

“I want to return to Baba,” he said. “I cannot help you unless you ask, but even if you asked me now I could not help you. As you saw last night, Baba no longer hears me.”



“But Baba always hears us,” Miako said.

“Perhaps so for you, but she cannot hear me. That is why the Mediators have been absent for so long. They are all gone but one. I am the last Mediator, and I am broken, perhaps forever.” He leaned forward. “What I seek is another way to speak to Baba, so once again I can answer your prayers.”

“What shall I do?”

“I want you to accompany me on a trip.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere. Or perhaps not.”

“For how long, sir?”

“A week. Or perhaps the rest of your life.”

Miako inhaled sharply.

“I’ve been watching you since you were a child,” the Mediator said. “All your life you’ve been praying for a miracle, or at least a sign.” He stood up. “This is it.”

\* \* \*

He gave her time to think about it. In the silence of her bedroom, Miako looked out the window, stared at the miniature paintings of her parents, and tried to imagine wrenching herself out of her comfortable if disappointing life. She couldn’t see the path from where she was to the life she had imagined when she’d been a child; she never could.

When she was very little, she’d dreamed of what it would be like to be kidnapped by Merta tribesmen and forced to be the fourth wife of a wild, savage chief. At another time she had imagined Sevessa coming to her in the night and whispering that this life was a mistake; she had been intended for vessin that had somehow gone wrong. But most often in her daydreams Tongat came to her at school and took her wordlessly by the hand and led her away to their rocky, icy land at the top of Gebertala, to teach her their mysteries and show her the truth behind the world.

Never had she imagined a Mediator, one of Baba’s messengers, showing up at her door and offering her the adventure she had always craved.

In the end she faltered, just as she had on her choiceday. The wide world tempted and horrified her in equal parts. She came out of her room to find the Mediator standing near her front door. With stiff limbs she performed the rite of reluctant refusal, a rite that was most often performed when declining a marriage proposal. Her face burned with her own inadequacy, and the Mediator walked out the door without a word.

## The Littapo Fair

The following morning, Miako paused inside the office door to perform the rite of labor commencing. She added the optional grace note, one arm flung up with hand spread wide, to indicate that she was happy to be employed. Her supervisor, Keving Rosekeeper, was a kind man. When she'd come in halfway through the workday yesterday he had asked if she were feeling well. She had carefully danced the rite of abject apology and explained that the delay had been beyond her control, and he'd merely performed the rite of acceptance and said he was relieved that she was not ill.

The office was undivided, in typical Felitta fashion. Low, comfortable couches were scattered around the vast second floor of Government Building, separated by potted plants, storage cabinets, chalkboards, coffee stations, communication consoles, and shrines. Some couches were clustered so that groups of up to ten people could huddle together in conference, but most were the private work areas of individual workers.

Miako followed the meandering corridor through the maze to her own little space in the center of the floor, nodding and waving to acquaintances as she passed them. She set her flute case on her couch and hung her coat beside those of her nearby co-workers, on a preserved tree whose lower branches had been carved into coat hooks; the upper branches had sparkling, oversized glitter for leaves. A live ficus tree, slightly taller than she was, stood in a brown-and-blue glazed pot beside her couch. She took a moment to inspect its leaves, pulled off three yellow ones, and watered it.

After sinking down into the couch, she unfolded the work surface from the left arm and looked over the papers she had nearly finished reviewing before leaving the previous evening. The census report was due to the World Council the following week. There were no surprises in the numbers this year: the world population hovered, as it should, just under six million. Sometimes, for reasons that no one understood, the ratio of births to deaths fluctuated enough to require birth limits or fecundity drives in Felitta, or changes in the pattern of vessin, but none of that would be necessary this year. In the ten years that Miako had been working in the census office, she had come to think of the world population as a tide that ebbed and surged, controlled perhaps by phases of the moon but subject to bemusing randomness at smaller levels of detail. She retrieved the abacus from the storage unit built into the couch arm and resumed double-checking the arithmetic.

"Miako!" someone said. She looked up to see Suzata peeking around the thick foliage of her ficus. "Don't forget, we're all going to the fair this afternoon."

"I remember. How are you today?"

"I'm tired. I met a new man at the dance last night. I didn't get much sleep."

Miako laughed. "The weekends aren't long enough for you? You have to party on Seconday too?"

"Maybe tonight as well. The day after tomorrow is Fiday. I can sleep then."

"I'll see you at lunch. You can tell me about him then."

"Okay."

The morning passed quickly. By lunchtime Miako had finished her review and carried the census report to Keving's station near the eastern windows. He was not there,

so she left it on a small lacquered table beside his couch. She and Suzata took their coats and went down to the wharf for lunch.

Their favorite fish shack was just down the street from Government Building. It was a grayed three-sided clapboard structure that seemed to be on the verge of collapse—but it had looked exactly the same the day Miako had first seen it, a decade before. She had long since become friends with the couple that ran the restaurant, and they'd told her once that they spent long hours every weekend maintaining the place's ramshackle appearance. "Ambiance," Carl had said in a conspiratorial whisper. "That's the secret to a successful restaurant."

It was not the ambiance but the food, in Miako's opinion. Carl and his wife Stelna had very good relations with the fishermen in Littapo. Every workday they offered fish that had been swimming in the ocean less than twelve hours ago, cooked magnificently, at a reasonable price. She ate here at least once a week.

She and Suzata took their fried cod and beet-asparagus salads to one of the tall tables that looked out on the street. Although it was cool the street side of Carl's restaurant was always wide open to allow diners to see the show. While Suzata rambled on enthusiastically about the man she'd taken home the night before, Miako slowly ate her fish and salad, listening with half of her attention, and watched the traffic go by on Government Street.

Government Building was the tallest structure in Littapo, and therefore the tallest in Felittaka: four stories of majestic granite, with carved corners and window frames, large expanses of glass, and an ornate parapet at the roof line. The street that served it was one of the few paved avenues in Littapo. Most of the city of half a million people, the most populous on Brezlun, was served by narrow lanes like the one on which Miako lived.

People rode down the street on horses and the occasional camel or donkey. Carts of various sizes being pulled along the street—by horses, oxen, or mules, singly or in teams—ranged from drab weather-beaten wood to ornately lacquered carriages to brightly-colored ceramic spheres nestled in delicate wrought-iron frames.

It had taken some time for Miako to adjust to the bustle of city life. She had grown up on a secluded farm far up the Whip River, half a continent away, with no brothers or sisters and only two children her own age within walking distance. By now the crowding and the variety of people, food, and buildings were no longer confusing, they were an important part of her life, and she would not willingly give them up.

She smiled at Suzata as her friend finished her story about her new lover. There was no need to pay overly close attention or even to remember his name. In a few weeks there would be another to take his place. Once Miako might have found Suzata's behavior appalling, but a decade of living in Littapo had made her tolerant of different lifestyles.

"Ready to go back?" she said.

"I can't wait to go to the fair."

"You won't have long to wait. It's only two hours." They performed the rite of thanks for the meal together, and Miako waved to Carl as she left the restaurant.

\* \* \*

The fruit trees on the hills surrounding Littapo were in full blossom. It looked as though a tsunami of pale color had deluged the town and run up almost to the crest of the hills, leaving swaths of pink, white, rose, and lavender wrack behind.

Keving gathered his department together at the appointed hour. "I would greatly appreciate it," he said with mock sternness, "if we managed to avoid the excesses of last year's Blossom Fair."

"What," shouted someone from the back, "you mean Tipper tearing off all his clothes and dancing naked on top of the apple barrels?" Everyone laughed, but Tipper, a young man with unkempt hair, straightened his shoulders and thumped his chest proudly, grinning.

"No," Keving replied, "I was thinking more of the eight babies born twenty-seven weeks later. It plays *havoc* with my staffing plans." More laughter. "Follow me, census staffers, to the Littapo Fair!"

Most of them carried their musical instruments. Miako had her case in hand, and Suzata's small bongos hung at her back on a cross-body strap. They followed the crowd of fifty people down the stairs and out to the street. It was just a mile or so down the boulevard to the fairgrounds, a pleasant walk on this sunny and cool afternoon.

The street was lined with chestnuts, elms, maples, and sycamores. In the wide center median between the lanes, the massive branches of thousand-year old oak trees sagged almost to the ground. Traffic was heavy heading to the fair, with carts occasionally having to stop for no reason other than congestion. Street cleaners darted in among the slow-moving animals, scooping up the offal and flinging it into their carts.

Keving's people stayed together for only a few blocks, ending up strung out into a thin line that fragmented and finally dissolved into the crowd at the entrance to the fairgrounds. Suzata took Miako's hand so they wouldn't be separated. Before they even passed through the intricate ceramic gates that towered fifty feet above them, they were assailed by the smells and calls of vendors offering food of every sort, from fresh fruit to spun sugar castles to bread pockets filled with steaming spicy fish stew; perfumes, toys, decats of varieties of fresh flowers on long stems, and guides to the fair. Suzata just laughed at the aggressive peddlers and they passed beneath the gates and into the fair.

The fairgrounds were used primarily at the festival that began each season, like the Blossom Fair, but nearly every week in between there was something going on here—spontaneous symphonies, animal shows, storyteller conventions, or cooking classes. Miako knew the thirty-acre grounds well.

"What do you want to do first?" she said.

"Animal barn!" Suzata said, nearly shouting to be heard over the happy noise.

Miako shrugged in resignation. She had grown up on a farm with dogs, sheep, and cattle, and perhaps that was why she had no pets herself; but Suzata was obsessed with them. She had a small dog, three cats, a cage full of small flitting birds, ferrets that seemed to vary in number from week to week, and a rabbit.

She dutifully followed Suzata up and down the aisles in the huge barn, examining the horses, pigs, rabbits, chickens, cattle, llamas, and show dogs until she thought she would scream from boredom. Suzata exclaimed over every specimen that was even slightly interesting. When they were done, Suzata gave Miako her choice for their next activity.

"Music," Miako said, and they reversed roles. Suzata sighed and they went back out into the sunshine, looking for a peffodia.

It wasn't hard to find one, the problem was finding one in which a flute could play a significant role. They passed a very loud, energetic group comprised mainly of strings and horns. She and Suzata paused for a moment to watch the dancing. After a moment

she realized that the three loose-haired women whirling barefoot to the rhythm were not Felitta—they were Sevessa, from the southern continent, and the dance instantly transformed itself from a scandalous, embarrassing display to a fascinating cultural one.

“I’d like to be able to move like that,” Suzata said.

“Just imitate your cats,” Miako said. “That’s exactly what they look like when they’re playing with a paper toy.”

They stopped again to listen to a storyteller, an aged man who reminded Miako of her old frenik Tapadak, spinning a tale about a cow that had fallen in love with an elk. When he reached the humorous ending, the audience laughed and applauded, and they moved on.

### **The Fairgoer’s Tale**

This is a tale of the long ago in the land of Felittaka.

On my old Papa’s farm we had a lot of silly cattle. There was one that could not leave the corner signposts alone; over months it would chew right through the pole, and then my Papa would have to call the utility company and they’d install a new pole and charge him for it. He’d bang that cow on the head with what was left of the shredded pole, but the cow would not learn. The third time she did it he took that cow out to the slaughterhouse and we had steaks for a year, but I thought they tasted of creosote.

There was another that fell in love with an elk. This was out east of Hungry Lake, good cattle country and good for growing maize, but there was a lot of old forest surrounding the fields, and still is today. A herd of elk lived in the hills and the woods near our farm, and sometimes they’d come down into the maize fields and we’d have to chase them away. We’d hunt them in fall, but they were forest-wise and it was a rare year that Papa actually bagged one.

One spring a young bull elk came down into the fields, looking for handouts maybe or cobs left over from fall. He came right into the cattle field, and one of those silly cows fell smack in love with the skinny, gangly fellow. She’d follow him from one side of the field to the other, and when he’d hop the fence like you’d step over a pumpkin, she’d stand there at the rails and moo and moon until the sun went down.

This went on all spring. That elk would come by nearly every day, and that silly cow would follow him around, nudging him in the flanks and backing up to him like he could actually do something to scratch her itch. He must have been twice her height but half her weight; if she’d sat on him he’d have been crushed like a fresh tomato. She didn’t care about their differences, she was in love. She didn’t seem to mind his big nose, and those proud antlers growing bigger every week, and the fact the he had no spots at all, just a reddish-brown coat with black points.

The young buck did no harm, and after a while Papa decided it wasn’t worth my time trying to chase him out of the fields. Somewhere in the

back of his head Papa must have been thinking that the familiarity would make him easy pickings come hunting season.

That didn't happen, though. First chilly day of the fall the elk came into the fields as usual, and at dusk he stood by the fence, proud and tall with his antlers full and ready for battle. Papa came out onto the back porch, and when the elk saw him he let out a bugle cry that shook the windows. Then that elk did the darndest thing. He nudged that adoring cow with his big, proud rack, then he waited a moment and nudged her again. When she wouldn't leap the fence he tossed his head and flew over it himself like the magical caribou in the children's stories. And we never saw him again.

Now that cow watched him go, and you could see something change in her. Like wisdom, maybe, realizing she'd spent the entire spring and summer mooning over a creature that barely knew she existed. In that moment she wised up and became a better cow. She resolved to set her sights lower and in the future be more realistic, more practical, more true to herself, and realize what her limitations were.

She held fast to that resolution. She went right out and fell in love with the barn cat, an old tom that had seen a lot of the world and was wiser than some people I've known. That cow followed him everywhere. And that cat knew what was what, so he let her.

— — —

Near the flower hall, a small group of musicians was weaving a plaintive melody; just a guitar and two violins. The family eating lunch at a nearby picnic table were smiling appreciatively. Miako listened for a moment, then nodded at Suzata. These were good musicians, but their song needed something and she thought she knew what. She opened her case and took out her dull silver flute, while Suzata pulled her small drums around to the front of her body.

The song they were weaving had a complex, subtle rhythm. Miako held the flute to her lips silently for several minutes before joining in, starting with low, breathy notes that merely punctuated the high, sad wailing of the violins. The guitar provided the foundation and the rhythm on which the violins spun a fantastic structure like the sugar castles they'd seen outside the gate. Miako darted in and out of that construction like a bird flying among the branches of a tree. She wound it tighter, gave it focus, and made it sadder. Meanwhile Suzata set up a soft syncopated beat that freed the guitar to join the violins in erecting the edifice.

When they wound down to a slow, pulsing, diminishing wail half an hour later, Miako was startled to see that a huge crowd had gathered around them, including Keving and many of her co-workers. As the last note died away the audience whistled, cheered, and clapped wildly. The musicians bowed deeply. The guitarist, a middle-aged man with graying hair and wild eyebrows, set aside his instrument and came over to her.

"Where did you learn to do that?" he said.

Miako ducked her head shyly and was about to deliver a demurrer when another voice rang out clearly in rich harmonics.

"Miako Tomaza Seeker," it said.

Her stomach flipped and all the good feeling she had accumulated during the performance and the applause vanished like fog beneath the summer sun. There, in the back of the crowd, the cloaked Mediator towered over the fair-goers. They edged back, making a bubble of space around him. When the silence had grown palpable he tossed back his hood and a collective gasp rose up from the crowd. Decats of people began the rite of welcome that she had had so much trouble remembering the night he'd first appeared; decats more had the same memory lapse and were copying the others, half a beat behind.

The ritual movements trailed away and the crowd was still. Miako could feel the stillness spreading out from him in waves. She closed her eyes and wished herself away from here, but when she opened them again he still stood thirty feet away with nothing but open space between them and a tight cluster of people enclosing them. There was no escape.

"I am Chass," he said with a commanding voice that echoed off the surrounding buildings, "the last Mediator of Brezlun. I have been waiting two thousand years for a female Seeker, and I require your assistance."

There was a sigh as a hundred people drew breath together, and then the silence grew even deeper. Miako looked around, at her fellow musicians, her friends, her supervisor, the many strangers that she had bewitched with her music. In their eyes she saw confusion, awe, sympathy, envy, even fear, but nowhere did she see a way back to her old life.

Miako carefully set down her flute and performed the rite of onerous duty accepted.

\* \* \*

Suzata led her out to the street. By the time Miako reached the fair gate her arms and shoulders were bruised from thousands of gentle squeezes, hugs, pats, caresses, and slaps. The news had spread through the fair like fire. The people who had seen the visitation pointed her out to the people who had not, and they lined up, making a gauntlet of the curious, the reverent, and the suspicious—a clear path that led directly out of the fair.

"Meet me at Papessa docks at sunrise on Fiday," the Mediator had said before his towering form somehow vanished into the crowd. Less than two days to get ready, two days to shuck off her comfortable life. He hadn't even given her a chance to explain that she could not leave without asking permission of her supervisor and the local council.

She felt exhausted, stunned and yet somehow hyper-alert. Then she realized that she didn't have her flute.

"Suzata, my flute!" she said.

"Right here." She held up the case in her left hand. With her right she continued to tug Miako's arm.

They passed through the gate and Miako felt relief that the ordeal was finally over, which lasted the five seconds until she realized that the people in the street were also lined up to watch her pass. No one tried to speak to her, no one called out encouragement or disparagement. They simply watched her walk by. The silence was worse than shouting and cursing would have been.

"Why is everyone so quiet?" she said.

"What is there to say?" Suzata replied.

After a while the crowd thinned out and then, without her noticing when it happened, they were simply walking down the street with other pedestrians, and no one was

watching them. Suzata released her arm and handed her the flute case. They walked without speaking until they'd passed Government Building and were halfway home.

"What do you think he wants?" Suzata said.

"He was in my house when I came home from the party."

Suzata stopped and faced her. They were on the cobbled sidewalk beside a broad, two-lane street that branched off at an angle from Government Street. It wound up Piffle Hill, with switchbacks and curves, but it wasn't very steep. The leaves on the elm trees still shone with the vivid translucent green of spring.

"You didn't tell me."

"I didn't know how. It would sound like bragging, or you'd think I was just drunk."

Suzata crossed her arms on her chest. "What did he say?"

"He wants me to go away with him. Looking for something."

"What?"

"I don't know. I don't understand what he said. Something about another way to talk to Baba."

"How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know." She looked down at her feet. "Maybe forever."

She was startled when Suzata grabbed her in a hug so fierce that she thought her ribs would crack. She held Miako tightly for a long moment, then shook her, turned without a word, and continued walking.

They stopped briefly at Suzata's house to pick up a bottle of cherry brandy. She stayed with Miako until late that night, helping her decide what to pack and putting her to bed after she fell asleep on the living room floor.



## Rite of Departure

The brandy left no hangover. While she boiled an egg for her breakfast the next morning, Miako debated whether to telephone her parents to tell them the news. She reluctantly decided not to. The communication center nearest to her father's farm was in the town of Shusha, an hour's ride away. By the time someone from the comm center could get to the farm to tell them they had a telephone call, and her father set down whatever he was working on and rushed into town, probably worrying the entire way that she'd been injured, it would be late afternoon. She had to go to work, and she wasn't sure she could deliver a coherent message over the telephone. She would write them a letter tonight.

It was Forday, usually a happy day because it was the end of the first half of the week—Government offices and many businesses were closed on Fiday—but Miako felt like a condemned prisoner. Tomorrow morning her life would be over. There might be a life after this one, but she knew of no stories in which people *returned* from journeys with Mediators.

On her walk to work it felt warmer than the previous day. Spring was asserting itself. Although the winters in Littapo never really got cold, nor the summers too hot, there was an appreciable difference between them and Miako was glad they were coming into the warmer part of the year. Then she remembered that she would not be here to see the hills turn red, first with summer's fruit and then the colored leaves of autumn. For all she knew they were headed for the glaciers of Tongatka.

The great sliding-glass doors of Government Building were open for the first time this year, leaving nearly the entire front of the atrium open to the street. Miako walked across the granite floors, between the potted ficus and ming aralia trees, with the dappled sunlight shining down through the skylights four stories above, to the broad, curving staircase. Like the rest of the building the stairs and banisters were carved out of granite from the Hutapi Hills just east of Littapo. It was beautiful stone, speckled gray shot through with gold and blue veins, but Miako thought an entire building of the stuff was oppressive, especially such a huge one. It surprised her to realize that she would miss this building in which she'd spent so much of her adult life.

On the second floor she walked through the open archway to the census office and paused, then chose to perform the rite of labor commencing, even though she doubted she'd be working that day, or any day after this. There was no grace note she knew of that denoted a sense of impending loss, so she left the sentiment unexpressed.

Conversations stopped as she walked into the room. A few people, all of them women she did not know well, waved their arms rhythmically in the rite of warding off misfortune—which was intended not to wish her good luck on her journey but to prevent her bad luck from rubbing off on them. Miako ignored them. She went straight to Keving's station. He was sitting on his couch staring out the window.

"Sir," she said, taking up the first pose for the rite of reluctant request, "I must regretfully request permission to abandon my position. This is not my choice—"

"Miako. Sit down here."

She stuttered and stopped. This was not how she had imagined her leave-taking would go. She knew that Keving had seen the Mediator command her, but she thought she would have to argue and perhaps plead. As she hesitated, her supervisor stood to perform the rite of consolation. She hesitantly sat beside him on the couch and waited for him to say something. It took a while, during which she could hear the hum of conversation start up again in the office around them. But they were sheltered from anyone's vision by the dense foliage of several potted trees.

"You know I think highly of your work here," he began. Miako started to thank him but he held up a hand and she refrained. "But as much as I like you and am grateful for your efforts, I never felt you belonged here."

She didn't get the impression she was meant to speak yet.

"I don't know what lies ahead of you," Keving said, "but I wish you good luck, and I hope you find whatever it is you could never bring yourself to search for."

"Does... does this mean I am given permission to go?"

"Miako, the last recorded sighting of a Mediator was in the year 3805. That's 466 years ago. If the documentation for their existence wasn't so overwhelming, we'd probably all believe by now that Mediators were just a legend. As it is, many people have come to think that Baba has deserted us."

Miako was shocked. "But you can see her in the sky! She's still there."

"Yes, but she hasn't answered a prayer since before our grandfathers' grandfathers were born." He looked at her and smiled. "After all this time, we learn not only that Mediators are real, but that one has been among us all this time, waiting—waiting for *you*. Do you imagine that anyone would dare refuse you permission to do as you've been asked?"

"You mean ordered."

"If you take this as anything other than the greatest honor bestowed on a human being in ages, I will be forced to reconsider my high opinion of you."

She bowed her head and fought back tears, suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that she *had* been myopic, timid, and self-centered.

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

"Of course you are! I would be terrified out of my mind. But I know you, Miako. You will do what must be done, and you will do it with style and grace." He put his hand over hers and squeezed gently. "Now—you have one more duty to perform, and then I think you should go home and prepare for your journey." He stood up and she did the same.

"There's someone who wants to talk to you before you go."

He led her to the back corner workstation, where the head of the census office sat, but Tiyinga was not there. An elderly man she had never seen before stood up at their arrival and walked forward with his arms outstretched. As Miako began the rite of first meeting, she realized with horror that she knew his face.

"Miako Seeker," he said in a warm, friendly voice.

"Councilor Peppersower!" What was one of the five members of the High Council doing here? She had expected to speak to a local council member, whose permission she needed to move, change jobs, or marry. She couldn't help it; she heard herself blurt out, "Does this mean the local council has given me permission to go?" Peppersower laughed and Keving blushed. Miako was stunned. "I'm sorry, sir."

“To answer your question: yes, of course. You have no idea the stir this has caused at the highest levels of government. It’s been a very long time. I’ve been on the radio with my co-councilors all morning.” Miako realized her mouth was open and closed it. “But come in, sit down. You too, Supervisor Rosekeeper.”

They sat on couches facing the councilor.

“I wanted to meet you for my own gratification,” he said warmly, “but also to tell you two things. First, the Mediator has asked the government for nothing, and so we cannot offer to help. So you will be on your own with him. Do you understand?”

Miako nodded.

“If you find yourself in a situation when you or... Chass need anything, get a message to me or to anyone on the local council, wherever you may end up, and we will do our best to help you.” He lifted a small medallion on a golden chain from around his neck and handed it to her. “This will aid you in that.” Miako looked at it closely. It was cloisonné, enamel segments separated by gold threads. On one side was the seal of the High Council, a stylized map of the world, with each of the three continents done in a different color. On the other was a depiction of a golden comet racing across a black, starry sky; it was one of the oldest symbols for Baba.

“No one has ever been asked to help a Mediator before,” Peppersower said. “Not in the long lay of the world. Usually, you know, it’s the other way around. So my second piece of advice is to be good and make us proud. Whether you succeed or fail, your name will end up in the history books. Be sure they write you well.”

She felt as if she would cry again.

“I know that’s a heavy burden to lay on a young woman from Shusha. But remember that we did not choose you—the Mediator chose you. And you must trust that he chose well.”

Peppersower stood up and Miako did too. “Good luck, Miako. Whatever happens, remember who you are. You are Felitta, and we are the bones of the world, the foundation of humanity, and the root of all Brezlun.”

Miako hesitated, trying to get her muddled brain to choose the appropriate rite for the situation, but he startled her speechless by himself performing the rite of acknowledging great sacrifice. She was stupefied by the incongruity of a master of the world bowing to *her*. Peppersower nodded to Keving and walked away.

Keving turned to her. “Now that I am no longer your supervisor, I can do something I’ve wanted to do for a long time.” He gathered her into his arms and hugged her fiercely. “Go home,” he whispered before releasing her. “And say farewell to your old life.”

\* \* \*

What could she live without? What could she manage to carry on a trip of unknown duration and destination? What would she desperately need that she had no inkling of now?

Chass had given her no clue. The night before, Suzata had advised her to take a mixture of clothing, since not even Baba herself knew where Miako might end up. Now Miako stared at the excessive piles of neatly folded clothing on her bed and felt overwhelmed.

After nearly an hour of paralysis and indecision, she decided to start with the absolute essentials. The first thing she set on the new pile was her flute. A pair of sturdy walking shoes and a pair of comfortable, knee-high leather boots that she’d had all her adult life.

Two pairs of trousers, four tunics of various weights, the fleece coat that her mother had given her on her seventeenth birthday. A week's worth of underwear.

The essential toiletries: toothbrush and paste, body wash that she could also use on her hair or for washing laundry, skin lotion, sponge, a small kit of clippers, scissors and other tools. The stout, four-inch knife and the compact, lightweight set of cookware and cutlery she always took on camping trips.

Miako spent a few minutes staring at the contents of her pantry and decided that it might be wise to bring food. She had some supplies for the times when she and Suzata went hiking in the nearby hills: chocolate bars, some grain-and-fruit bars, hearty and indestructible oat cakes, small vacuum-sealed packages of dried fruit, a compact box with a selection of spices.

Money was an issue; she didn't think her coins would be worth anything if they left Felittaka, and there was a limit to how many metal bars she could carry. She settled on a handful of Felitta coins, one bar of copper and two of gold. The combined weight of the money was only a bit more than that of the food.

She spent more time standing in front of her house shrine. Like most Felitta, she changed it continuously in response to her evolving taste, needs, and hopes. The shrine rested on a tall, sinuous pedestal of smooth white wood. On the polished oval top, at the level of her chest, she had carefully arranged a collection of precious objects. There was a small gold sunburst pendant hanging from a miniature, delicate, bare-branched tree carved from elk horn. A startling cobalt seashell that she had found at the beach, which a friend of hers, an amateur expert on mollusks, had exclaimed over, because the species was found only in Blast Bay on the eastern shore of Sevensaka, thousands of miles away. Tiny, realistic, intricately painted ceramic figures of men and women, made by her father. A small cut-glass vase filled with acorns from the oak tree she had climbed on as a child. A beautiful marble horse, about the size of her hand, carved by her friend Partep, whom she had once thought to marry, but he died of cancer at the age of twenty-four.

The sunburst represented Baba, source of everything good, watching over her life. Considering who she was to travel with, Miako felt an obligation to take that. But after dithering for too long, she left it and just took down Partep's horse, wrapped it well in a hand towel, and placed it on the pile.

In the end she managed to fit everything into her day pack, and she could lift it without difficulty. It was no heavier than the pack she usually carried on weekend-long excursions into the Hutapi Hills.

When that was done, she sank down in the reading chair in her living room and tried to think of what to do with the rest of the afternoon.

\* \* \*

Suzata had tried to organize a farewell dinner but everyone she'd contacted had an excuse: this one's daughter was ill, this one had planned to spend Fiday on Goatpurse Island and was leaving right after work, this one's mother was zepping in tonight.

"Cowards," Suzata spat.

"I can't blame them," Miako said. "I feel the same way, but there's nothing I can do about it."

"We all have to live in our own skin," Suzata said. The ancient epigram had never meant anything to Miako until now. She wished she could escape herself and this burden

that had been thrust on her. Suzata flopped down into the other chair in Miako's living room. "What kind of assistance could a Mediator need? Aren't they really powerful?"

"I don't know. And even if someone could help him, why would he think it's me?"

"He said he needed a female Seeker."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But I sneaked into Records this afternoon. There's a man there I had an affair with a few years ago. Actually, I think he still wants to marry me. Can you believe that? Anyway, he helped me look through the name files. You wouldn't believe it. Huge, leather-bound books, page after page filled with the full names and identification numbers of everyone who's ever chosen every surname, going back thousands of years. Did you know that I'm not the only Doghealer in Felittaka? There are three others, two men and—"

"Suzata."

"Sorry. There was a point to this. Miako—in four thousand years there have been fewer than a hundred Seekers, and all of them were men. The Seeker book has only one page, and you're the first woman Seeker in all of history!"

Miako pulled her feet up under her and rested her head on her hand. "I wish I'd chosen Treekeeper."

"Really? You were thinking of Treekeeper? Miako Treekeeper." Suzata chewed on it for a moment. "No, it just doesn't sound like you."

"I wish it were me."

"Cheer up. It's not like he's going to chop your head off. You're just going on an adventure. I bet you're back in three weeks, and you'll be famous. You'll never have to work again. You could get married if you want, pick any man in Littapo, married or not. You'll be rich!"

Miako shook her head and unraveled herself from the chair. "I may die tomorrow," she said, "but right now I'm hungry. Let's go down to the Moody Cow and you can buy the condemned woman a steak dinner."

"Condemned? Don't you mean blessed?"

"No."

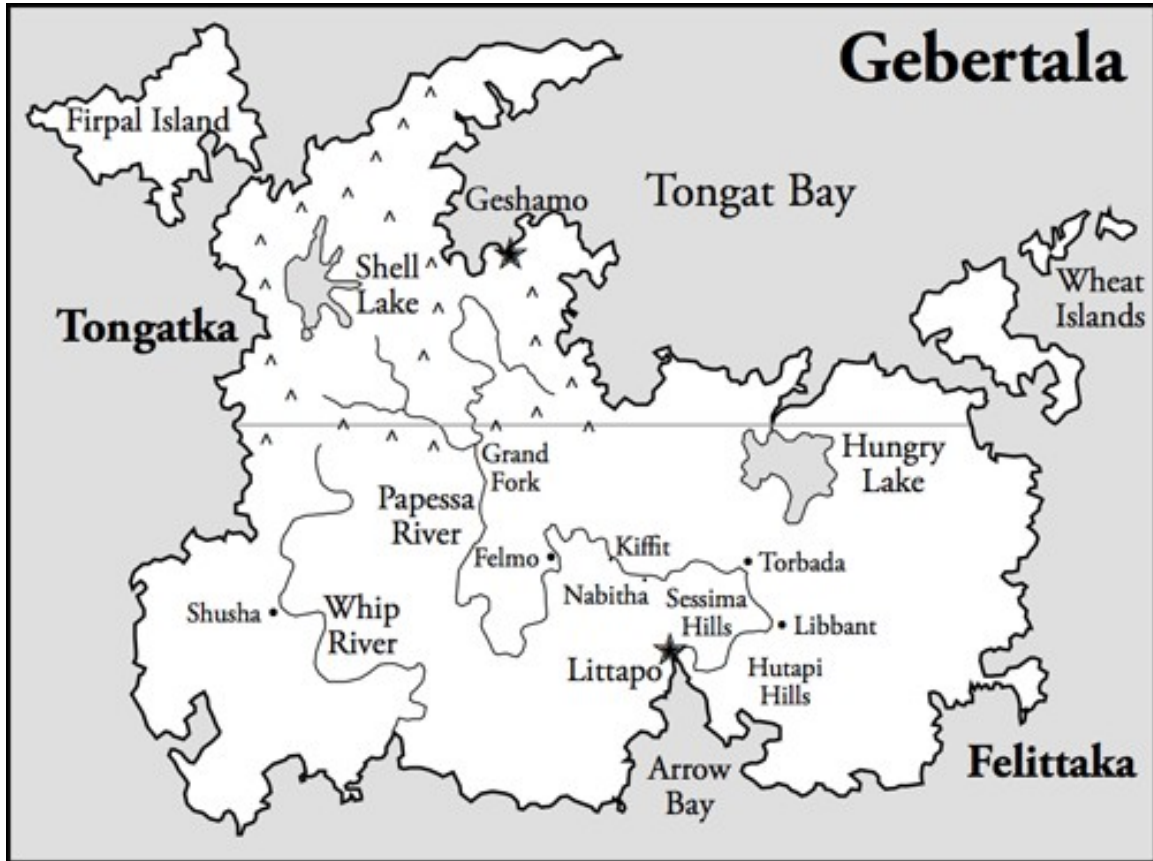
"I swear to Baba, you are the most mournful person I know. If you play any of that sad flute music for the Mediator, he probably will chop off your head."

"Are you coming?"

"Yes. Let me get my cape."

It was not a festive meal. Miako could not shake the feeling that she was teetering on the edge of a precipice. After Suzata walked her back home and kissed her goodbye and good luck, assuring her that she would see her again soon, Miako went straight to bed and lay under the quilt convinced she would never be able to drop off. But she fell into a dreamless sleep almost immediately and rested quietly until the sun came up on a beautiful spring day.

## Part Two: Felittaka



## Tiggleday

The Papessa River ran nearly the full length of the continent of Gebertala, emptying into Arrow Bay at Littapo after traversing over six thousand winding miles from Grand Fork, just south of the border between Felittaka and Tongatka. Farther north the water ran milky green with the runoff from glaciers, but from the docks at Littapo it looked black.

Miako walked into the throng with no idea where she was supposed to be. "Meet me at Papessa docks," the Mediator had said, but that was like saying, "Meet me north of the equator." The river here at the north edge of Littapo was hemmed in by steep cliffs on the east and by ranks of warehouses, offices, whorehouses, and street vendor carts on the west. The docks themselves thrust out into the wide river like L-shaped wooden tongues. Three boats were tied up this morning. At one a rank of longshoremen like a line of ants carried bales and barrels of cargo off the boat. A second had a confusing bustle of people coming and going, and the third looked deserted.

The ocean docks several miles downstream were modern and efficient, with giant electric cranes squatting over the river barges and ocean freighters like monstrous insects from a child's nightmare. The river docks, which served the smaller boats that ran passengers and light freight all the way from Littapo to Tongatka and back, ran their business the same way they had for four thousand years. It wasn't efficient and it wasn't modern, and if you said so to any of the burly men hauling cargo on his shoulder he'd likely laugh and spit and hurl you out into the center of the river.

She shifted her backpack on her shoulders and tried to locate the Mediator in the crowd. All she could see were the colorful tunics of passengers and businessmen, the bare torsos of the dock workers, and the occasional draft animal, all passing in a confusing stream, back and forth on their way to somewhere else.

Finally she spotted a sign for the shipping office and wound her way through the press of bodies to the weather-beaten storefront. As she approached, the Mediator stood up from a bench in front of the building. He was wearing the same cloak, with the hood pulled forward. Miako's stomach sank. She'd hoped that somehow he wouldn't be here.

"Miako," he said. "You made it."

"Sir."

"Call me Chass."

"Sir?"

The Mediator sighed and reached into a pocket of his cloak. "Here," he said, and handed her a gold bar. It was a standard-weight cylinder identical to the two she'd brought, a little longer than her middle finger and somewhat thicker. "Book us passage on the *Tiggleday* for Nabitha."

"Nabitha?" It was a middling town near the center of the country. She had never been there.

"The *Tiggleday* is that boat there," pointing to the one in the center with all the activity about it. "It weighs anchor in an hour. Two cabins, please."

She took the gold and went into the shipping office. The clerk was helping a young couple who looked like farmers. The woman was pregnant, perhaps halfway to term. She looked up from petting her sheepdog and smiled at Miako, who smiled back.

"You're all set, then," the clerk said. He was a stern-faced, ruddy-cheeked elderly man who had probably been tall and strong in his youth. He was still husky, and his voice was kinder than his rough face would have led one to expect. "Two tickets to Felmo. Passage for the dog is included but dog food is extra." He rather sloppily performed the rite of business concluded.

The young man thanked him and nodded to Miako as he turned away. His wife smiled at her again.

The clerk performed the rite of business commencing, and she echoed his movements with a bit more precision. "What can I do for you, Miss?" he said to her.

"Two tickets to Nabitha on the, uh, the *Tiggleday*, please."

"And is that one berth or two?"

Miako blushed. "Sorry. Two cabins."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that, little Miss. It can help to while away the hours on a slow boat ride, now can't it?"

She blushed harder and the clerk laughed. "Sorry there, little Miss. Didn't mean to embarrass you. Nabitha is two days and a bit upriver. That'll be two cabins for three days and two nights, including meals. Would you be paying with coin or gold?"

"Gold."

"Very good. That comes to three ounces, then."

She handed him the bar the Mediator had given her. As he stepped away from the counter toward the scales, she saw that his right leg was just a peg below the knee. It was ornately carved and ended in a polished knob. The clerk measured and weighed the bar and apparently did the calculations in his head to determine that the bar was unalloyed and standard size. He marked off a little less than a fourth of its length and cut it with a precision ceramic slicer.

He took two tickets from a cubbyhole, wrote the date on them, and slipped them into an envelope. Then he pulled over a log book and picked up a permanent pen.

"And the names, then?"

She stared at him. She hadn't known she would have to give their names. The clerk smiled at her politely from his wreck of a face—broken nose, weather-beaten skin, cracked lips. In a moment he'd start wondering why it was taking her so long to remember her own name.

"Miako Seeker," she said and thought furiously as she watched him laboriously write it out. He looked back up at her. "And Chass Loudspeaker."

"Loudspeaker is it?" the man said, chuckling. "Not a name I would have chosen. Still, I've known a Loudspeaker or two in my time. Good men to have at a fellball tournament." He finished and set the log book aside.

"You're all set, then. Two tickets to Nabitha, good food and nice, clean cabins. She leaves in ninety minutes." He handed over the tickets and she thanked him. "Good journey to you, Miss Seeker," the clerk said. "And give my regards to Sir Loudspeaker."

He was laughing softly as he did the rite of conclusion and she turned away. She nodded to the two men who had been waiting behind her. They were about her age, both wearing heavy gray work clothes and lean, hard faces. But they smiled back at her and



stood aside politely. “Two berths to Nabitha,” she heard one of them say as she left the office.

\* \* \*

“Well done,” the Mediator said. “Let’s go aboard.”

He led the way down to the pier that ran out out to the *Tiggleday*. They moved slowly through the crowd, which was mostly bare-chested stevedores hauling crates, barrels, and bundles out to the ship and coming back empty-handed, though there were also a fair number of unladen people coming and going down the narrow plank.

“Are these all passengers?” she said, wondering how they would all fit on the boat.

“Not many,” Chass said. “Most are business people wrapping up their affairs before the boat leaves. It won’t be back for three weeks, you know. Some of these will have business with passengers, but most will be dealing with agents of the shipping line, arranging for the cargo they’re sending or expecting.”

“How... why do you...”

“Why do I know so much about it?” He looked back at her and Miako thought she saw a twinkle of amusement in the hooded eyes. “Miako, I arrived on Brezlun with your ancestors in the Gentle Fall. I’ve had a lot of time to learn how things work here.”

The Gentle Fall. She’d thought that was a myth.

The *Tiggleday* was a sternwheeler, about 150 feet long, twenty feet across the beam, with a shallow draft. The hull was brilliant white, made of thin but nearly unbreakable ceramic, as smooth as Miako’s house was pebbly. Two levels of cabins and common areas lay above the main deck, and a superstructure at the bow rose two more levels above that. At the stern the red-painted wheel loomed higher than the cabins.

An agent at the end of the pier punched their tickets and directed them to their cabins, amidships on the second level. Miako had traveled across the continent several times, but she had never been on a ship before, always traveling by train or cart. She stared at everything and everyone: the sweating men carrying their heavy loads into the bowels belowdecks, walking briskly when laden but sauntering on their way back out. Several paused for a brief version of the rite of sexual appreciation with hope but no expectation for dalliance; Miako blushed and the men laughed, nodded, and moved on.

She saw half a hundred men and women bustling around the deck and going up and down the wide stairway near the bow. Some of them continued up to the forecabin, others walked briskly down the corridor toward the stern. Most of them wore the standard Felitta business uniform, a loose, colorful tunic over trousers, but Miako spotted a Tongat doctor in the traditional flowing white robes, and a Sevessa couple wearing formal deep blue overalls.

Their cabins were adjacent. Miako opened the door and was surprised at how spacious the room was. There was a double bed, a small washroom, and enough space left over for a padded wicker chair with a footstool. There was a good-sized porthole, looking out at the moment on the docks. She shucked off her pack and went back into the corridor. Chass was waiting for her.

“Would you like to watch the departure?” he said.

“Yes, please.”

They continued down the corridor to the stern, where a large open deck lay between the cabins and the great wheel that rose up to nearly Chass’s height above the decking. The day was warming, although the sun had not yet climbed above the cliffs to the east.

Miako went to the railing on the river side and watched the seagulls wheeling above the water, swooping down occasionally to try to snatch something from the river, but each time climbing away with empty talons. After a moment she walked to the port side and watched the people coming and going—more going now than coming, since the loading had finished and those people not leaving with the ship were headed back to land.

A loud steam whistle blew, announcing their imminent departure. “Board!” called the boatswain in a deep, singsong voice, drawling the word out into two long syllables that echoed off the cliffs. A last few stragglers ran down the gangplank to the pier, after which two men hauled it aboard. “Cast off,” the boatswain sang, and then moments later, “weigh anchor,” and the ship shuddered as if it had just awakened from sleep. The paddle wheel jerked, then rotated smoothly, immediately sending up a shushing roar of sound that made Miako involuntarily step back from the railing and away from the stern.

The ship drew away from the dock and began a lazy turn out into the middle of the river, continuing the turn until it was heading upstream. Then the wheel hissed to a stop and they drifted silently on the slow current.

“Sirs and ladies,” an amplified male voice rang out. “This is your captain, Jemen Riverstalker. In case you have not noticed, we are about to get underway. The *Tiggleday* is headed upriver on the mighty Papessa through the heart of Gebertala, with stops at Libbant, Torbada, Nabitha, Yippisa, Higgee, Pelbaha, Felmo, and ending at Grand Fork. If you have not bought a ticket or this is not a trip you wish to take, please hop overboard now.”

There was scattered laughter. The captain went on to explain safety procedures, noting the absence of life vests since no river ship of the line had foundered for over three thousand years.

The captain paused. No one jumped off the ship. “Very well, then,” he boomed. “Lunch is served at 07.00, dinner at 14.00. Our next stop is Libbant, where we will dock between 24.85 and 24.95 local time. Unloading will commence immediately, since daybreak will occur just after we arrive. Enjoy your trip on the *Tiggleday*, and please let the crew know if you need anything.”

The big wheel began turning again, creating a thrumming vibration in the deck. Miako stepped away from the rail and slowly performed the rite of leaving home, with a grace note for the uncertainty that she would ever see it again. When she finished the docks had slid out of sight behind a bend in the river. On the ship’s right the cliffs rose high, and as she watched a sliver of sun burst over them. On their left was thick forest. She turned away from the sight to find Chass watching her.

“Our journey has begun,” he said. “Let’s find a quiet place to talk.”

\* \* \*

They discovered an empty lounge near the stern on the main deck. It was well-appointed, with dark wood panelling that had a reddish tint and several groupings of comfortable chairs. Outside the windows the wooded riverbanks slid slowly by. When the Mediator had seated himself Miako began the rite of attentive listening but Chass held up a hand and she froze with one hand cocked behind and just above her head.

“Miako, sit down.”

She could not remember ever having been interrupted in a rite before. She hesitated for a moment, unsure if she should finish, unsure if it were decent or perhaps even dangerous to stop mid-rite. Then she remembered who she was with. If a Mediator told

her to do something, by definition it must be acceptable. She clumsily straightened her limbs and sat in the upholstered chair beside him.

“This may be hard for you, but I want you to try not to perform any rites to me from now on.”

She tried to say something, not sure what it might have turned out to be, but all that came out was a choking sound.

“I’m not asking you to stop your rituals. When you’re dealing with other Felitta, do what comes naturally. But you must know that the other three cultures do not have a rite for every single action in their lives, and it’s very likely that we will be traveling to at least one of them. As practice, I want you to treat me as non-Felitta. I *am* not Felitta, as you can easily tell, since I’m not human.”

“Sir, I...”

“Please try.”

She swallowed and nodded.

“If I had another lifetime,” Chass said, “I’d like to study why these rites have persisted for so long. They made a sort of twisted sense aboard the ship, where your predecessors crowded right on top of one another, but once you came down to Brezlun —” He broke off and she could tell without seeing his face that he was smiling. “Sorry. I owe you an explanation, not a lecture.”

He reached into his cloak, pulled something out, and held it out to her. She put out her hand. It was trembling slightly.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said.

The thing he dropped into her waiting palm was metallic and very lightweight. The rectangular shape covered about half of her hand, and was only as thick as a coin. Miako hefted it and looked at it more closely. There was a comet symbol on one face, a Baba symbol, nearly worn away with age or use. A barely visible seam ran along the thin edge.

“Open it.”

The rectangle swung open easily, hinged on one short side. The thin device was actually made of two even thinner halves, one that was no thicker than a sheet of paper, but not pliable at all. She had never seen such rigid metal; if this were steel or aluminum it would be foil and she would have crumpled it when she opened the case, but it was as rigid as the best Sevessa ceramics. The other half was inscribed with worn-away markings that might have been buttons or labels. She could make nothing of what was left of the symbols.

“What is it?” she said.

“At the time of the Gentle Fall your people had two ways of contacting Baba. I was one of these. Two Mediators were assigned to each landing, and anyone could petition Baba simply by asking one of us. Over the centuries my colleagues vanished one by one. I know for sure what happened to only one of them, Kepp—he fell overboard in Blast Bay during a severe storm. It’s most likely that the other Sevessa Mediator, Podd, suffered the same fate. I think Troff probably fell into a glacier in Tongatka, and I’m certain that the Merta Mediators were intentionally destroyed. I have no idea what happened to the others.

“That device in your hand is the other method. It’s like... something like a radio, but also like a telephone. It’s a way to call Baba.”

Miako looked down at the little thing. It seemed incredible that something so small could have such an important function. She lifted it halfway to her face.

"It doesn't work," Chass said. "As far as I can tell, the last time one of these communicators worked was around the year 1820. Over two thousand years ago. Not too long after that we Mediators also started to lose contact with Baba. We didn't see each other very often and by then perhaps only half of us were left. By the time we managed to gather to try to solve the problem, none of us, singly or together, could establish two-way communication. We kept talking for a long time after that, but no one has heard her voice since 1913."

Miako sat back in her chair. She had no idea what to say, and no clue what it was he wanted of her.

"My guess is that the transmitters went first," he said. "Otherwise our requests for replacements would have been answered."

"You don't think... that maybe something has gone wrong with Baba."

"No. I've been observing her orbit for four thousand years. It's perfectly stable, which is impossible for a low-level orbit without constant monitoring and correction. Baba is functional. But neither she nor the Mediators are allowed to render assistance after landing unless specifically asked. It never occurred to the Planners that you would forget how to ask, or lose the ability to do so."

"That's why you asked me to ask Baba for a new Mediator the night we met."

He nodded. "There was a chance it would work. But I'm clearly broken, probably both the uplink and downlink. There's no one on this planet that can fix me, and no way to ask anyone off the planet for help. Except for that." He pointed at the communicator.

"You said it doesn't work."

"I am the last Mediator, but that is not the last communicator."

Suddenly she realized what he was after. "You want to find a communicator that's not broken!"

"Not exactly. I'm convinced there's no functioning unit anywhere. But if I can collect together a number of broken ones, I may have enough working parts to reassemble one that works."

"But where are the other broken ones?"

"Where they've been kept for the last two thousand years. In shrines." She gaped at him. "Every culture was given several of these. When they stopped working they stopped being a tool and became objects of reverence. Relics. We're going to visit the sites where they have been enshrined. Starting with Felitta."

"In Nabitha."

"Exactly."

"But why do you need me? Surely, sir, if you showed up at these shrines and asked for the communicators the owners of the shrines would gladly give them up."

"Perhaps. But remember that I don't know what happened to my colleagues, especially among the Merta. I need a mediator of my own—a Seeker, to go places that I might not safely go alone."

She was to be the Mediator's mediator? It made her head swim.

"But why a female Seeker?" she said.

Chass leaned forward so she could see his eyes. "I am neither male nor female, but humans don't think like that. I'm taller and stronger than any human on Brezlun, so I

must be male. That puts me at a disadvantage in at least two of your cultures. In Sevevssaka I would never be admitted to the shrine. In Mertaka I would probably be challenged repeatedly and overwhelmed before I could find it. Only a woman can visit all four Brezlun cultures safely. And you are the first female Seeker. Ever.”

Miako thought about this for a long time. When she looked up again, he was sunk back in his own chair and his features were once again hidden by the cowl of his cloak.

“We have nearly three days before we get to Nabitha,” he said in his strange, harmonic-laden voice. “Explore the boat. Meet the other passengers. Have a little fun. When we arrive at our destination it’s possible that we won’t need to go further. But if we do, you may well find that this little hiatus was more than a pleasant holiday; it may end up being the last real rest that you get for a long time.”

\* \* \*

The boat had a shallow draft, so there was only one level belowdecks. No one tried to stop Miako from going down the steep stairway, but she didn’t stay long. The holds were crammed full of bales, barrels, and crates, all lashed down with the thin Merta rope that she’d been told was stronger than steel. As she went farther astern the noise of the twin engines rose until it became uncomfortable, and she retreated back to the main deck.

There were five lounges other than the one she and Chass had used. The two near the bow were quite large and had sweeping views out of tall windows on three sides, which explained why they had been alone in the small stern lounge. Miako didn’t linger in the main deck lounge, which had only a decat or so passengers, but on the second deck there were easily four times that many, clustered in noisy groups with a few solitary types reading or staring out the windows. In one corner, with eight-foot tall windows on two sides, a peffodia was forming.

A gray-haired older woman had a triangle instrument around her wrist and was tapping it experimentally with a thin metal beater, holding it up to her ear and laughing at something the young man beside her was saying. Beside them stood a middle-aged man with a small Merta-style guitar; a boy with a violin; twin women about her age, one with a clarinet and the other with a Sevevssa hip drum; two men with trumpets of completely different styles; and one of the men she had seen in the ticket office, who was unraveling a small set of Tongat bagpipes. She walked over to the group with her flute case in her hand.

“Thank Baba, a flutist,” the guitarist said cheerfully. “An antidote to trumpets and bagpipes.”

Several of them laughed, including one of the trumpet players. Miako introduced herself and they did the same. The guitarist’s name was Pahbalan. “Zeven Purger,” the Tongat piper said when it was his turn. He looked at her so intently that she found herself blushing, which drew a kindly laugh from his stern face.

By acclaim the young violinist, Teepesh, started the first song, which he did with a wail that got the attention of everyone in the lounge, but then he settled down into an energetic jig that drew instant applause from the onlookers, some of whom started to dance. The other instruments took their places in the evolving melody, and when Miako felt the rhythm enter her chest she joined in, weaving grace notes around the edges of the musical stampede, occasionally punctuating moments of relative silence with haunting, breathy shadows. The song went on for over twenty minutes, and when the violinist led them down to the coda the audience applauded enthusiastically.

“I don’t have the energy to do that again soon,” Pahbalan said, to laughter. “What do you say—shall we have our flutist lead us in something a little less boisterous?” Some people called out for more dances, but far more called out loudly for a ballad.

“Sad songs are what I do best,” Miako said, to more cheers. The other members of the peffodia urged her to the front of the group. The audience settled themselves into their upholstered chairs, some pulling seats from around the lounge so they could gather close.

Miako closed her eyes and thought of Suzata and her home, neither of which she expected to see again; of the quest she had always dreamed of and never dared to begin, which had now come to claim her since she would not go looking for it; she thought of her parents and of Tapadak, who had made her flute case with his own hands and was now dead. She put her flute to her lips and breathed, and the unaccountable sadness that had always enfolded her life wafted out of her instrument and wrapped the listeners, players and audience alike, in a shroud of beautiful melancholy.

It was a long minute before the clarinet joined her, then the violin, the guitar, the bagpipes playing more softly than she had thought possible, the percussion sliding in so gently that she didn’t notice them until she realized they had been providing the beat for several minutes—and the horns blowing soft and breathy, highlights only, staying away from the melody to make a box that wrapped around her gorgeous sorrow and framed it to make it all the more haunting.

Miako led them all on a journey down to the depths of despair and back up to the merely uncertain, peeking for a moment at the hope of a sunrise before falling back down to darkness. She wrapped these strangers and their following music up in a ball of delicious agony and took them and their listeners to places they had never glimpsed before. When she was nearly done and they had dropped behind, one by one, she played solo for over a minute, ending as she had begun—alone and reedy, and finally falling into breathless silence.

The silence continued for a long moment and then the audience exploded into applause, whistling, stamping feet, and clapping. Miako looked behind her at the musicians who had followed her so beautifully, and started to thank them.

“We won’t top that today,” Pahbalan said reverently. “I think we’re done.”

A few people in the audience were calling for more, but most realized that the players were not just finished—they had nothing left to give.

“How far do you go on the *Tiggleday*?” the young violinist asked her shyly.

“Nabitha.”

“Then we must play again tomorrow,” he said, and bowed low.

Her eyes followed him out, and she saw Chass standing in the back of the lounge. He seemed to nod minutely, then he turned and left the room. The old triangle player put her hand on Miako’s shoulder briefly, startling her, before walking away. Several of the others touched her as well before dispersing. The Tongat piper stood motionless, watching her as she cleaned her instrument and put it back in its case.

“It’s almost lunchtime,” he said at last. “Will you join me?”

\* \* \*

Apparently all meals aboard the *Tiggleday* were served buffet style. This was fine with Miako, who had never developed a taste for what some of her friends called fine dining. She preferred the informality and focus on hearty food at places such as Carl’s fish shack. In general she liked buffets, when the food was good, because she could

control the portions. Invariably at restaurants she found herself faced with a mountain of food that someone thought was a meal but to her was several days' worth of lunches. Then she was forced either to eat it all and feel sick, or leave it and feel guilty, or take it with her and have to eat the same meal day after day.

Standing with the piper Zeven, waiting for their turn at the buffet line, Miako found herself staring at him and forced herself to stop. His countenance was rugged, evidence perhaps of many days spent outdoors, and his tunic and leggings were rough, clean but poor. She had of course seen Tongat before, but usually they were more refined and walked about with a distracted air as if they were pondering some deep problem. If Tongat had shepherds, and perhaps they did, this was how she imagined they would look: stern mountain philosophers.

The buffet contained several rice dishes, roasted vegetables, and seskafet, the spicy simmered chicken that was a staple of central Felitta. Miako took one of the wide, oval, rimless ceramic plates from the stack and served herself saffron rice, some vegetables and chicken, and an apple. She followed Zeven to a table near the windows.

His fellow Tongat was already there, and nodded absently to his companion as they came up. Around the table also sat the farmer and his pregnant wife, who had been in front of Miako in the ticket line, and a solitary old man wearing a long-sleeved shirt with gold-embroidered trim. Miako performed the rite of joining an established transient gathering and the three Felitta responded with the brief acceptance rite.

"You're the flutist," the old man said by way of greeting. Miako nodded. "You're very gifted. But you're too young to be full of such sadness."

"Perhaps she has cause," Zeven said. He spoke Felitta very well. "How can we know what sorrow she's seen?"

"Look at her face," the old man said quietly. Miako blushed as she realized that everyone at the table was staring at her. "Her life has been a good one, if perhaps unfulfilled. If there's been sorrow it's no more than any normal young woman might know." He reached across the table and Miako shook his hand. "My name is Nimmel Underwalker. Sorry if I embarrassed you."

The young couple introduced themselves as Ibsel Wheatberry and Yola Mothchaser.

"When are you due?" Miako asked Yola.

"In twelve weeks. It's our first."

"Picked a name yet?" Nimmel asked.

"Tentel if it's a boy," Ibsel said.

"After his dead father," Yola added. "Or Tiffa for a girl."

"Good names. Where's your farm?"

"Near Felmo. We've just come down for the festival. I think it will be our last for many years, until our children are old enough to go."

"Did you enjoy the festival?" Miako said.

"It was very exciting," Yola said. "We heard there was a Mediator, but we didn't get to see him. Did you?"

No one responded. Miako made a noncommittal shrug and focused on her food. The farmers looked embarrassed and fell silent, as if afraid they had made a social blunder. On the contrary, Miako was certain that the Mediator was still a lively topic of conversation in Littapo, but she had no desire to talk about it and apparently none of her table mates did either; who could know why?

“What is the purpose of your trip?” Zeven asked Miako.

“I’m visiting a cousin in Nabitha,” she said.

“Ah. Hobbed and I are visiting one of our sisters in Nabitha.” His companion nodded but didn’t look up from his food.

“Sister? But I thought—”

“Not blood sister. We use the term to mean a close friend who was trained at roughly the same time. She’s the doctor in Nabitha. We’re bringing her a load of supplies from Geshamo. Her name is Undalay, do you know her?”

“I’m sorry, no. I’ve never been to Nabitha before.”

“What,” Nimmel said, “never visited your cousin before?”

“She’s just married and moved there to join her husband.”

“Ah.”

“And your very tall companion...?” Zeven said.

Miako froze with a spoon of rice halfway to her mouth. “I’m sorry?”

“The hooded man who was waiting for you when you left the ticket agent.” He looked around the dining room. “Where is he, by the way?”

“He prefers to dine alone,” Miako said. “His health is not good, he has special dietary requirements.”

“And is he your father?”

“No, my father lives near Shusha. This is my uncle, the father of my cousin who was just married.”

“Strange for a father to visit a recently-married daughter,” Nimmel said. “With his niece and not his wife. When was the wedding?”

“My aunt is dead,” Miako said. “And my cousin was married six weeks ago. Her husband invited my uncle to visit, because he lives all alone. I think they want him to come live with them, since their frenik died several years ago.”

Nimmel nodded at the good sense of this. But Miako could feel Zeven’s eyes on her, still probing. She ignored him and finished her meal. She felt disappointed; she had never before had the chance to speak at length with a Tongat, but instead of listening to him talk about their mysterious ways she had had to endure an interrogation. She hated lying, but she had no choice. The truth would likely make their journey uncomfortable if not severely unpleasant, and while Chass had not forbidden her to reveal his identity he had not given her permission either.

When she was done and about to leave the table, Zeven said, “Going back for more, I hope. That wasn’t enough to feed a hamster.”

“Thank you for your concern,” Miako said formally. “That is all I require.” She stood up and performed the rite of leave-taking. “It was nice to meet you, Nimmel. Ibsel and Yola.”

“I hope to hear you play again tomorrow,” the old man said.

Miako nodded in thanks. She could feel Zeven’s eyes boring into her back all the way out into the corridor. She went straight back to her cabin and collapsed on the bed. *How am I going to make it all the way to Nabitha?* she asked herself.

\* \* \*

She ran into Ibsel and Yola late that afternoon as they were walking their dog along the main deck. The dog was long-haired and lean with a sharp muzzle, black and tan and white, descended from working dogs but obviously pampered. When Miako came around



the curve of the superstructure, almost face to face with Yola, the couple smiled and their dog did none of the things you might expect a farm dog to do upon meeting a stranger, bark or raise its hackles or come to guard. Instead it bowed slightly. Miako let it sniff her hand, ruffled its head, said hello to the young couple, and went on. She looked back. They were holding hands. Yola's free hand held the other end of the dog's leash, and in Ibsel's swung a pail of water for sloshing away dog messes.

The encounter sent her scurrying back to her cabin, afraid she might run into Zeven too, but boredom drove her out again a few minutes later; that was why she had been walking the deck. She knocked on Chass's door.

He didn't answer, but a moment later the door opened. His hood was pulled forward, hiding his face.

"Come in," he said and swung the door wide to admit her.

Miako started to perform the rite of intrusion with purpose, but forced herself to stop. First, it was a lie, she really had no purpose, and second he had asked her not to do that. The Mediator closed the door and locked it, crossed the room and threw back his cloak.

"Please sit down," he said.

As in Miako's room, there was just one chair. She hesitated, wondering if it were appropriate to take his seat, but sat down when he squatted across from her with his back to the cabin wall.

"I had to lie about us at lunch," she said. She told him what had happened and what she'd said.

"Very good," he said.

"But it was a lie. Baba tells us not to lie."

"She never said any such thing."

Miako was about to argue with him and remembered who she was talking to. She thought back to her school days, and her parents teaching her the Ten Maxims. She had been taught that Baba didn't want her to lie, but it wasn't actually one of the Maxims—which, now that she thought about them, didn't really have much to do with moral issues at all.

"You're right," Miako said. "My parents told me that, but it's not one of the Ten."

"Baba understands human nature very well. She might as well tell you not to breathe. What do you think the Ten Maxims are about?"

"I haven't given them much thought since school, but I just realized they're not really the moral commands I thought they were. They're actually... um."

"They're rules for how to survive on a new planet."

"So if Baba was teaching us how to live here—where did we live before?"

"I don't know. She filled me with information, but not that. I know that she brought you here. I know that she made this world fertile and livable. I don't know what it was before, or where you came from."

Miako thought quietly for a while. "You told me of a Sevessa legend that a woman would lead the world into a new age. What will that be like?"

"I can't possibly answer that. It will be whatever people make it."

Miako thought for a while. "Maybe we'll live within Baba again, with the Unfallen, and know her completely this time. That would like... like bliss."

"The word you're looking for is 'paradise.'"

"What is that?"

“Dwelling with Baba in eternal happiness.”

“And that’s what I’m supposed to find?” She slumped in her chair. “I can barely face up to a Tongat shepherd. How can I lead the world to paradise?”

“By helping me find a way to speak to Baba,” he said gently. “One small step at a time.” He looked past her, out the window. “Go now. They’re serving dinner. Continue posing as a woman with a sick uncle on her way to visit her newlywed cousin. And face up to your Tongat shepherd.”

Miako went to the door. “Can I bring you anything?”

He laughed softly. “Thank you, but I don’t eat. Go.”

Despite his encouragement Miako found no courage waiting in the buffet line. Without making a conscious decision she found herself carrying a plate and a glass of beer back to her cabin. She didn’t leave it for the rest of the night.

### **Baba’s Ten Maxims**

Legend has it that Baba spoke these instructions to people as they left her after the Gentle Fall. Every culture interprets them in their own way, and places special emphasis on a different subset of the Maxims. And each culture also finds it convenient to ignore one or more of them.

1. Wage no war.
2. Worship no gods.
3. Help yourself.
4. Control your population.
5. Share with those who have less.
6. Learn your world.
7. Tend the plants and animals.
8. Find your proper place in the world.
9. Sing your own song.
10. Call me if you need me.

— — —

She awoke to alarming noises: rattling, thumping, and shouts. She got out of bed and peeked out her cabin window, to see the same barely-controlled bedlam she’d witnessed at their departure, but this time in reverse. So they had docked at Libbant. The sky was the mysterious, translucent blue it often achieves just before sunrise. Miako washed up, got dressed, and left her cabin. She took the wide stairs at the end of the corridor up to the highest deck to watch the unloading.

Libbant was a small town at the eastern-most bend of the Papessa. They were north of the Hutapi Hills and east of the Sessima Hills, with nothing but prairie and woodlands between the town and the Northern Ocean. The fields she could see stretching out to the horizon were already greening with wheat, soy, and barley.

The town itself was just a small cluster of a few decat structures, simple ceramic shells like her own house, if somewhat larger on average. There were no stone or wooden constructions to be seen. The river here was wide and placid, and she could see the broad curve as it changed its mind about heading east and turned south and west toward Littapo.

There were trees planted thickly between the houses, so when the laborers and passengers left the boat they vanished under a canopy of new leaves. Miako was standing at a point higher than the tallest building in town. It was a strange sensation, looking down on the trees and curved roofs, and she had the sudden intense urge to climb up on top of the forecastle to get an even better viewpoint. She looked around to see if she could find a crewman to ask permission, and saw Zeven leaning against the forecastle wall, smiling at her.

“Will you go into town?” he said.

She remembered what Chass had told her and forced herself to smile back. “Is there anything worth seeing?”

He walked over to her and leaned on the railing. “I doubt it. I’ve never been here before, but I’ve seen many similar towns. They’re usually nice places to live but they have no attractions for the tourist.”

“I think I’ll stay aboard then.”

“Breakfast is ready down below. Are you hungry?”

She hadn’t given food a thought until now. “Ravenous.”

“Would you care to join me? I missed you at dinner last night.”

“On one condition,” Miako said. He smiled expectantly. “I have some questions about Tongat. Will you allow me to pester you with them?”

He smiled even wider and offered her his arm.

\* \* \*

Breakfast offered smoked fish, three kinds of stewed fruit, toasted bread, and oatmeal. Miako took a small helping of fish, oatmeal, and apricots, and a teapot for two, and followed Zeven to a table in the stern where they could eat outdoors. It was a table for eight, but no one else was using the little patio—few people seemed to be up and about as yet—so they ate alone.

“What would you like to know?” he said when they were settled. His plate was piled with enough to feed Miako for three days, and he attacked it with enthusiasm.

She mixed cream and dried blueberries into the oatmeal and tasted it before answering.

“What do you do for a living?”

He laughed out loud and set down his spoon. “Well, I suppose I deserve that after the grilling I gave you yesterday.”

“I didn’t mean—” Her hands involuntarily began the rite of apology for unintentional rudeness but she forced herself to stop.

“No, you needn’t apologize. It’s not considered improper to ask a Tongat that.”

“Then why did you laugh?”

“Something about the way you blurted it out. And the sly look on your face when you did it. It just struck me as funny. No, please, don’t apologize for apologizing. Let me see if I can answer you.” He took a bite out of a thick piece of toast that left only half of it behind.

“I’m sorry, is that a difficult question?”

“Not difficult. Just... tricky. Tongat roles are more slippery than Felitta or Merta. You go to Mertaka and ask a man what he does for a living and he’ll stare at you as if you’d asked him where he wears his head. Felitta are a little more flexible, but we tend to take

that to an extreme.” He thought for a moment as he chewed a slice of fish. “I guess the closest I could come would be ‘troubleshooter.’”

“I’m sorry,” Miako said, “I don’t understand that.”

“I find things that are broken. Then I fix them or throw them out.”

She frowned. “Can you give me an example?”

“Well, this trip is an example. I told you we’re taking supplies to my sister Undalay.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Delivering supplies is part of it. Discovering why she needs supplies so soon is where the troubleshooting comes in. You know that many doctors in Felittaka are Tongat.”

“Yes.”

“Doctoring is one of our main trade goods. Our doctors earn credit for food, cloth, and assembled goods—things that are difficult for us to provide for ourselves. They also observe Felitta society. We Tongat are very curious about the other cultures.”

Miako sat back in her chair. “Your doctors are spies?”

He laughed again and took a sip of tea. “Miako, do you suppose your people have anything we would wish to steal?”

She blushed and looked down at her plate. Compared to Felitta the Tongat were wizards. Everyone knew they had technologies—some developed ages ago—that were far beyond anything the rest of Brezlun had ever seen. Tongat dribbled out innovations, one or two each century, to let the world adapt gracefully to change. Her father once told her that airplane travel first become common in his youth, but she had learned since that Tongat had invented airplanes over three thousand years ago. People said there were dreadful mechanisms locked away forever in the vaults of Geshamo, things so dangerous they would destabilize the balance of Brezlun society.

“We’re interested in everything,” Zeven said. “That’s the defining characteristic of Tongat, just as preservation is the defining characteristic of Felitta.”

“You think that’s our most important feature?”

“You don’t record the details of your history, and you cremate your dead and spread the ashes in the fields without marker or memorial—but you’re the most conservative culture on the planet. Preserving your way of life is the purpose of everything you do, including your willful forgetfulness. We believe that Felitta society has remained essentially unchanged for over eight thousand years, so I’d say your cultural strategy is working.”

“But history begins with the Gentle Fall. That was only forty-two centuries ago. How can you know...”

“Tongat records go back farther than that.”

Miako leaned over the table, her food forgotten. “What came before the Fall?” she said eagerly.

Zeven studied her face. Then he smiled and drank some more tea. “Perhaps one day I may tell you. But I still haven’t answered your question. Nabitha is a town of fewer than three thousand. Undalay used up a ten-year supply of certain drugs—not narcotics, antibiotics and such—in three years. When she requested more, it caught someone’s attention and they sent Hobbed and me to find out what’s going on.”

“Could she be selling them?”

“That is possible, but I really have no idea and I refuse to speculate without data. It’s my job to understand if something is broken, how it became so, and then to fix it or replace it.”

“You’re not a shepherd then.”

Zeven guffawed. “You thought we were shepherds?”

Miako blushed again. “Your clothing is very... rustic.”

“That is a choice, my dear musician, not an edict, and not due to poverty.” She finished the last of her fruit by way of hiding her embarrassment. “Now you know what I do for a living, as well as I can explain it. What else would you like to know?”

She looked up and couldn’t help smiling. “Well, *are* there Tongat shepherds?”

He laughed again. “Yes, there are. The southern part of Firpal Island is, as it happens, an excellent place to raise sheep and goats. Rocky and isolated, cold but not completely covered in glaciers. I’ve known many people who have gone there for a year or two to work out a particularly difficult problem without the distractions of life in Geshamo.”

“What’s Geshamo like?”

“It’s a sea town, like Littapo, but much smaller. There are more people living in Littapo than there are Tongat in the whole world, you know. Now let me see. I haven’t been back for a few years. Cold. It’s quite cold there, colder than Firpal though it’s farther south. It’s beautiful, in a rather austere way. The city lies on the long northern slope of Mount Kibbith, and it’s entirely built from granite quarried from the mountains. Like your Government Building, but the whole city is that way. Underground tunnels connect many of the larger buildings, so you don’t have to swim through the snow in winter to get around. The snow lies several yards deep most years.”

“Did you like it there?”

“I’m here.” After a moment it became clear that was all he had to say about that, and she smiled. “What else?” he said.

Miako hesitated. “Do you... do Tongat... ever make exceptions for people who made the wrong decision on choiceday?”

Zeven looked her directly in the eyes for a long time without speaking. He finally looked away to begin gathering up his plates and utensils. “It happens occasionally,” he said. “I think I can speak for our council and assure you that they would make an exception for you.”

\* \* \*

He left her after breakfast to attend to business, whose details he did not specify, and Miako didn’t see him again until late afternoon. The boat left dock an hour or so after breakfast service ended and they continued upstream past increasingly rocky shorelines. Shortly after lunching with Ibsel and Yola and two other couples she had not met before, she wandered out to the top deck and found a crowd forming. At first she thought happily that it might be a peffodia—she had brought her flute thinking to find one—but then she saw that the center of attention was a Sevessa woman.

She was tall, several inches taller than Miako, and just as thin, dressed in casual pants, a baggy shirt, and walking boots. Her hair was long, tied back in a complex braid that reached to her waist. Although she was chatting casually with a Felitta woman, something about her stance at the center of the circle told Miako that she was a storyteller about to entertain them with a tale.

In a few moments the teller touched her friend on the arm, and the Felitta woman joined the still-growing crowd. The teller waited a little while longer, then nodded at the audience, which quieted down. Several people close in sat down on the deck, but most continued standing.

The story began with the traditional opening, but the woman told it in the Common tongue, not in Felitta. As Miako listened to the tale she wondered how much of the allegory was based on fact. She resolved to ask Chass that evening, but soon she stopped thinking and just listened to the story. When it was over, the audience applauded appreciatively. The teller found her Felitta friend and they wandered off toward the back of the boat together. Miako couldn't help thinking that perhaps here was another Felitta who had made the wrong choice at kethrin.

### **The Sevessa's Tale**

This is a tale of the long ago in the land of Bricka.

Once there was a herd of caribou, stout-hearted, dependable, and stolid. They were hard-working creatures who loved their land, but they were enslaved to a band of crows. Like all crows these caribou-masters were bossy, proud, and very conscious of plumage.

Now Bricka, as everyone knows, was a land of magic, and one particular kind of magic allowed animals to change into other kinds of animals. The crows used this to their advantage, for they were so insufferable that they could never find enough mates. At night they would steal into the caribou huddles and pick out the best-looking young females. The evil crows would enchant these young beauties, turning them into crows themselves, and take them back to be their nestmates and their body slaves.

It took many generations for the anger of the noble, somewhat dim caribou to become aroused, but when at last they had had enough, they stormed into the nests of the crows and killed all the males. When the bloody deed was done the liberators invited their daughters to rejoin them, but the girl-crows discovered they no longer had a desire to be patient, herd-bound caribou. Nor did they want to keep the shapes of their former masters, so they turned themselves into raccoons—beautiful, clever, and just a little bit bad-tempered. The caribou shrugged stoically and went back home.

But things were not the same. With their herders gone the caribou were free to wander as they liked, and some found that they loved the wandering more than the herd. These turned into bears, occasionally sociable but always testy and ready for a fight. The bears lived in caves at the edges of Bricka and rarely interacted with the caribou any more.

And still other caribou were wild in another way: not to be alone or to fight at the drop of a pine needle, but to gather together and talk and try to work out the ways of the world. These could not accept the placid grazing life of the herd, but went off alone to think and found themselves becoming foxes—clever, resourceful, and full of themselves.

This structure lasted for more than an age. In each generation every tribe bore a few children that were out of step with their families. Bears that were really placid herd creatures, raccoons that could not stop thinking about the story behind the face of the world, foxes that wanted to fight instead of think. When these misfits came of age they were allowed to go to their true homes, and magically transformed into the shape that matched their souls.

In this way the creatures found a lasting balance, and fulfilled three of Baba's maxims: avoid war, find your place in the world, and sing your own song.

— — —

Still in search of a peffodia, Miako spotted the young violinist, Teepesh, walking rapidly toward the bow of the ship.

"Miako!" he said with some excitement. Miako blushed but immediately realized that she was not the cause of his agitation. "There's a martial arts demonstration up in the bow. Do you want to come watch?"

She smiled and followed him forward. The outdoor tables and other things had been cleared away from the area in front of the forecastle and two bare-chested men were performing stretching exercises in preparation for their demonstration. When they turned Miako gasped. It was Zeven and his unsociable friend Hobbed. They wore tight trunks and thin, grip-soled shoes and nothing else. It had been impossible to tell that under their rough-spun robes both men were in superb shape. Miako could not understand how someone could eat what she had seen Zeven eat and not have an ounce of fat on his body.

When the crowd was several people deep—more than twice as many as had listened to the Sevessa's tale—Zeven bowed slightly to the audience and spoke in a firm, commanding voice.

"We are required by the Tongat order we joined as young men to maintain ourselves in top physical condition until age takes away our strength." He turned from the waist and Hobbed tossed him a quarterstaff, which Zeven caught one-handed and twirled, still using only one hand, until it was a blur and its tip whistled. "Fortunately that has not happened yet." The audience laughed. "I'd like to ask you all to step back a little. We need some room for this discipline, which is called jasheeya, the singing staff."

Miako had never seen anything like the display Zeven and Hobbed put on over the next half hour. She'd had no idea the human body was capable of the contortions and exertions they exhibited. At one point Zeven was balanced on one foot on the railing, two stories above the river's churning surface, as Hobbed apparently tried his best to kill his friend. Zeven parried the attacker's staff, never even coming close to losing his balance, leaping lightly into the air occasionally when Hobbed tried to sweep him off his perch, always landing solidly and without wavering back on one foot on the narrow wooden rail. He ended that bout by leaping into a somersault that took him *above* Hobbed, parrying a blow while he was completely upside-down, landing behind him and disarming him with a rapid sweep of his staff. All the while the tips of their staves gave off a low tone that varied in pitch depending on their speed.

When they were finished the audience exploded into whistles and applause. The Tongat bowed, collected their robes, and headed below. Zeven caught Miako's eye and winked at her as he passed.

“Let’s go play,” Teepesh said.

“Yes, but not here,” Miako said. “We can’t follow that act.”

They found Pahbalan, the guitarist, and a few of the other musicians from yesterday’s peffodia, plus a few new ones who wanted to play with Miako and Teepesh. They set up as before in a corner of the second-deck forward lounge, and drew quite a crowd before they began. Miako played well but not as she had the first time. She found she couldn’t concentrate on music for the image floating through her head: Zeven flying through the air, upside down and nearly naked.

\* \* \*

Miako looked for Zeven at dinnertime but didn’t see him. She ate in a corner of the dining room with two women she hadn’t met yet, who were so involved in their own conversation about pig farming that they scarcely acknowledged her. A good portion of their debate centered on whether there was any numerological significance to the fact that a sow’s gestation period was almost exactly one hundred days.

She had always been baffled by her people’s fascination with tens: the year was thirty-two weeks of ten days, each composed of twenty-five hours of one hundred minutes, each minute containing one hundred seconds. A circle was said to contain one hundred degrees. Ten-year anniversaries were always special; choiceday fell on one’s twentieth birthday. The common assumption was that it derived from the ten fingers of the hand, but Miako thought that was a feeble explanation for the obsession some people displayed with numbers.

She knew for a fact that the average gestation for a sow was one hundred seven days. And the year was actually 320.3 days long. How far were people willing to stretch the facts to fit a theory of numbers?

She wandered out onto the lower aft deck when she was done. It was getting dark, and there was no one else in this little open space. The meaningless noise of the thrumming engines and the chuffing paddle wheels were pleasant after the painful, idiotic dinner conversation.

“Hiding?” someone said. She looked around, then looked up. Zeven was leaning on the railing of the stepped-back deck above her, smiling.

“Digesting,” Miako said.

“Are you almost done? There’s a dance going on in the forward salon. Do you like to dance?”

She smiled and didn’t hesitate. “I’ll meet you there.”

The main deck lounge was crammed with twirling people. A group of musicians stuffed into the forward bay was belting out a reel. The sound was dominated by violins and drums. Zeven came in behind her and touched her shoulder. They spent a moment negotiating styles—Felitta dancing was primarily done in couples while Tongat tended to favor more complex and larger groups. Since no one else was doing Tongat-style quadrilles, Zeven took her hands and led her onto the floor in the traditional skip-step.

He was an excellent leader, guiding her expertly around the edges of the room. When the song ended the crowd whistled and applauded and cried for another. Zeven smiled at her and she nodded, and they danced again. This time he kept one hand on her shoulder and one behind his back in the ancient northern Felitta style called teraband. As the music faded away they happened to be near the front of the room, and Teepesh the violinist called out.



“There’s Miako!” he said. “Miako, come play a pavane.”

“I don’t have my flute,” she said.

“We’ll wait,” several of the musicians said in unison. There were a few supporting cheers from the dancers, so Miako flashed an apologetic smile at Zeven and ran out of the hall. It took only a few minutes to dash up to her room and grab her flute case. Several people touched her gently as she passed through the crowd to reach the front. In another moment she was ready.

“A pavane?” she said. The crowd agreed enthusiastically. She turned to the other musicians. “Do you know Kennet’s Pavane?” Most of them did, so she nodded to Teepesh, who led them into the soft, slow, elegant rhythm. When the other two violins and the drummer had built a complex counterpoint, Miako joined in, spinning a web of breathy notes that wound around the stately melody like twining ivy. She had no idea how long they played, but from the corner of her eye she saw couples joining and leaving the dance, spinning together in the complex forms of the traditional Felitta steps. It might have gone on much longer, but a disturbance arose from one side and someone called out that the boat was coming into Torbada, their second stop. The band wound down and the dancers applauded and began to disperse.

“I’m getting off here,” Teepesh said without looking at her.

Miako touched his arm and leaned in to kiss him on the cheek. He was barely taller than she was. “It’s been a pleasure playing with you. You’re very gifted.”

Now he looked at her, the first time their eyes had truly met in the two days they’d known each other. “That’s what I’ve been told. But now I know what gifted really is.”

She blushed and performed the rite of sad farewell. He returned it, with a grace note for missed opportunity. When he had finished, he clumsily grabbed her free hand, squeezed it, and dashed out of the room.

“He likes you,” Zeven said.

“I like him, too.” Miako busied herself cleaning and stowing her flute.

“Will you go ashore?”

“No, I think I’m done for the day.”

Zeven nodded. “Thank you for the dances. Your playing is unbelievable.”

Miako looked up and smiled. He smiled back, tipped his head, and walked out.

\* \* \*

She walked slowly up the stairs and back to her cabin, ignoring the bustle of people getting ready to disembark. She was about to go into her own room, but on a whim turned and knocked on Chass’s door. He opened it for her and stood aside to let her in.

When she’d been sitting without speaking for long moments, he said, “You’ve had a busy day.”

She looked up at him. “I thought you stayed in here all day.”

“I venture out occasionally. I know how to move among you without being noticed.”

Miako frowned. “You stand out in any crowd. You’re so tall.”

“Trees are also tall, and people can walk beside a wood and never notice them.”

Miako let it go. “There was a storyteller this afternoon.”

“Vivitha. I’ve heard her tell before.”

“She’s an excellent orator. It was a strange story, though.”

“Tell me.” Miako repeated the gist of the story about the caribou, the crows that became raccoons, the bears, and the foxes. “Yes, I’ve heard variants of that tale. Do you understand it?”

“It’s an origin myth. I think I may have heard it before, when I was young.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. I first heard a tale quite like it shortly after the Fall.”

Miako looked at him carefully, examining his smooth, flesh-colored skin unblemished by hair; his unfinished facial features, the minimal lips and ears, thin nose with no nostrils. It was incredible that she felt so at ease with him that she could study him so. She had no idea when this had happened; yesterday morning she had barely been able to speak to him, and they had seen each other for only a few hours since. Now she was sitting comfortably in the cabin of a four thousand year-old machine sent to Brezlun by God, chatting about children’s stories.

“Is it true?”

“The story? I assume you don’t mean literally—I’ve never thought of you as a caribou.” She smiled. “As an explanation for the stability of Brezlun cultures, it makes sense, but I don’t know whether it’s true. My memories begin a few days before the Fall, and I have no information about your people before that.”

“Even so, your life...” She paused.

“An acceptable term,” he said.

“Your life encompasses the entire history of Brezlun. You must have formed an opinion on where we came from.”

He shifted his position and leaned back against the cabin door. Miako wondered in amazement if he were actually uncomfortable with the topic.

“The other Mediators and I discussed it often. There are patterns—clues, if you will. It’s very clear that, although Brezlun has a stable ecology, it is an impoverished one. It’s too simple to be natural. All the animals and plants that you know are related to humans at a cellular level. There is nothing on this world not related to you. Yet it’s equally clear that you did not evolve here.”

“Evolve? What do you mean?”

“Plants and animals can change over long periods of time.” He held up a hand. “I don’t mean four thousand years, which only seems long to you since, if you’re lucky, you may live to be eighty. I’ve been observing this planet and its people since you first arrived, and there has been no significant change in any organism larger than a microbe. And there are no records in the rocks of any life forms that preceded you. I don’t know your history but I know a lot about biology, and none of the life on this planet originated here. Therefore you—and every other living thing—must have come from another place, a place with a much more diverse ecosystem, and a deep past.”

“Where?”

“I have no idea.”

Miako thought about a place that could make her world seem simple—her world with its decats of species of large animals and hundreds of trees, shrubs, and flowers. It had taken her years just to learn the plants and animals that lived around her parents’ farm. What would it be like to live in a teeming, complex place with ten times as much?

“It’s getting late,” Chass said, unfolding smoothly from his crouch. “You should get some sleep. We dock at Nabitha just after lunch tomorrow.”

Miako stood up and waited for him to step aside. "Good night," she said, still lost in thought.

"Sleep well," he told her, and shut the door behind her.

\* \* \*

Breakfast with Zeven, Hobbed, Ibsel and Yola was quiet. The couple were going on for several more days, but the other three would be disembarking in a few hours. Hobbed said nothing; Miako had not heard him speak a word since she'd met him. Zeven seemed content to sit beside Miako and wolf down a large plate of ham, pickled eggs, and toast. He and Hobbed went off together after breakfast as usual, with only a polite nod at the others.

Miako spent the time she had left on the *Tiggleday* wandering the decks. She stayed away from the lower machine areas but explored all the other public spaces, and finally ended up leaning on the railing watching the riverbanks glide by. The cliffs that had bordered the Papessa River at Littapo were long gone. In the night they would have passed more, as they went through the Sessima Hills, but here the river was wide and placid, the land flat and fertile. On the south side of the river were bright spring fields, mostly wild but punctuated by farmland; but on the north side a dense wood marched right down to the water's edge.

After a while the ratio of farmland to meadows increased, and then they came around a bend of the river and she could see the town. It was larger than the first two the boat had visited, but still not much more than a village. Miako turned to go down to her cabin to collect her things and saw Zeven leaning against the wall of the forecastle, just as he had yesterday. She had no idea how long he had stood there watching her silently.

"Almost time," he said.

"Zeven... It was a pleasure getting to know you."

"Perhaps we'll see each other in town. Oh—" He interrupted the start of a polite demurral. "That's right, you'll probably spend your entire visit at your cousin's farm." He stood up and walked over to her. She felt her body simultaneously trying to shrink away and lean forward. "I wish you luck with your... visit. I think we may meet again one day."

He leaned down and kissed her lightly on the lips, meanwhile pressing something small and hard into her right hand. When he pulled away he was smiling. He raised his eyebrows, nodded his head, and walked away with a swagger like nothing she had ever seen in a Felitta. Miako felt a sharp pang of disappointment that was tempered with a grain of relief. When he had vanished around the curve of the deck, she looked at the thing he'd put into her hand. It was a small figure of a naked man, carved from horn or perhaps cast in lustrous ceramic. She thought at first that he was dancing, but when she studied it more closely she realized he was standing in one of the poses from Zeven's martial arts demonstration, with one knee bent and raised and his hands crossed before his chest. It was exquisite, incredibly detailed, embarrassing, and provocative. Miako tucked it a pocket and went below.

She gathered her things and waited in Chass's cabin; they did not speak. When the boatswain called that the board was down, she and Chass walked together down the stairs to the main deck and across the gangplank onto dry land.

## Nabitha

At first glance she would have thought she was back in Shusha, the town near her father's farm. Shusha and Nabitha were at nearly the same latitude, both built on the west bank of a great river, with the same oaks and elms surrounding the fields. The people looked exactly the same: mostly farmers with serious expressions, wearing long-sleeved shirts tucked into straight-legged trousers.

The small differences crept up on her slowly. Nabitha was about twice the size of Shusha, probably nearly three thousand people, so the docks were busier than she'd ever seen them at home. There was a clock tower in the center of town, several blocks in from the river, something Shusha had wanted for generations but could not afford. The fields she could see at the edge of town were mostly in soybeans; at home they would be predominantly barley.

It was a clear, crisp day, with not a trace of cloud in the sky.

"We need a carriage," Chass said.

"I'll find one," Miako said.

"I'll wait outside that tavern across the way. Give me your bag."

She handed him her heavy backpack and he carried it in one hand as if it contained nothing more than a sandwich and an apple.

Longshoremen hauled goods on and off the boat, making neat new stacks on shore and tearing down old ones. Carts drove up and down the dockside road, and decats of people bustled back and forth. Although this was chaos compared to her home town, it was like a summer afternoon's nap next to the bedlam she'd experienced at the Littapo docks two days ago. She spotted a livery stable a ways down the road and walked out into the flow of traffic.

The stable was constructed of several standard ceramic modules cemented together. They were eccentric ellipsoids, which would have been slightly more expensive than the sphere that formed the shell of her house, but not by much. A really prosperous business would have a custom-blown shell, as many of the warehouses in Littapo had, but she would have been surprised to find one here.

A middle-aged man leaned on the wall of the stable. Miako might have thought he was tall before meeting Chass; now he seemed perfectly normal, if somewhat unusually beefy. He wore a floppy hat that had probably once been white but was now a grimy gray, and homespun trousers topped with a loose, very short-sleeved shirt that showed off his muscular arms.

"Afternoon, Miss," he said politely, weaving his arms in the rite of solicitation for useful services. "You looking for a trap?"

Miako replied with the rite of acceptance of a business offer. "I need to hire a carriage for two, plus a driver," she said.

"Yes, Miss, we can help you with that. Where to?"

"I don't know yet."

The stableman grinned and pushed himself off the wall. "And how long will you be off exploring the unknown?"

"I don't know that either."

"Well, now, this is going to be awkward when it comes time to tell your driver where to go and when you'll be back."

Miako blushed, but felt resolution straighten her back. "Give me a driver who doesn't mind a bit of mystery in his life," she said.

The stableman guffawed and slapped his thigh. "I have just the man for you." He turned and yelled into the stable, "Daven!"

A moment later a young man walked briskly out into the sun. He was of medium height, very thin, perhaps a year away from his choiceday. He wore his hair short, which was unfortunate; his sharp features could have benefitted from a longer style.

"Daven Bertamen, this is..."

"Miako Tomaza Seeker."

"Ah, a Miss Seeker, is it?" He put a huge hand on the boy's shoulder. "This young lady wants to hire a carriage but she doesn't know where she's going or when she'll be back. A Seeker indeed. Now Miss, this boy of mine is a first-rate driver, but that doesn't matter because next summer he'll be leaving us to go live with the ice wizards. Isn't that right, my boy?"

Daven didn't acknowledge the speech. He kept his eyes on Miako's face.

"So," Bertam continued, "as long as you have him back before then, I think everything will be fine." He clapped Daven on the back. "Gather some things in case the young lady decides to stay at her mystery destination overnight. Take the brown and the number two carriage."

Daven nodded and walked back the way he'd come.

"Sooner or later his tongue will come unglued from the roof of his mouth," Bertam said. "Now, let's discuss the fee."

After some haggling, they agreed that a reasonable compromise between one afternoon and twenty weeks was three days, with the excess refunded if they returned before then. They both performed the rite of business concluded. "And you feed him," Bertam said as she counted out the coins.

"Of course," she replied.

"Well, Miss, you know how young men are. Voracious appetites. I got the better end of that deal, I think."

"Yes. Unless we feed him the horse."

He guffawed again and bowed. "Very good, Miss Seeker. Daven!"

It was several minutes before a four-wheeled sprung carriage with a folded-back top emerged from the stable. It was drawn by a handsome solid brown mare with a silky black mane. The horse had obviously been well cared-for, and the carriage looked in top condition. Daven tied the reins and hopped down to help Miako up into the back.

"Now Daven," the boy's father said. "Take good care of our mysterious Miss Seeker, and try not to talk her ears off." He resumed his post leaning against the side of the stable, chuckling to himself as he watched them.

"Where to, Miss?" Daven said evenly. His voice was somewhat deeper than she had expected.

"Please call me Miako. Go left, toward the tavern."

Daven nodded to his father—who waved at them both, still chuckling—and flicked the reins, merging effortlessly into the light traffic on the dirt street.

When they'd reached the tavern, Miako said, "Stop here, please." Daven hauled up on the reins. Chass stood up from the bench where he'd been waiting and loaded Miako's bag into the carriage before climbing aboard. Daven watched this procedure with no outward reaction, but somehow Miako got the feeling that Chass alarmed him.

When the Mediator was settled, Daven looked at them expectantly.

"Do you know the Pippil Beekeeper farm?" Chass said. Daven startled at his voice, but nodded. "Take us there, please." Daven nodded again and pulled back out into traffic.

Miako told him the terms of the hire and Chass agreed that they were reasonable. And that was the last conversation any of them initiated for over an hour.

\* \* \*

Once they left town, the landscape got a little monotonous, only the occasional field of wheat or maize punctuating the norm. Soybeans were the primary crop of the region, and the low plants looked like nothing more than neat rows of low weeds at this stage of spring. The ground was evidently not rocky in this part of the country, because the fields were separated by stands of poplar or oak, not by stone walls. The farmhouses were the same inconsistent jumble she remembered from home: some were ceramic shells in any shade of pastel, with later additions budding off like the progeny of a one-celled animal. Others were ancient framed wooden structures, rising proudly and stubbornly over their lands; these had to have been remodeled and rebuilt many times over the thousands of years these farms had been handed down from one man to another.

It had been over three millennia since Tongat had offered the secrets of forging ceramics to Sevessa. Since then it had become Sevessaka's principal export, which of course they traded for female infants in the primal rite known as vessin. Since then most common buildings and many conveyances were constructed of standard or custom-formed ceramic shells, which were lightweight, thin, nearly indestructible, and never needed maintenance. When a building was constructed of other materials, such as Government Building in Littapo or these noble farmhouses, it was usually either because they were very old or there was some patriotic reason not to use the more affordable and practical ceramic alternative.

They passed several horse- or ox-drawn carts on the carefully-maintained turf road. The drivers all seemed to know Daven and called out heartily to him. His response was usually a polite nod, occasionally a wave, and the other people invariably laughed at this. Apparently the boy's taciturn manner was well-known and the subject of good-natured humor.

Miako leaned forward and said, "So you plan to take kethrin to Tongat next year?" Daven only tilted his head. "I met several Tongat on the boat ride up from Littapo."

The boy's arms jerked and the horse nearly took them off the road. "Really?" he said when he got them back on the lane. "What were they like?"

Miako climbed onto the rear-facing seat and then up over the driver's seat back to sit beside him.

"One of them never said a word the entire trip," she began. "But the other was a piper and very talkative. You wouldn't believe how much he could eat! Well, maybe you could."

He asked for more details and she told him what she could: the jasheeya demonstration, the confidence bordering on arrogance, Hobbed's constant frown and Zeven's ready smile, but she left out the flirting.

It became clear that it was not a lack of personality that had made him so quiet, but the natural defenses of someone who had been born in the wrong place and had been teased over his differences since he was small. Miako admired his earnestness, his eager hunt for every scrap of information she could remember, and regretted—for both their sakes—that she had not spent more time with Zeven aboard the *Tiggleday*. She was glad he had only another year before he could take his place in his real home.

“There it is,” he said at last, when they were about three hours out from Nabitha. It was one of the old rambling wooden farmhouses, painted bright white with a dark green roof that was probably interlocking ceramic shingles.

As they started up the drive Miako saw a pasture with three horses busily cropping. The fences were in good repair, the fields—half soybeans and half alfalfa—looked healthy, and in general everything was in excellent condition. Like almost all of the farms they had passed on the drive from Nabitha, the Beekeeper farm seemed prosperous and well-run.

They were met halfway up the drive by a tousle-haired, barefoot boy of eight or nine, who startled Miako when he leaped out from the field on their right and then ran alongside the carriage without saying a word, simply staring up at the strangers. The boy ran with the unstudied grace of a fawn. When they arrived at the house he stood some ways apart, not breathing hard though he’d just kept pace with the mare for a quarter of a mile.

A stout woman stood up from where she’d been kneeling in the vegetable garden close to the house and wiped her hands on a heavy apron. Chickens chased each other around the yard, squawking, before disappearing behind the corner of the house.

“Good day,” the woman said.

Daven helped Miako down from the driver’s bench. Miako bowed and performed the rite of intrusion with purpose. The woman responded with the brief rite of welcoming strangers. By the time she was finished, Chass had climbed down; he nodded respectfully.

“I’m Miako Tomaza Seeker,” she said. “This is my uncle Chass Loudspeaker. We would like to speak to your frenik, if he is unoccupied and willing to speak to visitors.”

The woman laughed. “Willing? Try to get him to shut up.” She gave a brief bow. “I’m Lamia Spicer. This is my son, Tikker.”

Miako smiled. “My mother is a Spicer. Pepita Francha.”

“Well, then,” Lamia said, smiling back, “you are doubly welcome. Where does she live?”

“Near Shusha, on the Whip River.”

“I’ve never been that far west. Come, let’s find Ron.”

She led them farther down the drive, alongside and then behind the house to a grassy square surrounded by outbuildings. There was a modest stable, a large barn, and several small structures that might have been storage sheds or smithies. Lamia gestured for them to follow her to one of these. It was perhaps twenty feet wide and not more than ten deep, raised off the ground so there were steps leading up to its door, and painted the same brilliant white as the house, with the same green shingles which Miako could now see were definitely ceramic—permanent, fireproof, and maintenance-free. Lamia knocked on the doorframe without climbing the steps and called out, “Ron!”

They could hear steps inside, then the door opened outward. An old man with a thick shock of white hair looked down at them, blinking in the sunlight. When he realized that his visitors were strangers, his face lit up.

“Ron Haymaker, meet Chass Loudspeaker and Miako Seeker. Apparently today she is seeking *you*.”

Miako repeated her rite of greeting and Ron waved his arms in reply, with a grace note for welcome interruption.

“Thank you for your assistance,” she said to Lamia.

“Not at all. When he’s talked you dry, come into the house for some refreshment.” Miako started up the stairs. “Tikker,” Lamia said. Miako turned and saw the boy trying to sneak in behind her. He hung his head and stomped down the stairs. Chass waited for him to stalk away before going up and entering himself.

The shed’s interior was dim, lit only by two electric fixtures. There were no windows. Deep shelves and heavy chests lined the walls, which looked lumpy and strange. When Miako looked closer she could see that they were covered with more of the ceramic shingles used on the roof. Fireproof.

“Welcome, welcome,” the old man said. “It’s so seldom I get any visitors at all, let alone strangers. Most of my old friends are dead now, and my beloved wife, too. My successors, Pippil and Lamia, are very nice people but I’ve heard everything they have to say ten times over since I sold them the farm seven years ago. Come in, make yourselves comfortable. There’s a couch way over there if you’d like to sit. Now—to what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit?”

“I understand,” Chass said, “that you are the caretaker for the relics of Felittaka.”

Ron frowned at the hooded man and nodded. “You sound a bit hoarse, my friend. Are you well? Is there anything I can get you?”

Chass threw back his hood and the man gasped. He stumbled back two steps, then stepped out the rite of welcoming a Mediator. Miako noticed that though his hands were shaking, he did a better job of it than she had. Chass waited through the long dance with a half-formed expression that Miako had seen before; she was beginning to think it was not just patience but amused tolerance.

“Sir,” the old frenik said intently, “I thank Baba I lived long enough to see this day. To meet a Mediator at last—my lifelong prayers are answered!”

“Prayers; that is precisely what this visit concerns,” Chass said. “I am here to inspect the relics that you and your predecessors have protected these long centuries.”

“Everything I have is yours for the asking,” he said. “You need look no further: this is the reliquary.”

“This?” Miako said in astonishment. “This shack is where you store Baba’s relics?”

Chass looked at her with that expression again. “Remember what I told you about your people? Conservative yet willfully forgetful. You don’t keep records of the past, except for names and milestone dates. And you store the shards of your ancestors’ technology in a shed on a small farm three hours from a puny town in the middle of the wilderness.”

“They have been here for ages, sir,” Ron said. “The keepers of this farm have tended them, catalogued them, and handed them down from frenik to frenik for three thousand years, waiting for someone to care enough to ask about them. Praise Baba that it should happen during my stewardship!”



"I'm happy to hear that you've catalogued them," Chass said. "Perhaps that will expedite things. Have you ever seen anything like this?" He pulled the miniature radio-telephone from his robes and showed it to the frenik.

Miako thought the old man's heart had stopped. His face went white and he reached out a hand that trembled as if he had a nervous system disorder. It must have been a shock. He would have bought the farm as a young man, worked the land for forty or fifty years, and retired to serve as advisor and counsellor—frenik—to the next young farmer, Pippil Beekeeper, who in his turn bought the farm for a moderate fee in exchange for lifelong support of his predecessor and his wife. For the last seven years Ron had likely spent most of his waking hours in this shed, hovering over the fragments of ancient technology; inspecting, sorting, and wondering. To meet a Mediator and see a new relic both on the same day must be overwhelming.

"May I touch it?" the old man whispered.

"Inspect it closely," Chass said.

He did that for several minutes, quickly discovering that it opened and examining it thoroughly inside and out. Finally, and reluctantly, he handed it back.

"I'm sorry. There is nothing like that in our collection."

Miako's heart sank, but Chass didn't react. He put the communicator away again.

"A pity. I had hoped you might have an intact unit. However, it's very possible that you have components that would be of use. May I inspect your catalogue, or the relics themselves?"

"It would be an honor, sir."

Ron walked back to a table in the rear of the shed, near the couch he had mentioned, and pulled a sheaf of papers from a drawer. He sat at the table and began reading the inventory aloud, detailed descriptions of incomprehensible little bits of metal and other substances, along with fanciful guesses as to their purpose. After ten minutes of this Miako was getting restless. Chass looked up.

"Miako, we will not likely finish this today. It's nearly dusk. Would you tell the driver that we will need him for four more days, and make arrangements with the farmer's wife for us to purchase lodging for one night?"

"Certainly," she said, and gratefully went back out into the quad.

The young boy, Tikker, attempted to follow her stealthily as she walked back to the house, but he was as cunning as a newborn calf. She tracked him by the soft padding of his bare feet as he ran from tree to shrub, trying to follow her without being seen.

At the back door of the farmhouse she rang the little golden bell hanging on its wire. Lamia came to the door and opened it, smiling.

"I see you've escaped," she said.

Miako smiled back. "My uncle's business with Ron will take longer than we thought. He has asked me to inquire if you could put us up for a night. We will happily pay you for meals and lodging for ourselves and our driver."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lamia said. Her round face crinkled as if Miako had said the most outlandish thing she'd heard in years. "You'll stay as our guests, you, your uncle, and Daven too. His mother would never speak to me again if I didn't feed him and give him a bed for the night. And we don't need your money, so don't mention that again." She looked Miako up and down. "You look like you could use a good meal, you emaciated little thing. Dinner's in two hours. You'll hear the bell."

“Thank you very much,” Miako said, performing the rite of unexpected kindness. Lamia laughed and bowed and spun her hands in the rite of acknowledgment. “I imagine you’d like to use the washroom after your long ride. It’s just inside here.” She held the door open.

Miako walked into a large kitchen, with high ceilings, worn wooden floors, and a very old-fashioned cook stove and refrigerator. Tall glass-fronted cabinets dominated two walls, and a huge work table with a wooden surface that was nearly a foot thick took up much of the center of the room. Everything was neat and tidy, except one corner of the table that was dusted with flour where round loaves of dark bread were rising.

Lamia showed her the washroom, and Miako gratefully used the facilities. When she came out, the farm wife was back in the kitchen, stirring something in a large cast-iron pot; it smelled deliciously of onions, cumin, cinnamon, and something savory.

“Would you mind if I went for a walk?” she said. “I’m not used to such long rides.”

“Of course not. Tikker will probably follow you, but don’t mind him. There’s a creek and a pretty grove just behind the barn.”

She thanked her and went outside to find Daven. He was sitting under a walnut tree at one corner of the quad, his back to the trunk and a book in his hands.

Miako told him they would be staying there overnight, that he would be a guest of Pippil and Lamia, and that he would be needed for perhaps half a week longer. He nodded and looked up at her expectantly.

“I’m going for a walk,” she said. “Would you like to come along? We can talk about Tongat some more.”

He flowed up off the ground in a fluid motion that Miako would not have thought him capable of. He tucked his book into the back pocket of his pants and his hands into the front pockets. They started walking toward the barn.

“What are you reading?”

“Analytic geometry.”

“Oh. I was only average at mathematics. Too much of a dreamer, I think. I preferred music.”

“Music is mathematical.”

“Only theoretically. I don’t think when I play, I just feel.”

Tikker appeared out of nowhere and walked alongside Daven, imitating his slouch with his own hands in his pockets. Daven swiped at him but the boy just danced aside and smiled, and continued mimicking him. They went through the barn and its cloud of smells—hay, timber, oil, and manure—and came back out into the sunshine near a winding creek that was running high. On the other bank were ranks of beehives, twenty or more, and the soothing hum of the clouds of industrious bees.

“Is this where the farm gets its water?” Miako asked Tikker. The boy nodded and pointed to a windmill not far away, which evidently powered a pump for the irrigation. The two boys, one small and one tall, followed Miako toward a clump of trees off to their left. They were nearly there before Daven found the nerve to start asking her more questions about Tongat. Tikker’s eyes widened and he skipped along beside them, drinking in every word.

\* \* \*

They were half a mile from the farmhouse when the heavy bell rang to call them for dinner. Tikker took off at a run, and Miako—who had been punishing herself for several

weeks by not running—gave in to the impulse and raced him back. In a few seconds she had overtaken the boy and paced him without effort. Then she looked to her left and saw that Daven was pacing *her*. That was too much to bear, so she put everything she had into it. But he was nineteen, with longer legs, and she was thirty, and she had to be content with coming in only ten paces behind him.

“You’re very good,” Daven said between gasps.

Lamia was standing at the kitchen door frowning down at them. “Wash up,” she said sternly, and turned away so they couldn’t see her smile.

The three runners took turns in the washroom. The boys insisted that Miako go first.

Afterwards she wandered out into the sitting room and examined the farm’s shrine, which rested on a small, sturdy, high table in one corner of the room. It was an interesting composition, containing a decat of fascinating objects that included a twisted, sharp piece of shiny metal that she suspected had come from Ron’s reliquary and a small oil painting on ceramic that she at first thought was abstract but quickly realized was not. It was a stylized image of a solitary woman, standing on the edge of a craggy cliff overlooking a wild sea, during a thunderstorm. The woman’s arms were raised level with her shoulders and her head was thrown back so her long hair trailed down onto the ground. A lightning bolt seemed about to strike her. It was very good, but not Felitta—perhaps Sevessa; they were much more interested in paintings. Felitta tended toward sculpture and other three-dimensional art forms.

“That’s Ravi at Blast Bay,” someone said behind her. Miako turned; it was Ron. He was staring at the painting, frowning slightly.

“I don’t know the story.”

“Queen of Sevessaka, ages ago. She was standing on the cliff during the worst storm in centuries, watching her fleet being mashed to splinters. Twenty Sevessa ships were lost, and two towns were erased by floods—they never even found any bodies. There was a flagship of Sevessa out in the bay when the storm hit, and the last Sevessa Mediator was standing in the bow. No one knows what had happened to the other one, Podd; he’d gone missing centuries earlier. Kepp was sailing with a diplomatic mission to... hmm. To here, I think. Vessin negotiations, probably.”

He stepped closer and peered at the painting.

“The tale goes that he lost his grip and was flung overboard, and he sank like a stone. Ravi knew the moment it happened, they say. She let out a wail that turned her courtiers’ blood to ice. Ten of her attendants died just from the sound of her grief. She flung her head back and a bolt of lightning struck her, but it didn’t kill her. No one knows if it was the lightning or the loss of their Mediator that drove her mad; maybe both. Before anyone could make a move, Ravi stepped right off the cliff. She fell a thousand feet and was lost in the storm surge. Never found *her* body, either. They say she swam down and found the Mediator at the bottom of the bay, and they’re still there today, holding court. The flagship survived, and her daughter became queen, which was quite unusual. Life went on.”

Miako stared at the painting and thought she could see the despair, the sadness, and the madness in the twisted figure. It was unaccountably appealing.

“Dinner’s on,” Lamia called from the dining room.

\* \* \*

“Where’s your uncle?” she said as everyone was gathering.

“Chass has special dietary requirements,” Ron said quickly.

“He’s been very ill lately,” Miako said simultaneously. She paused. “And therefore he can’t eat regular food.”

“Have him bring his special food in here,” Lamia suggested.

Miako performed the rite of apology for inability to control an offensive situation. Lamia accepted gracefully and invited everyone to sit.

They nearly filled the dining room, which was not especially large. One wall was entirely taken up by a massive, built-in cherry-wood cabinet with glass doors through which she could see plates, cups, and glass goblets; small statues made of wood, stone, metal, and ceramic; service items, and more she could not immediately identify. The table was round, made from the same wood, and only seated seven. Lamia sat in the chair nearest the kitchen, with Tikker to her left. Ron was pulling out the chair next to Tikker, and Daven had already seated himself across from Lamia, so Miako took the seat between them.

Everyone was settled and waiting. Miako was beginning to wonder whether there was some rite she didn’t know about that required the head of the family to delay his appearance, when the kitchen door slammed open. She heard heavy footsteps and a scrabbling sound that had to be dogs skittering on the wooden kitchen floor.

Seconds later two matching farm dogs burst into the room, circling the table in opposite directions. They were nothing like the sheepdog the farmers on the *Tiggleday* had had; these were more like the dogs she had grown up with—husky, long-legged, with thick coats and long heads. They were solid black with white markings around the forehead and muzzle. As the dogs passed behind her they snuffled at her feet and legs, but barely slowed down to do it.

“Station,” a man said in a commanding voice. One dog immediately settled in the doorway to the kitchen and the other did the same in the doorway to the sitting room.

Pippil Beekeeper did not match his voice or the sound of his footsteps. He was a slight, small man, with overlarge hands and thin, muscular arms. He was well on the way to baldness, though he looked to be no more than thirty years old. He performed the right of apology for delay and everyone but Tikker replied with the acceptance.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” he said. “The bay wouldn’t come in from the field. I had to corner her to get the harness on.” He performed the rite of first meeting to Miako. “Pippil,” he said.

“Miako.”

“It’s an honor. Daven, boy, how are you? You look ten inches taller than the last time I saw you.” He took his seat to Lamia’s right and when everyone had performed the rite of thanks for the coming meal, reached for the bread. “Ron, you must be out of your mind with happiness. Guests who actually *want* to see your collection and they’re staying overnight!”

“I am,” Ron said. “It’s a very special occasion.” Miako looked at him and he winked conspiratorially.

Dinner was quite good: solid Felitta food, a stew with lots of vegetables and lots of spice. The bread was a dark, dense, seeded, multi-grain loaf that had a hint of honey. With a smear of sweet butter it almost made a meal in itself.

“Where’s our other guest?” Pippil said when everyone was digging in.

“Indisposed,” his wife said.

“He’s resting out in the shed,” Ron explained. Miako suspected that he was actually continuing his research. From the look of Ron’s thick stack of papers, his inventory of relics must number in the thousands. It would take even a Mediator a while to get through that.

“Eat more,” Lamia said three times during the meal, and Miako took a tiny bit more stew or a few more beans. She apologized each time, assuring everyone that the food was delicious but that she had never had a large appetite. In the end she ate slightly more than normal, but not much, and she politely but firmly declined the delicious-looking apple layer crumble, to Lamia’s disappointment and Tikker’s disbelief.

Miako offered to help clean up after they were done, but Lamia insisted she go out for another walk. Miako dug out a warmer tunic from her backpack, because the night was turning chill, and walked outside. The Moon was not up yet and the stars were bright. The Mother’s Veil lay draped across the heavens, clear as a road through a soybean field.

She thought about checking in with Chass, but Daven and Pippil had followed her out. “Let’s walk down the lane,” Pippil said.

She half-expected Tikker to follow them, but didn’t hear or see him and supposed that his mother had given him chores after dinner. They walked down the long drive to the lane and turned right, away from town. Miako strained but she could not see any sign of the lights of Nabitha, ten miles or so away. There was just enough light to distinguish road from ditch, and they stayed in the center of the lane, walking quietly for several minutes.

“You’d think these fields went on forever, wouldn’t you?” Pippil said. “But the cultivated area of the valley is only a few miles wide. This road ends at the Hoglifter farm just six miles on.”

“It’s the same where I grew up, near Shusha,” Miako said. “The fields follow the fertile soil out from the town for a few miles, and beyond that the land has never been touched.”

“I read somewhere,” Daven said, surprising them both, “that we’ve farmed and logged less than one percent of the land in Felittaka.”

“It’s even less elsewhere,” Pippil said. “Merta only farm a little strip along the Great Vein River, and I don’t think Sevessa and Tongat farm at all, except for the Wheat Islands.”

“So all the rest is wilderness,” Miako said wistfully.

“Full of bears and moose,” Pippil said.

“Caribou and wolves,” Daven said.

“Turkeys and bison.”

“Wild horses and camels.”

“Wild oxen and mountain sheep.”

“And don’t forget the kantabeti,” Daven said archly, and they all laughed. The kantabeti were a children’s tale, giants that lived in the mountains of Tongatka and northern Felittaka. They had the body of a man but the head of a bison and the horns of a ram. There were tales of hikers who had heard the monstrous sound of kantabeti butting heads during rutting season in the lonely canyons of the north. Miako gave them exactly the same credence as the tales of giant tentacled monsters in the oceans.

“Let’s head back,” Pippil said. “I’ll bet the coffee is ready by now.”

Tikker was in bed when they returned. The adults and Daven, who was nearly an adult, settled in the sitting room with their coffee. Lamia made it in the country style, very dark and thick, with heavy cream. Miako hadn't had coffee like this since she'd left home for Littapo.

"Miako, do you play?" Lamia asked.

"Yes, the flute."

"So do I! Would you care to try a duet?"

Miako agreed and they both fetched their instruments. Pippil, Ron, and Daven sat on a couch facing the women, who brought in chairs from the dining room for better posture.

"Would you like to play a composed piece, or peffodia-style?" Miako said.

"Are you comfortable leading?"

Miako smiled with sincere humility but agreed to lead her in an impromptu composition. She raised her flute to her lips and thought of the millions of square miles of Brezlun that humans had never altered, but then her thoughts drifted to the tale of Ravi, the Sevessa queen who had thrown herself off the cliff when her people's last chance of contact with Baba had drowned in Blast Bay. She blew the wind coming up on a clear day. She blew the storm that had taken so many lives and altered the history of a great nation. She blew the lightning that had shot through the despairing queen. She blew the waters surging in the bay and swallowing up their last Mediator.

She was aware of Lamia's playing, competent but not more. She sculpted the song to allow her hostess to round out the melody without asking too much of her. Meanwhile she created harmonic undercurrents that directed the soul of the room downward, like a riptide pulling them out to sea and then under. When she felt Lamia growing tired she let the storm abate and blow itself out. Her last notes were the sun peeking under heavy clouds just before it sets.

She dropped her hands to her lap. No one made a sound. Daven's eyes were glued to her face; he might not have blinked for the entire length of the song, fifteen minutes or more. She looked at Ron and was startled to see him weeping.

"Now I understand," he said. "Now I see why he chose you."

"What are you talking about?" Pippil said quietly.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Where did you learn to play like that?" Lamia said. "I felt like I was just another instrument you were wielding."

Miako sighed. "I don't know. My mother taught me the mechanics. This flute," she held up the dull silvery instrument, "has been in our family, handed down from mother to daughter, for a very long time. When I was older I studied with a man in our town. But he told me at the end that he took more than he gave. So I don't know where it comes from."

"It's a gift," Ron said. "From Baba."

Miako dropped her eyes. "Yes," she said.

They gave her a small but comfortable room on the second floor, light yellow walls and a four-poster bed that nearly filled the room. Miako lay under the warm quilt looking up at the darkness for a long time, remembering her mother and flute lessons on the front porch of the house. She remembered the last one, when she'd been eleven, on a warm, sunny summer's day. She'd played an improvised song that had come out of nowhere, inspired by she knew not what. When she'd lowered the flute she'd been amazed to see

her father standing at the corner of the house, weeping just as Ron had tonight. The next week she'd started regular lessons with old Hernan.

Lying in this house that was so much like the house she'd grown up in, surrounded by people so much like her own people, she felt a tug that she hadn't experienced in many years. She felt at home, but she also missed her home so much it made her stomach clench up.

She rolled onto her side and hummed a song inside her head that eventually lulled her to sleep.

\* \* \*

In the morning she awoke naturally and had a shower, which was both better and worse than the ones she'd taken on the *Tiggleday*. The boat had an unlimited water supply from the river, and nearly limitless power from its big fuel cells that could power the enormous paddle wheel and still have enough left over for the puny requirements of the passengers. But the washroom had been tiny. Here the shower was spacious but the water pressure not very good and the temperature would not rise above warm. The cotton-bamboo towels that Lamia had laid out for her were luxurious, though.

She didn't see anyone until she came down for breakfast. She was not looking forward to fending off mountains of food, but Lamia seemed resigned to her abstemious nature and at Miako's request toasted her some of the bread from dinner, which Miako ate with coffee and dried ginger pears, sitting on the steps outside the kitchen.

There was no one else visible. She assumed Pippil was at work on the farm, Ron was probably in the shed with Chass, and Tikker was no doubt stalking something. But where was Daven? She found him in the barn, sitting and watching his horse munching hay in a stall. He jumped up when she entered.

"Do you think we'll be leaving today, Miss?" he said nervously.

"Please, call me Miako."

"Miako."

"I'm not sure, but I think so. It's hard to believe Chass—my uncle—wouldn't be finished today."

"Will we be heading back to Nabitha?"

"I don't know where we're going next. My uncle is in charge, and he hasn't told me."

They looked at each other silently for a moment. Miako was finding it hard not to laugh at his puppy awkwardness, but she was determined not to embarrass him.

"I think I'd better see how they're doing."

"If you need me," Daven said eagerly, "I'll be in here or under the walnut tree."

She nodded and walked out, biting her lips to hold in the smile.

She knocked on the door of Ron's shed and he opened it almost immediately. "Come in," he said with relief. "I thought it might be Tikker again. He's been trying to force his way in here all morning."

"How are you doing, sir?" she said. The Mediator was bent over the table in the back of the shed, probing at something with a sharp, delicate tool. "Did you work all night?"

He looked up at her, his inhuman face shadowed by the electric lights. "Good morning, Miako. I'm nearly done, just a few hours left. And yes, I worked through the night. There are two thousand one hundred and seven pieces of circuitry in these bins and it takes a while to determine the function of each fragment and then to see if there's anything still working that I can cannibalize."

“And... is there?”

“I’ve found three components worth the trouble.”

Her stomach flipped. “Three? Out of two thousand?”

“I’m not done yet. I may find more.”

“May I see them—the good ones, I mean?”

He waved her over and held out a small wooden tray about six inches long and half that in width. She looked at it and frowned: it was empty. Then she looked closer and saw three tiny bits of junk lying in it. They were so small that she almost couldn’t focus on them in this dim light. One looked like a hair-thin wire with a little blob of dust at the end. Another was a tiny black box, smaller than a match-head, with short thin wires sticking out of it; she would have mistaken it for a spider. The last was a shiny sphere the size of a lemon seed.

“Will these really help?”

“They’re not enough on their own,” he said, setting the tray down and going back to his work. “But they may turn out to be essential.”

Miako looked at Ron, who smiled and proudly squared his shoulders at those words. To Chass she said, “Is there anything I can do for you? Or any instructions for Daven?”

“We’ll leave a little after lunchtime,” he said. “For Kiffit.”

“Kiffit? Why... Oh my.” He looked up at her again, smiled, and returned to his work. “I’ll go tell Lamia and Daven.”

She went back outside. There had been sun when she woke up but the sky was solid overcast now and it smelled like rain. She barely noticed. The thought that she was going to add another wonder to this strange trip was almost overwhelming. She had never expected, ever in her life, to have a chance or an excuse to go up in an airplane.

\* \* \*

Lunch was a cheese sandwich, thick-sliced homemade pickles, and dried apples eaten under the walnut tree with Daven. They didn’t talk much, and when Tikker appeared suddenly and plopped down at their feet, the conversation died completely. She still had not heard the boy say a single word, and wondered if he were mute. She’d thought Daven was uncommunicative when she’d first met him, but now she knew what taciturn really meant.

Shortly after they finished, still sitting in silence, the rain started and drove them into the barn. Daven started harnessing the horse, and Miako helped him. When that was done he raised the carriage top, which she realized would only partially cover the driver. He was going to get soaked.

Less than an hour later, Chass and Ron came out of the shed and headed toward the house. Miako ran to meet them at the kitchen door. They all went in, shaking off the rainwater, but Chass left his hood up.

Lamia was waiting for them with a drawstring bag of food. “I made up some take-away for you,” she said, “in case you find yourself in a place where the hospitality is wanting.” She looked up at Chass, whom she hadn’t been close to since he arrived. “You’re quite the giant, aren’t you? Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. Lamia took an involuntary step back. The layered harmonics of the Mediator’s voice were startling at first—inhuman—but Miako realized that she was getting used to it. “Thank you for your kindness to my niece, and for your generosity.”



"It was nothing," she said.

"Please give our regards to your husband."

"He should be back in a few minutes if you'd like to wait. Or stay to dinner again."

"Thank you. We must be leaving." He turned to Ron. "If your help leads to success, I'll be certain to let you know."

Ron performed the rite of joyfully-given assistance, then he, Lamia, and Miako all performed the rite of departure synchronously. Ron stepped forward and handed her a small package.

"What's this?" she said.

"Ravi." The painting he'd told her about.

"Oh, Ron, I can't..."

"Please, take it. My farmers never liked it anyway, and when I go there's no telling what'll happen to it. Take it." She bowed deeply and performed the rite of acceptance.

Chass and Miako went outside to find that Daven had pulled the carriage up to the door. Miako was relieved to see that he was wearing an oversized slicker and a large, broad-brimmed hat. With no further ceremony, they climbed into the carriage and Daven flicked the reins. They headed down the drive.

\* \* \*

The trip took three full days. Before they stopped the first night the farms had given way to forest, punctuated by the occasional lake, meadow, or rocky cliffs. Miako thought the wilderness was fascinating at first, but it went on mile after dull mile. It was difficult to converse over the carriage noise, and Chass seemed lost in thought and unwilling to talk in any case. It rained without stopping for the first two days, so she couldn't ride up top with Daven.

In the evenings they stopped at inns, conveniently placed one day's travel apart, and the inns were always the same: solid, low ceramic shells with rustic furnishings, businesslike hosts, and fellow-travelers who were interested only in their companions. Daven retreated into his old silence; Miako had nothing more to tell him about Tongat to entice him out of his shell. Each evening she ate quickly, went to her room as soon as she was done, and fell asleep.

The carriage was well-sprung and the roads were in good condition, but the constant vibration left her feeling dizzy by the end of the day. They stopped only to stretch their legs, eat a quick bite, and duck behind a tree.

Miako was wearying of coach travel; she had never come this far by horse before. Three times she had crossed the middle of Gebertala between Shusha and Littapo: once when she left home for the city, and then the round trip to visit her parents three years ago on her mother's sixtieth birthday. The journey by train had taken less time than this trip from Nabitha, though it was almost twenty times farther.

The last day dawned sunny then became overcast again, but it didn't rain, so they rode all day with the top down. In the early afternoon they broke out of the woods. The land on both sides of the road was flooded and rice plants were poking their tender green shoots up into the air. Everything from horizon to horizon was shimmering water, with a network of raised roads easily visible, criss-crossing the paddies.

A few hours later they came to the outskirts of Kiffit, which looked somewhat larger than Nabitha. Miako never found out for sure, because they didn't enter the town.

"Take the next right," Chass said.

The road led to an area that had either never been flooded or where the paddies had been filled in. An area about a half-mile square was edged on the far side with large, low ceramic-shell buildings. The rest of the land was perfectly flat, most of it grassy, but a strip down the middle was paved with concrete. The only concrete Miako had ever seen before was the boulevard outside Government Building in Littapo. This runway was not as long as Government Street, but it was broader.

“Excellent timing,” Chass said. “The afternoon flight leaves in just over an hour.”

“Where are we going?” Miako said.

“Geshamo.”

The capital of Tongatka. Daven reined in the horses and turned around in his seat, his face a mask of hopeless desire. “Please, sir, take me with you! I don’t belong here—there’s nothing for me here. Please, I’ll do anything, give anything.”

Chass leaned forward. “You’re wrong, Daven, there is something for you here. Your parents.”

“They don’t want me! They’re looking forward to my choiceday.”

“No. Your father teases you because he fears to lose you. He’s heartbroken that he has only a year left, after which he may never see you again. Would you deprive him of that year?”

“I don’t believe it. He’s tortured me my entire life.”

“That may be. But he dreads the day you choose kethrin to Tongat.”

“What do you know about it?”

The Mediator lowered his hood. Daven dropped the reins in shock and tried to stand to perform the rite, but he lost his balance and nearly fell out of the carriage.

“Daven, sit down!” He did. “Listen to me. I know you, and I know your father. Believe me when I tell you that you would kill him if you left today, without even saying goodbye. This next year will seem like an eternity, but when you’re older you will look back and thank Baba that you waited. You have the rest of your life to be a Tongat man. Give your father and mother one more year of being a Felitta boy.”

Daven swallowed and found his tongue. “Yes, sir.” He looked at Miako with renewed wonder—she was not just whatever he had built her up to be in his mind, she was also the companion of a Mediator.

“He’s right, Daven,” she said. “I still live in Felittaka, but my parents are all the way across the continent in Shusha, and I miss them terribly, and they miss me. Don’t give up your last year with them.”

He nodded. Chass raised his hood again. “Please take us to the terminal now.”

Daven picked up the reins and slapped the horse’s rump with them. They started moving again.

Outside the smallest of the buildings, Daven handed Miako her bag. She counted out a fair price for the extra days, added a big tip for Daven, and when she saw that she only had four Felitta coins left she dumped those into his hands too. He looked into her eyes briefly and jerked as if he’d been shocked. He started to turn away, but she grabbed his arm and pulled him in close to kiss him on the cheek.

“Perhaps I’ll see you in Geshamo some day,” she said.

He took a step back and performed the rite of farewell with the grace notes for deep sorrow and profound hope for reunion. She replied in kind, politely including the same graces. He hopped up onto the carriage and drove away toward town, pushing the tired

horse too fast, and never looked back. Miako lifted her bag and walked toward the shipping office.

Chass waited outside while she made the arrangements for two fares to Geshamo. It was more expensive than the *Tiggleday* had been, but that seemed fair. The actual distance they were traveling was nearly the same, but air travel was still only two generations old, while the river boats had been running continuously since the Gentle Fall.

They waited outside with seven other passengers, a mixed group of young, mature, and old, and were rewarded with a few shafts of sunlight. The clouds were breaking up. In a little while a plane taxied out of a hanger far to their right and turned toward them, rolling smoothly to a stop before the office.

The craft looked like a sculpture of speed, swept-back wings with jet nacelles hanging below. The hull was sleek, seamless ceramic, dark gray, with a continuous window running nearly the full length of the cabin. It was about a hundred feet long and the wingspan was almost that much, with a tail assembly that projected more than ten feet above the fuselage. Miako had seen pictures of airplanes before, but never the real thing. It didn't look like new technology—and it wasn't, though the first commercial flights had started when her father was a young man. Generations of Tongat researchers had perfected the design, tinkering and testing until it was flawless, and then they sat on it for untold centuries until they decided the world was ready for it.

The turbines idled with a loud hum that had a slight whine to it, but it wasn't so loud that she couldn't have heard normal conversation over it. A doorway in the fuselage opened, extruding a stairway that reached down to the ground. A young woman at the top waved to the passengers, and they started toward the plane. When Miako climbed to the top the woman, a pretty girl who looked no more than twenty-five, took her tickets and told them to sit wherever they liked.

The cabin was bright and roomy, with ten rows of two seats on each side of a wide center aisle. Everything was restful shades of gray, except for a brilliant, illuminated stripe that ran down the center of the aisle. There were storage bins at the front and back of the cabin. Miako stowed her bag and followed Chass to a row just in front of the right-side wing. He motioned her to take the window seat. There was enough room between the rows for even the Mediator to stretch out, but he sat primly erect as always, as though comfort were something he neither needed nor could imagine.

When the last passenger came aboard, the greeter sealed the hatch. She announced in a firm, pleasant voice that there were safety instructions and interesting facts on the card in the storage area built into the arm of each seat, then she went forward into the cabin. Miako realized that this young woman was the pilot.

A moment later she announced over an intercom that they should fasten their harnesses; lift-off was imminent. Miako pulled the four-point harness over her head and locked both catches, and Chass followed suit. She wondered if he needed the harness; if the plane crashed, would he be able to walk away from the wreckage? Then she remembered that he was the only Mediator left of the original eight—they were not indestructible. It was moot anyway, because in fifty years of flying there had never been a single crash. The information card informed her that the harness was there in case of turbulence, to prevent injuries from passengers being tossed around.

It was a four-hour flight to Geshamo. Miako read about safety procedures even though she was nearly certain they had never been needed. She studied the rest of the card. Restrooms and a small kitchen were aft. Cargo storage and power generation were in a deck below the passenger cabin. The window strips were integral and load-bearing, an advanced transparent ceramic bonded at the molecular level with the rest of the fuselage.

The noise from the engines became audible through the walls of the plane. They turned smoothly away from the terminal and headed to the end of the runway. When they reached it, the plane turned again and the pilot announced that they were taking off. Immediately Miako was pushed back into her seat as the plane surged forward. Seconds later the ground vibration stopped abruptly and she realized they were in the air.

The plane climbed unbelievably fast. The clouds were continuing to break up and the sun was getting low, so the shadows on the ground were long. Mile after mile of rice paddies shrank away until they became nothing but abstract green tiles covering the land, with the network of roads the grout lines between them. Suddenly the fields gave way to woods, solid darker green. A moment later everything flashed white as they rose into a cloud bank, and then they climbed above the clouds into clear sky. The sun was still a diameter above the clouds, the sky a deep blue that as Miako watched became darker.

Through gaps in the clouds she could see the forest stretching away horizon to horizon. Then they were over a patchwork of fields again, not rice this time but something denser, perhaps wheat. The forest closed back in.

Miako was barely aware that a young man was walking up and down the cabin, offering drinks, snacks, and assistance where needed. She kept her face glued to the window and saw the first foothills of the Tongsha mountains rising up like forested waves. Then the real mountains appeared, the peaks miles below them, snow-capped and austere like Tongat themselves. For almost two hours the mountains passed below, separated by enormous, wide, flat-bottomed glacial valleys and deep, steep-sided river chasms.

Finally she sensed that they were descending, much more gradually than they had risen into the sky at take-off. She put her face right to the window and saw an enormous mountain, not as tall as many she'd seen, but vast: its base must be a hundred miles across, she thought. The northern slopes of the monster swept down into the sea. They were heading right for it, but then they veered off to the right and started circling to come in from the east. The plane was definitely lower now; she thought they might be below the peak of what she knew must be Mount Kibbith.

They sank lower and she could see lights on the ground. Then she looked to her right and saw the brilliant lights of a city that climbed from the waves of Tongat Bay halfway up the slopes of the huge mountain. A moment later she saw a long double row of brilliant lights in a straight line, leading them in. The wheels touched down smoothly and the engine noise, which she hadn't noticed for hours, rose to a malevolent growl. Suddenly they were taxiing instead of flying, and the plane nosed right and headed for brightly-lit buildings nestled up against the foot of a cliff.

The pilot's voice came over the intercom. "Welcome to Geshamo," she said.

# Part Three: Tongatka



## Tongat Rites

Chass dawdled getting off the plane, so they were the last ones to leave.

“Good evening,” the young pilot said, performing an abbreviated rite of business concluded. Miako responded, also briefly, by which time Chass was at the bottom of the stairs. She hoped the pilot didn’t think him rude, but then realized it was more likely she’d think he was Tongat, especially since he wore a robe not too different from the type they frequently used.

The plane had pulled up quite close to the terminal, a very plain-looking blue ceramic structure. The light inside was muted, but she could see several offices built against the walls, and several workstations scattered about. The back of the building was walled off; beyond it she supposed were supply and storage rooms. A young man held the door for them, and Miako started to perform an appropriate rite but stopped herself. She wasn’t in Felittaka anymore.

The doorman wore a natural-colored cotton tunic that came to mid-thigh over tight black leggings. Miako had never seen a Tongat who wasn’t wearing robes—until she’d seen Zeven wearing not much of anything a few days ago. He smiled at her and told them they should go to the registration desk, and pointed it out, not far away to the right. He spoke Felitta so clearly that Miako suspected he was a dirshet, an imported worker from Felittaka.

The last of their fellow passengers was walking away as they approached the desk. It was a high desk that came up to Miako’s chest, made of polished, dark wood. Another young man, probably also a dirshet, stood on the other side, smiling at them.

“Welcome to Tongatka,” he said in a pleasant, deep voice. “May I have your names for the record, please?”

“Miako Tomaza Seeker,” she said. The clerk looked at Chass expectantly.

The Mediator threw back the hood of his robe and seemed to grow a foot as he stood taller. “You know who I am,” he said, his voice echoing around the open space. “I’ve come to speak to the Archivist.”

The clerk’s mouth was hanging open. He shook himself, said, “One moment, sir,” and scurried away.

Chass looked at her. She must have had a similar expression to the clerk’s. “In Tongatka I can reveal myself safely and without constantly causing disturbances,” he said. “Elsewhere there’s some benefit to anonymity.”

She nodded, not really understanding. Almost immediately a somewhat older man, wearing a dark blue tunic, came out of an office midway down the terminal and walked purposefully toward them. The clerk followed behind him.

“Chass,” he said as he came up, and gave a stiff bow. Miako was startled that the man knew Chass’s identity. Before he’d announced himself to her she’d never even known that the Mediators *had* names, let alone what they were. “It’s been a very long time, sir,” he said in the Common tongue. “All of Tongatka will rejoice that you are still with us.”

“Thank you.”

“How can we assist you?”

“We require transport to the Archives, several days’ lodging within or nearby, and the assistance of the Archivists’ staff.”

“I can help you with the first, sir, and notify the Archives of your arrival and your requests. If you’ll give me a moment I’ll see to the arrangements.” He bowed again and walked back the way he’d come.

The clerk was left standing awkwardly with nothing to do. After a moment he busied himself with his records, but his movements were stiff and uncomfortable. In just a few minutes the supervisor reappeared and invited them to follow him outside.

Waiting for them was a machine such as Miako had never seen, a sleek black ceramic shell with no apparent openings. It was like a carriage but the wheels were smaller, fat, and apparently soft, and there was no horse. As they came outside, part of the wall of the machine slid up and onto the roof, and a stocky man stepped out. He had been sitting in a contoured seat of some kind, behind a complex control panel and a half-wheel steering contrivance. It looked a lot like the airplane’s controls had.

“This is Howart, your driver,” the terminal manager said. “He’ll take you to the Archives and wherever else you may need to go during your stay. The car is yours for as long as you need it.”

“Thank you,” Chass said.

“Sir,” Howart said in Common. He was not Felitta then. “And Miss. May I help you with that?”

He took her backpack to the back of the car and did something that caused the rear section to fold upward as his door had. He carefully placed her pack inside the sizable storage area and pulled on the hatch; it slid closed slowly and fastened with an audible click.

“Perhaps you should sit in front, sir. There’s more... um, space.”

“I don’t mind sitting in back,” Miako said. As he opened the door behind his she saw how he did it: there was a nearly-invisible handle that lifted to release it.

The interior of the car was roomy. When Chass got in the seat to the driver’s right, his head didn’t touch the roof, even though he was over a foot taller than the average human. The seats, front and back, were shaped to hold the passenger securely, with lots of leg room and comfortable arm rests. Part of the door was transparent, even though it had looked solid black from the outside.

“Put on your safety harness, please,” the driver said. It was the same four-point harness as in the airplane, so Miako had no problem fastening it. Howart turned to be sure she was secure before he engaged the vehicle’s drive.

The acceleration felt stronger than the airplane’s had. Within moments the buildings outside were whipping by; Miako guessed that they were going over fifty miles an hour, almost as fast as a train. The car was perfectly silent and there was almost no vibration. They left the airport and sped down a smooth road, passing a series of horse-drawn carriages carrying their fellow air-travelers toward the city. Suddenly the carriages seemed quaint to Miako. Why had she never heard of this technology before? If they had had a car instead of Daven’s plodding horse-drawn carriage, the trip from Nabitha to Kiffit would have taken three hours instead of three days.

Why were the other passengers traveling by old-fashioned carriage instead of by car? Miako realized that the car must be for special occasions and perhaps only for special

passengers. She tried to imagine what life would be like if everyone traveled by car instead of by train, boat, or horse.

The roads would have to be widened. And somehow made more safe. She doubted that the car would be able to ford a river the way Daven's horse had done decats of times on the road to Kiffit, so there would be bridges. Gravel and turf would probably not hold up to the weight of the car; the roads would have to be paved with concrete.

Now that she thought of it, there were many areas of Felittaka that could not be reached by horse at all. There was no road connecting Shusha to Littapo, for example—people took the train. If people got used to fast travel, they wouldn't want to be restricted to local travel, they'd want to cross the continent in their cars. There would have to be more roads, not just better ones. Then they would need places to stop for the night, since it would still take over a week to cross the width of Felittaka, and every small town would stumble over itself to provide services.

Miako had a vision of the continent of Gebertala criss-crossed and strangled by wide concrete roads cutting multiple pathways through the virgin forest, all buzzing with cars on their way from one hapless town to another. She decided that Tongat were right to withhold these things. Cars would destroy the Felittaka that she knew.

It took less than half an hour to reach Geshamo. They had passed only a few other vehicles on the way, all of them traditional horse-drawn carriages or wagons. The driver slowed the car as they reached the outskirts of the city, which came upon them abruptly, as though someone had drawn a line. On this side scrub and low trees, but on the other side one- and two-story buildings climbing up the slope of the mountain away from the harbor.

Miako suddenly felt exhausted. The prospect of trying to find food and a place to sleep seemed overwhelming. That morning she had awoken in a comfy inn twenty miles from the insignificant town of Kiffit. Now she was in the wizards' city, capital of the Tongat nation, and she had never felt more lost.

But she didn't need to find anything. Howart dropped them off at the door of a visitor's lodge, and without fanfare or the formality of registration they were escorted to adjoining rooms. A hot meal was delivered to Miako's door before she even had a chance to explore the suite. She was sitting at a small table by a large window, looking out at the lights of fishing boats bobbing in the night waters of Tongat Bay and eating a shaved beef sandwich that was almost too tall to get into her mouth when someone knocked at the door.

"Come in," she tried to say around the food in her mouth, but it came out garbled. Nevertheless the door opened and Chass walked in.

"May I join you?" he said.

She stood up, but then forced herself to stop the rite she'd been about to perform. Instead she bowed and sat back down. When she could speak again she said, "Sorry. Please come in."

"Don't apologize. You must be starving." She hadn't eaten since breakfast.

She gestured to the platter they'd brought her, which had enough food for two days on it—crisp batter-fried vegetables, fresh fruit, a green salad, and a layered confectionery monstrosity that seemed to be almost solid chocolate. "You don't...?"

He shook his head. "Thank you, but I have no use for organic fuel. Please continue." He took the seat across from her. "I apologize for ignoring you since Nabitha. I've been



analyzing what I found in Ron's reliquary and making plans. The generally poor condition of the circuitry I found there has led me to conclude that we will most likely need to visit all four nations, unless Tongat have done a better job at preserving their relics."

"But you don't expect that, do you?" she said.

"It wasn't abuse, just the passage of time."

"Do you think it's possible you'll find what you need, even if we go all the way?"

"I think it's unlikely."

She felt her stomach lurch. "What will happen then?"

"Between ten and twenty weeks from now," he said, "one of four circuits in my body will fail. I'll lose consciousness and shortly afterwards my entire system will collapse."

She set the sandwich down on the platter. "And then you'll be... dead?"

"Not irretrievably, but in the absence of any way to talk to Baba, there's no possibility for repair and revival, so yes. In essence I'll be dead."

"Then what will happen to us?"

"If Tongat ever let you off the planet, which I think is likely, and Baba is still functioning, which is almost certain, you'll find each other and start a new conversation."

"How long will that take?"

"At the present rate of technology introduction, I'd estimate not more than ten thousand years."

"Ten thousand years!"

"Miako, it took them over three millenniums to decide to let people fly fixed-wing airplanes. How long will they have to think it over before they give you a space plane?"

She picked up a chunk of battered, fried cauliflower and popped it in her mouth. She realized as she swallowed it that she wasn't hungry anymore.

"May I ask you something?" he said. She nodded. "You told Daven that you missed your parents. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"That's unusual for Felitta. Most people rarely see their parents again after choiceday."

"Well, I'm typical, then. I've only been back once, a few years ago."

"Yes, but most people don't miss not seeing them."

"It's not unhealthy," she said defensively.

"I didn't imply that it was. Only Felitta and Tongat work that way. Sevessa and Merta children live with their parents indefinitely."

"Well, Tongat aren't really the same."

"It's only a matter of timing," he said. "Felitta parents send their children out into the world on choiceday. Tongat do it just after they're born."

Miako shook her head. She knew this, of course; most people knew at least a little about the different reproduction patterns of Brezlun's cultures, but she had worked in the census office so she'd had to face it nearly every day. Tongat had children just like everyone else, but they never kept them. They were proud of it: "No one is born Tongat," so the ancient saying went. Every one of the nearly two hundred thousand Tongat belonged to that nation by kethrin—by choice.

"I think that everyone—well, almost everyone—misses their family. We're just not supposed to talk about it."

He looked at her silently for a minute or so. She wished she could read his expression, but his idealized features were, as usual, completely blank.

“You’re tired,” he said. “Get some sleep. We’ll be going over to the Archives first thing in the morning, but there’s no need to rush. Sleep in, have some breakfast, and come get me when you’re ready.”

“Good night,” she said, and felt foolish, because of course Mediators didn’t sleep.

But he wished her a good night in return, just the same.

\* \* \*

When she woke the light was strange—obviously daylight, but filtered, and not just by the sheer yellow curtains. Miako got out of bed and walked to the window. She pulled the curtains open and stepped back in surprise.

White puffs were falling out of the sky, like cottonwood seeds but heavier. Billions of specks floated lazily from left to right, but then the wind changed and they began blowing straight at her. It was disorienting, as if all the stars had come loose from the sky and were showering down into her eyes.

“It must be snow,” she said aloud. She had read about it, but it never snowed in Felittaka—or in most of Sevensaka and Mertaka either, only in the mountains.

The bedroom had a balcony. She opened the door and walked out. It was cold, colder than she’d ever felt before, and the pebbled ceramic surface of the balcony was icy underfoot. She felt tiny, wet, cold kisses on her face as the snowflakes struck and instantly melted. It was starting to accumulate. She scooped up a scant handful from the railing and marveled at its lightness, then for no particular reason she closed her hand. When she opened it again the snow had been compacted into a solid, lumpy shape. She shook her hand and the clump fell and disappeared into the flurry.

Miako looked down. She was on the third floor. The garden below was coated in white fluff. She couldn’t see the bay anymore, in fact she couldn’t see anything more than fifty feet away. The world had shrunk to a bubble filled with lazy, drifting white specks.

She showered quickly and dressed, not wanting to keep Chass waiting. She wondered what to do about breakfast, but a booklet by the bed said she could expect it to be delivered to her room. When she opened the door there was a tray on a study table to her right. She brought it in and found hot oatmeal in a small tureen, with little bowls of nuts and dried fruit. It was a reasonable amount of food, unlike last night’s meal, and she wondered if Chass had told someone not to deluge her at mealtimes. She ate quickly, watching the snow fall, then cleaned her teeth and left. When she knocked on the door of the adjacent room, it opened almost immediately.

“Good morning,” Chass said. “Did you sleep well?”

“Very well. It’s snowing!”

“Yes. That’s unusual for the second week of the year, but not unheard of. Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then let’s go find our car.”

That was easy: a young woman at the lodge’s reception desk picked up a phone and Howart pulled up a moment later. He opened the doors for them.

“Can you drive in this weather?” Miako asked.

“Don’t worry, Miss,” he said. “I could drive this vehicle up to the peak of Kibbith with no trouble, if the roads went that far. We’re only going thirteen miles on the East Road, and there won’t be much other traffic on a day like this.”

Geshamo was a series of terraces that climbed from Tongat Bay up to the caldera of Mount Kibbith. There were ten main levels, but each one was subdivided by a maze of ramps, platforms, bridges, buildings, and roads, many of them cantilevered out from the face of the mountain. If Kibbith had been an active—or even merely dormant—volcano, the city wouldn’t have lasted a decade.

While they were still wending through the service buildings and warehouses that marched up from the bay on Level Ten, the snow stopped. Miako didn’t realize it was happening at first; the flakes slowed and thinned out, and suddenly she noticed that it had stopped. A moment later the sun came out and the world was a blinding field of diamonds. She blinked and looked up. The clouds were zooming across the sky as if something were chasing them, leaving behind the deep blue firmament.

Now that she could see the city, its beauty caught at her throat. The buildings were all constructed of the same dark gray granite, but it wasn’t perfectly uniform in color. Each structure seemed to have been made of carefully selected stones that were consistently streaked with an accent color, which was almost always different from the adjacent structure. They passed a small home that had a slightly orange hue. The restaurant beside it gave the impression of forest green, while the large warehouse beyond it had the same gold and cerulean intrusions as Government Building in Littapo. None of the buildings was more than three stories high, and most were just a single level.

They passed three parks before they came to the East Road, with open areas made featureless by their covering of snow, and each branch of the thousands of trees topped by a narrow heap of the stuff. It wasn’t until they passed the last one that Miako realized what was missing: there were no children playing in the snow. If the blizzard had happened in Felittaka there would have been hordes of blue-lipped, under-dressed children rolling around in it, making snowballs and domes and sculptures from it. The parks here were deserted.

The East Road was a wide, concrete way that didn’t even try to climb straight up the mountainside. It twisted, doubled back, hairpinned, and occasionally—as if simply for variety—ran more-or-less straight for a while before resuming its winding path. Howart had been right: there were a few pedestrians and the occasional horse-drawn cart, but for the most part they had the road to themselves. The snowfall didn’t seem to inconvenience the car at all. It didn’t skid or slip and they traveled at a steady rate of what had to be twenty miles an hour, slowing only for the sharpest turns.

Usually the uphill side was a tall stone or concrete wall where the mountain had been cut away to make room for the road, while the downhill side was a thick wall a single block deep at waist height. Miako could just see over that wall: the sun glinting off the sea, the clouds disappearing toward the horizon. The snow was starting to melt.

After a while they came to a broad archway, whose walls were ten feet deep and as many wide. On the other side the architecture was subtly different from what they had seen on Level Ten. The buildings were built from the same granite, but they had a grace that the stolid structures below had lacked. There were more curves and carved façades, and overall a lighter feel, as if the buildings were not hunkering down so much, but standing more lightly on their foundations.

They soon passed below another archway identical to the first, and the style shifted again, in the same direction: more ornamented, less blocky. Out the left window was a tall, domed building that Miako realized must be the Capitol. Its stone was vaguely reddish. Two long rows of very tall, free-standing columns led from the road toward the Capitol building, carved from the same rufous granite. The columns were graceful, unfluted, wider in the center than at the top or the base, with capitals on which statues stood. Miako couldn't tell what the statues depicted, only that they were not human forms.

They reached the next level quickly, and shortly after passing through the archway the car turned right onto an impressive boulevard lined on both sides and center with massive oak trees that were still covered with last season's dead leaves. The trees on their right-hand side hung over the dividing wall between Level Seven, where they were, and Level Eight, which they'd just left.

Only a few minutes later they turned left onto a short and straight drive that led to the largest building Miako had seen in Geshamo so far. It was easily a quarter of a mile wide and five stories tall, built right up against a vertical cliff that rose several more stories above the roofline. There was something odd about the façade, but before she could puzzle it out, they had arrived. Howart pulled the car up under a huge portico and opened the doors for them.

"This is the Archives, Miss," he said, and helped her out.

"We'll be here all day," Chass said. "Perhaps longer."

"I'll be nearby, sir," Howart said. "The doorkeeper will know where to reach me. Let him know and I'll be back to get you in just a few minutes."

"Thank you."

Miako added her thanks and followed Chass toward the building.

The doors swung open as Chass and Miako approached. They matched the massive size of the building. Each door was twenty feet high, ten feet wide, and more than a foot thick, formed from thick oaken slabs that were reinforced with stainless steel bands. They must have been counter-weighted, because they swept smoothly at the push of a single man.

He was scaled to the doors he guarded, nearly as tall as Chass and heavily muscled, but his face was friendly. He smiled at Miako and bowed to the Mediator.

"Chass, sir, we've been expecting you. I apologize for the unseemly weather."

Chass laughed, an eerie and unsettling sound. "If that blizzard was your fault, we must have a chat later on."

The doorkeeper bowed lower and led them inside.

\* \* \*

The vestibule was a semicircular room with a radius of at least forty feet. The doorway through which they'd just entered was at the circle's center, and directly across from them was another, identical pair of heavy doors. Evenly spaced on both sides of those were two smaller, single doors, almost normal in size, all of them closed. A colonnaded gallery ran completely around the room, about thirty feet above the floor, and the ceiling was lost in shadows above that; it must go all the way up, she thought. A man and a woman leaned on the gallery railing just off-center, looking down at them but engrossed in their own conversation. Miako could hear them talking but the words were indistinct.

Cool light came from sconces made of frosted glass and stainless steel, spaced evenly about the walls, in three rows up to the gallery and one above it. Brezlun had had electricity since just a few decades after the Gentle Fall, but this vestibule looked as if it had been originally designed for rush torches. There was something grand and yet somehow primitive about it.

Miako realized that there should be daylight; she had seen windows above the portico. She looked up and saw that the external wall was smooth and unbroken. That was what she had noticed from the outside without being able to identify it: the “windows” were architectural embellishment, not functional.

“Please follow me,” the doorkeeper said and led them to the first door on the left.

They walked along a perfectly straight hallway with no doors or decoration, only more of the sconces. It seemed to be running along the outside wall of the building. The hall was perhaps seven feet wide and about the same height. Chass didn’t need to duck his head, but it was close.

After several minutes they reached the hallway’s end. The doorkeeper opened another door and ushered them into another semi-circular foyer, the same size as the first, with an identical gallery high above the floor, but this one had ten normal doorways, spaced evenly about eight feet from each other, and no giant one. The doorkeeper walked to the fourth from the left, held the door open, and waited.

Miako followed Chass into a room that seemed small after the outsized spaces they’d seen so far, but was actually over twenty feet on a side. It was not quite rectangular; it seemed to widen away from the door, and there were numerous alcoves set into the stone walls at irregular intervals, most of them filled with large potted plants or pedestals topped with bronze sculptures. Several doors led out, all of them closed.

The room was furnished with thick rugs, overstuffed couches, chairs, lounges, low tables, and floor lamps in addition to the ubiquitous sconces. Three people stood up to greet them, two men and a woman. One of the men was middle-aged but the other two were quite old, still hale but white-haired and wrinkled.

“Chass, Miako Seeker, I am the Archivist,” the younger man said.

He bowed low and Miako realized with a shock that he was jebesha—brown-haired. She had heard of the mutation but never seen it before. It happened once or twice in each generation, often enough to serve as a taunt by cruel children. The Felitta word meant “half-baked”—like bread removed too soon from the oven.

Miako stifled the urge to perform the rite of first meeting. She recalled that Tongat did not have any rites as she knew them, not even the ritual grasping of hands that Merta used to show they were disarmed, or the light greeting touches of Sevessa. She simply followed Chass’s lead and bowed in return. The other people in the room returned their bows and resumed their seats. The Archivist showed Chass to an empty couch and Miako to a chair beside it. They were seated in a rough circle around a table with coffee and tea service and several decanters filled with multicolored liquids.

The Archivist introduced the others: the woman was Stepha Pipgatherer, the man was Krit Stormgazer.

“May I offer you a beverage?” Stepha asked Miako. “I know Felitta are partial to beer, but perhaps it’s too early in the day.”

“Some coffee would be nice, thank you.”

She made a small ceremony of pouring a mug and adding cream. Miako thanked her and sipped. It was not as strong as the coffee at home, but it was perfectly acceptable.

"Is there anything we can do to make you more comfortable, Mediator?" Stepha asked.

"That is why we are here," he said. "You must have realized by now that the other Mediators are gone."

"We thought you had joined them," the Archivist said. "Where have you been for the last four centuries, if I may ask?"

"Conserving my strength and preserving my mission. Waiting for a female Seeker."

Everyone turned to look at Miako. She blushed and looked down at her coffee.

"Some of my colleagues were destroyed in accidents, as you know, but at least three of them were intentionally killed. I could not allow that to happen to me, so I found a safe, isolated place in the wilds of Felittaka and traveled to Littapo every few years to check their records. As you can guess, Brezlun's population dynamics dictated that my best chance of finding a Seeker was there. Eight years ago I discovered that the daughter of a farmer had taken the surname Seeker but had remained in Felittaka. I waited for some sign that she would fulfill her name. Last week, on the tenth anniversary of her choiceday, I ran out of patience." He turned and looked at her. Miako raised her eyes and looked back at him. "I've had no cause for disappointment since."

She blushed again and looked back down.

"But why did you need a Seeker, and what do you seek?" the Archivist said.

"Several of my circuits are in danger of failing, probably within the next ten weeks. I need to find the means to reestablish communication with Baba before that happens, or you'll be cut off from her permanently, or at least until you're ready to go find her yourselves."

The Tongat were silent for a while. "But we have not spoken to her for half a millennium," Stepha said. "And not heard from her in three times that span."

"In parts of the world she's just a myth," Krit said.

"Why should you be concerned about this now, after all this time?"

"This was not Oma's plan," Chass said. The Tongat jerked at the name, which Miako had never heard before. It must be another name for Baba. He looked at them sternly.

"You were never supposed to lose contact."

"Have we failed Baba, then?" the Archivist asked softly.

"No. You have not failed." Chass paused. "But you are entering a critical period of your history. I know it must seem to you that this time is much like the ages that came before. The introduction of the telephone was a dangerous time, the most perilous since steel was introduced, but you came through it unharmed. You've had jet technology for millennia, so I'll wager you could put a man on the moon in ten years if your perovics would allow it."

"Two," Krit said without emotion. "The guidance system was difficult, but we discovered something we call semiconductors a few centuries ago. We use them in the jets and the cars. Guidance design is completed and undergoing standard review."

"Meaning that a century from now you could have failsafe, cheap, and commonplace space travel," Chass said. "But you won't. Perovics will spend at least a millennium thinking through all the implications and side-effects; perhaps two or three. Then you'll

wait for the right time to introduce it, which might be never, but I estimate it will be around ten thousand years from now.”

Krit nodded in agreement.

“When you do finally make that leap,” Chass said, “that’s the turning point, when the danger to your world will be greater than it’s ever been, and I want you talking to Oma during it. She’s the embodiment of what you’re trying to achieve in your admirably methodical way. Your goals and the means to achieve them should be informed by the only working example we have of a starship.”

The Tongat were silent again.

Stepha bowed in her seat. “Of course we have no objections to reestablishing communication with Baba,” she said. “And we have always deferred to the Mediators’ experience and knowledge. How can we help you?”

“There’s nothing on this planet that can save me, but if I can contact Oma we can rebuild her support network down here. I need to look through your Archives for fragments of old technology so I can rebuild this.” He took out the communicator and all of the Tongat drew a sharp breath.

“Ah,” Krit said. “I’ve never seen one intact.”

“Intact but not functional,” Chass said.

“You’ll have complete access,” Stepha said, “starting right now if you like.”

“Yes.” He stood up and Miako followed suit. “Thank you, President Pipgatherer.”

The Archivist said, “If you’ll follow me, please,” and headed back toward the door through which they’d entered. Krit and Chass followed him.

Miako felt herself swaying on her feet, lightheaded and uncertain whether to follow or not. The *President of Tongatka* had just served her coffee! It was worse than when Councilor Peppersower gave her the medallion and sent her off to follow Chass. The President took Miako’s arm.

“You look a little overwhelmed, my dear,” she said, smiling. “Let’s sit down and have a little chat. Then I’ll give you a quick tour, if you like.”

\* \* \*

“Tell me about your family,” Stepha said.

Miako stumbled at first, but the familiar and comforting topic calmed her nerves. Before long she had regained her composure, and when she realized she was babbling she managed to wind up her story coherently.

“And you chose to remain in Felittaka, but not near your parents, even though you’d chosen the name Seeker?”

“I wanted kethrin to Tongat,” she said. “But just as strongly, I wanted to stay with my people.”

“It was almost the same with me,” Stepha said.

“Really?”

“Yes. I was born in a small fishing town in the Tail of Sevessa. I loved my family and my people, but I also was enchanted by the few men I met growing up, mostly aspirza who had been chosen to impregnate intended mothers. And I could never stop asking questions.” She laughed, a light sound like small bronze bells chiming. “I drove my aunts mad with questions. Why is the sea darker than the sky? Why does Baba always follow the same path while the stars shift with the seasons? By the time my choiceday came I

didn't need help to know where I belonged, but I needed help to actually make the choice. Your parents were selfish, I think."

Miako started to protest, but then she realized that Stepha was probably right. If either of her parents had said what needed to be said—"We love you, but go do what you must."—she would have spent the last ten years here, and happy, instead of in Littapo, and heartsick.

"Well, my dear, it would take me a year to show you all of the Archives, and the Archivist would do a much better job, but perhaps you would like a short tour now?"

"Yes, please," Miako said, repressing the rite that wanted to flow from her hands. She couldn't believe the President of Tongatka was going to give her a tour. It was like Baba coming down to help her make dinner. Or a Mediator jerking her out of her rut to explore the world.

"Considering where we are now, perhaps the best place to start would be the residences. We'll just go out this way."

Stepha walked to a door in the back of the room, which opened to a broad stairway made of the same granite as the walls, leading up. They walked up about forty steps. Stepha, despite her age, seemed to be having less trouble than Miako, who had to push herself to keep up. There were three turns at wide landings, and at the top the stairs ended in an enormous open space.

"This is the common room," the President said. "As you may know, we Tongat usually live where we work." Miako had not known that. "All of the Archivist's staff therefore lives in this wing of the building, as well as any researchers who are visiting for more than a day or two."

The room, which was larger than the Geshamo airport terminal, seemed to have zones for different activities. To their left were a series of what might have been swimming pools of various sizes, the smallest only ten feet wide and the largest five times that, arranged in a spiral, with a narrow channel connecting them. Straight ahead was a collection of bizarre-looking machines that Miako finally recognized as exercise equipment. That area was surrounded by an elliptical running track that had to be a quarter-mile in circumference, on which two men were jogging rapidly, talking as they ran. To their right was a sitting area with decats of seating groups, and beyond that a library, with tall, heavy wooden bookshelves surrounding many more chairs and couches. She couldn't see what was beyond that.

"I can't believe how large everything is," Miako said.

"When this city was built, the planning commission's contingencies branched out for five thousand years," Stepha said. "Tongat do not like to do the same work twice, and we would rather wait to build something until we're really sure, than rush in and have to repair it." She gestured at the room. "There are about one hundred fifty thousand people living in Geshamo, three-fourths of all Tongat. The Archives have a permanent staff of two hundred, and perhaps fifty guests at any given time, but the building was designed to support four times that number, just as the city was."

They walked toward the library. Just past the last bookshelf, the interior wall was pierced with decats of arched openings without doors. The area just beyond the library was a vast kitchen, with numerous food preparation areas, cooking stations, storage closets, and refrigerators. There were three women and two men working at various tasks.



Miako followed Stepha through one of the arches, which was the start of a long hallway. Every twenty feet or so a door was set in the wall. Most of those she could see were open.

“These are the private rooms. As I understand it, the prime real estate are the rooms farthest from the common area, which is why most of these are unoccupied.”

Miako peeked inside the nearest doorway. The room was of a good size, large enough for a bed, a desk, and a sitting area, but it was completely empty. There was a washroom and a closet.

“Why are there no windows?”

“There are no windows here because we’re actually inside the mountain,” Stepha said, and laughed at Miako’s expression. “Just wait until you see the Archives proper.”

“But the entry had no windows either. And the doors were reinforced—” She stopped. “It’s a fortress.”

“Yes. There has never been a war between nations on Brezlun, although one group of Merta came close to attacking us a thousand years ago. But the planners considered the possibility. The Archives and the Library are essentially impregnable with the technology the outside world possesses, and capable of self-sufficiency for over a year. Water is pumped up from aquifers in the mountain, and power comes from geothermal taps. We don’t know anything of humanity’s ancient history, and we have no intention of letting such a lapse occur again.”

They walked back out into the common room, past the kitchens and arch after arch leading to private rooms. Finally they came to the end, and went through the right-most of three closed doors, down another stairway that ended in another doorway. On the far side of that was the vestibule.

The doorkeeper bowed as they emerged.

“I’d like to show our guest the Archives,” Stepha said.

“Of course, Madame President,” he said.

He walked over to the massive interior doors, took a large key from a pocket of his tunic, and turned it in the reinforced steel latch. Nothing happened. Miako realized that there were no handles on the doors. A moment later she heard a muffled gong from the other side of the door, a single tone. Now she noticed that there was a tubular bell hanging from a heavy wooden stand beside the right-hand door’s hinges. The doorkeeper took up a mallet hanging from a leather strap and beat the gong five times, varying the time interval between each stroke, and somehow achieving different tones from what Miako would have thought was a one-note instrument.

The doors swung out toward them, opening just enough to let them pass through without brushing their shoulders. These were even thicker than the outer doors, and Miako was surprised to see that they were backed with several inches of steel. Stepha bowed to the doorkeeper, Miako did the same, and he returned the courtesy.

Another burly man stood within. He bowed to them both and then turned to the task of closing the massive doors, which required turning a large capstan. They walked through a tunnel in a wall that was over twenty feet thick and came out on a platform looking out on a space so vast that Miako had to grab at the safety railing to steady herself.

It must have been a lava tube originally—a gigantic one, and no doubt hollowed out by a thousand years of dirshet digging for their legacy. The roof was a hundred feet overhead, and the floor invisible below. Within that space was a city within a city,

curving towers rising up above long, tall warehouses and bubble-shaped ceramic structures, some of them large enough to swallow Government Building whole.

She turned and gaped at the President, who laughed and took her arm. "Come," Stepha said, "let me show you a little of our past and our future."

\* \* \*

After an hour Miako was numb and bewildered. Stepha took pity on her and suggested they stop for lunch. Miako followed her back out of the maze of buildings to the elevator, through the passage and the steel doors, to the main vestibule. They went back up to the residence kitchen and sat down at a small table in a corner of the dining area that was surrounded on three sides by large schefflera and rubber plants. Almost immediately a smiling, overweight woman brought them warm bowls of noodles and vegetables in spicy broth, with ten kinds of pickles.

Miako absently noticed that the food was very good, but her thoughts were still in the giant cavern, that was not even remotely filled by a city in which every corner of every one of hundreds of buildings held something she had never seen or heard of before. And each new thing came in a hundred variations, every one of which was accompanied by a sheaf of thin ceramic sheets permanently recording in exhaustive detail what the gadget was for, how it worked, who had made it and when, and why it was better or worse than its predecessor.

They had only seen a handful of other people during their tour, most of them carrying clipboards and walking slowly down rows of shelves full of incomprehensible widgets. Stepha had shown her a building or two of that sort, then taken her to the enormous ceramic shell she'd seen from above.

"You just flew in from Felittaka yesterday, is that correct?" she asked with her hand on the door latch. Miako nodded. "You might find this interesting, then," Stepha said. Inside were row after row of airplanes, but most of them looked nothing like the one she'd flown in. Some had two pairs of wings, one over the other, and some of the wings seemed to be made of cloth. Some had huge propellers stuck on their noses, others had various configurations of from one to five jet engines. Stuck in a corner of the vast building were things that looked like giant, nightmarish dragonflies, with the propellers *above* the craft. Miako walked over to one of these in a daze. The documentation was on a sturdy table beside it, five thick books of thin ceramic sheets—thousands of pages.

Out again, to a much smaller building that contained aisle after aisle of shelves with vertically-stacked panels of ceramic, roughly as tall as she was and a few feet wide, thin or thick, smooth or nubby, dense or translucent. Each one had its own little manual.

"Sevessa make the best ceramics," Stepha said. "Few people know that *we* sold them the recipes and techniques. They've taken them farther than we had thought possible at first, one of our few surprises. Perovics was scrambling for a hundred years after some genius in the Prong discovered how to make an indestructible, thin shell. That's what we use for boats, and the cars and planes too."

"Perovics," Miako said. "Chass mentioned that. What does it mean?"

"Ah, that's complicated. I'll explain it over lunch."

When Miako had eaten about half of her noodles and pushed the bowl away, Stepha brought it up again.

"You asked about perovics," she said. "You've probably heard that we discovered powered flight over three thousand years ago."

“Yes.” Her father had told her that.

“Why do you think we waited so long to make it available?”

Miako remembered her thought experiment of introducing cars into Felittaka. “To preserve social stability?”

“Yes. Every new invention has the ability to disrupt society to one degree or another. Suppose we developed an axle that turned with almost no friction. That would be good, right? Horses could pull more weight, trains would be more efficient and use less fuel.”

“I think you’re going to tell me the disadvantages now.”

Stepha laughed. “Yes, I am. The thing works, but it’s housed inside a closed tube that’s far too thick to be retrofitted into existing carts or trains. In fact they would have to be completely re-engineered—brakes and so on—because everything’s been designed with the assumption that the bearings have to overcome friction. The advantages are so significant that farmers would buy new carts, even though their old ones were perfectly satisfactory. Some of them probably couldn’t afford it, but they’d get them anyway, for prestige or for other reasons, go bankrupt and lose their farms. No one would want the old carts or trains anymore and they’d be left to rust out in the fields.”

“It’s not as good as it sounds, I guess.”

“That’s just an axle. What about something really new, like the car you rode here in?”

“I’ve already thought that one through. It could destroy Felittaka.”

“You’re right. We’re not sure we’re ever going to release that one. The benefits just don’t outweigh the problems.” She poured both of them more water from the pitcher.

“And that’s perovics.”

Miako looked away and thought about it. “You study the impact of new inventions before releasing them?”

“To decide *whether* to release them, and if so, when. Also how to mitigate the disruption.”

“Is it complicated?”

Stepha laughed again. The chubby woman brought them bowls of fruit salad, fresh citrus and apples with dried cherries and blueberries. Miako took a spoonful and realized she wasn’t hungry.

“Level Six is entirely devoted to perovics. We have more people working there than we do on research and development. It’s the single biggest task we do. Most researchers work for several decades developing new things or improving old ones, then spend the rest of their lives in perovics.”

“I think I would like to do that.”

Stepha contemplated her for several minutes. “Would you mind if I asked you a question?”

Before she could stop them, Miako’s hands leapt to the starting position for the rite of willingness to surrender to authority. She forced them back into her lap and said, “Please, ask me anything.”

“Why does the Mediator need a Seeker—a female Seeker? He told us what he’s after, but not why he needs you.”

Miako thought of the conversation she’d had with Chass on their first day aboard the *Tiggleday*. She tried to remember exactly what he’d said.

“We talked about it soon after he’d... recruited me,” she said. “He said only a woman could visit all four nations. He said I was the first female Seeker.” She tried to remember more. “I don’t think he ever said why the woman had to be a Seeker.”

“He’s very good at not saying what he doesn’t want to say, isn’t he?” Miako smiled. “I think you’ve had enough for one day. I’m going to have your things moved up here from the lodge. Why don’t you go pick out an empty room and I’ll see that it’s furnished.” She handed her a metal token about the size of her thumbnail. “Put this in the one you choose.”

Miako stood before the rows of archways leading back to the rooms. There was no reason to pick one over the other, so she counted to the tenth and walked through the arch. The hallway went straight for over a hundred feet, with only a few rooms on the right side and none on the left. Then it turned and went right for a short stretch, down a flight of stairs, and turned left to run straight ahead farther than she could see. The tenth room after the left turn was open. She carefully placed the token in the center of the floor and went back to the dining area.

“Would you like to go for a swim while you’re waiting?” Stepha said.

Miako reminded herself that this woman, who looked like someone’s gentle and humorous grandmother, was the President of Tongatka. If she ever wanted to invoke delayed kethrin and come to live here, this woman would absolutely have the power to approve or disallow it. But she thought that a swim was a very good idea.

“Yes, thank you. But I don’t have anything appropriate to wear.”

“Wear nothing if you like. Or there are suits of all sizes in the dressing rooms beside the pool. Come on.”

The series of pools was near the stairway that came up from the room where she and Chass had met the Archivist and Stepha—and, she now realized with a start, the other man who must have been the head of perovics. There were over twenty pools of varying sizes, with the smallest in the center spiraling out to a pair of large, curved ones that surrounded the others and enclosed them. All of the pools were connected by short waterways just wide enough for one person to swim through.

“The temperatures vary,” Stepha said. “The ones in the center are quite cool, but the larger ones will be more comfortable. The dressing rooms are over there.”

A bank of small rooms were built into the outside wall of the corner area where the pools were situated. Half of them had the universal symbol for male, the other half female. Miako peeked into the nearest female room and found decats of suits to choose from, sorted by style and size. She came out wearing a yellow swimming dress with a short pleated skirt. Stepha joined her, wearing a deep blue one-piece with no frills, and eased herself into one of the large pools. Miako was about to follow suit but Stepha laughed up at her.

“Miako, how old are you?”

“I just turned thirty last week.”

“Then act your age. Dive in!”

Miako laughed for the first time in days, took several steps back to get a running start and made a very splashy entrance into the deep pool. The temperature was very comfortable and she glided to the surface feeling lighthearted—buoyant—for the first time in a long while.

They swam laps, floated face to face talking, explored some of the inner pools, and splashed about for over an hour. When Miako climbed out she realized she was tired and sleepy. Stepha came out of her changing room and looked at her sharply.

“Your room should be ready by now,” she said. “Go and take a nap. I’ll be sure you’re called for dinner.”

Miako wanted to perform the rite of inexpressible thanks, but instead she resorted to the inadequate words that non-Felitta insisted on, and walked back down to her room. The bare space was now furnished with a thick round rug with a blue radial pattern beneath a couch, bed, and desk. There was a painting of Mount Kibbith seen from the sea, and another of fields of crocuses popping up through a snowbank; they were quite good. All of her things had been brought from the lodge. She opened her bag and took out her flute case. For ten minutes she played a melody that ran idly through her brain like a stream through a meadow. But her fingers grew sluggish, so she set the instrument down and flopped onto the bed, and was almost instantly asleep.

\* \* \*

A young Tongat woman woke her, touching her gently on the shoulder. Miako blinked up at her and rubbed her eyes. The woman couldn’t have been more than two years past choiceday, dressed in black leggings and the Tongat long tunic, dark green with gold trimming. Her expression was either reverent or fearful.

“What time is it?” Miako said.

“About 15.00. Dinner is being served. President Pipgatherer sent me to ask if you would like to join us.”

Miako realized she was starving. And that she had to pee. “Can you show me the facilities?” she said.

The woman led her farther down the corridor to a washroom and waited. When Miako came out they went back to the common areas, where a large crowd had shoved the furniture out from the center of the seating area and were sitting tightly-packed together on the floor, passing bowls and plates back and forth. Her guide led her to the far side of the clump, where Chass sat erect and impassive with a little bubble of space around him. She sat down to his right and he greeted her quietly.

Someone passed Miako a thin, round flatbread about a foot wide. It was warm and soft, fragrant of fennel, cumin, and garlic. Before she could decide whether to start gnawing at it or ask someone what the protocol was, Stepha sat down on her other side, crossed her legs, and accepted a large bowl of thick stew from the person beside her. She filled a ladle with the steaming mixture and gestured for Miako to hold out the bread. With a swift, practiced swoop she dumped the finely-chopped meat and vegetables onto the bread and swirled them with the ladle to distribute them evenly.

“Fold it in half and go to it,” she said. A man sitting in front of Stepha handed her a loaf of her own and she repeated the procedure, then passed the stew bowl away.

The stew had just a hint of heat, and it was delicious. Just about the time Miako was wishing she had something to drink her young guide came back to hand her a tall glass of dark beer. She accepted a small bowl of pickled red onions halfway through her sandwich and finished all of it. Stepha handed her something like a tureen filled with chocolate-covered dried fruit; she took a small handful and reached across Chass to hand it to the Archivist, who she had just noticed was sitting on the Mediator’s left.

By the time the young woman gave her a heavy mug of coffee she was awake and sated enough to start noticing what was going on around her. The crowd was not as large as she had originally thought, perhaps only forty people. They were a mix of young and old, evenly divided between men and women. There were a few here and there who held hands or leaned against each other—couples, she supposed. She knew that most Tongat married for life, except for a few sects that believed in celibacy. Most of them would have a child or two, dutifully given up for vessin, traded for goods from the other nations. Miako thought how odd it was to intentionally have a child that you knew you would give up. Felitta did it occasionally, for money, and less often because the child had been unplanned and was not wanted. Tongat couples did it because they wanted the experience of creating a child, because they believed it was their duty to propagate their genes, and because it was good for Tongatka. Strange people.

Most people were finished eating. Miako saw Stepha nod to a man sitting near the center of the group. His face was weathered and haggard, his hair completely white, but somehow she got the impression he was not as old as he looked. He hummed a sustained high note and conversations died away.

“Revered Mediator,” he said in a strong, deep voice. “I am Turbasek Starwatcher, Library board member, senior research advisor, and perovics coordinator. All of us are ecstatic to have you here with us and we respectfully request, before the evening’s lighter entertainments begin, whether you would be willing to answer a few questions.”

“I am willing to consider answering them,” Chass said gravely. For some reason the Tongat thought this was hilarious. Everyone in the room except Chass and Miako doubled over with laughter. When they had quieted down again, Turbasek spoke again.

“I see you are as constant as the stars,” he said. “Which leads me to my first question. About two hundred years ago, Baba changed her orbital inclination. For all of recorded history her orbit has varied only a few degrees from the celestial equator, but now she is wandering as far as twenty-three degrees north and south. Can you tell us why?”

“No.”

Miako expected some reaction at this abrupt answer, but Turbasek just nodded as if he’d expected precisely that single word response.

“Over the millenniums your colleagues revealed a little about the history of humans before the Gentle Fall, and regarding the nature of Baba. Would you consider telling us more at this time—since you are the last Mediator and it is entirely possible that this is the last time you will ever visit Tongatka.”

“I can tell you nothing of your history that you have not heard before. Not without Baba’s permission.”

This caused a stir in the audience, but no one spoke out loud. Turbasek waited for silence before continuing.

“The last time you visited we had not yet developed the diagnostic equipment we have now,” he said. “Would you permit us to examine you with our instruments if we guarantee they won’t harm you?”

“I will submit to a physical examination,” Chass said. “But not with instruments.”

Turbasek nodded as if he had expected this. “I understand that you will be sifting through the relics in the Archives, looking for functional components for the communicator you’re trying to repair. Would you be willing to identify the pieces that you reject?”

Chass was silent for a moment. At last he said simply, "Yes."

The crowd seemed to exhale all at once. Someone in the back let out a whoop that was quickly stifled.

Turbasek bowed from the waist until his forehead nearly touched the floor. "I will trouble you with no more questions this evening. Except this: will you honor us by attending our diversions?"

"Of course," Chass said, and bowed in return, though not as deeply.

"I have been told," Stepha said, "that your companion is something of a genius on the flute." Miako turned to stare at her. Stepha laughed lightly. "Don't be so modest, dear."

"But who..."

"We Tongat have our ways of knowing. Knowing is one of the petals of the Flower." The crowd chuckled at this. "In Felittaka I believe you have a custom called peffodia. We have something similar, of course. Where is Miako's flute?"

The young woman who had guided her came forward and bowed to Miako, holding out the wooden case with both hands. Miako thanked her quietly.

"I hope you don't mind, but I asked Jaybra to run back to your room and fetch your instrument."

"Not at all," Miako said. She rubbed the carved wood of the case nervously. Were they going to make her play solo in front of all these strangers?

"That's a beautiful case," the Archivist said.

"Thank you. My frenik carved it for me for my choiceday."

"Who will play with our guest?" Stepha called out.

Four people came forward. A young man with severely cropped hair carried the small Tongat bagpipes, almost identical to the set that Zeven had played. Another had a strange-looking guitar that seemed to be made of metal. An older woman was holding a reed instrument unlike any Miako had seen before, thin but quite tall, shiny lacquered black. Her guide, Jaybra, stepped up carrying a small, thin drum with a membrane on just one side. Miako recognized the type: it was a Merta drum. She wondered if she had been born in Mertaka.

Miako stood and the five of them stepped away from the gathering. People turned and shifted to face them.

"What shall we play?" she said.

"An improvisation," the Archivist suggested.

### **The Tongat Flower**

The Tongat, like all the cultures of Brezlun, believe that they are the true inheritors of Baba's gift. Among themselves they occasionally refer to themselves as the Chosen, because no one is born Tongat; every single one of them chose to become Tongat.

More commonly spoken of in public is the Flower, the five-fold symmetry on which their culture is based. Each petal represents a key aspect of their self-imposed mission, which of course is derived from their interpretation of Baba's Ten Maxims.

1. Knowing.
2. Building.

3. Preserving.
  4. Caring.
  5. Teaching.
- 

Miako took her instrument from the case and set the case on the floor. She tried to clear her head but this audience was the most exalted she had ever played for and she was having trouble overcoming her nervousness. Then she had an inspiration. She whispered to Jaybra, “Can you give me a three-beat base?” Jaybra nodded and began to tap her drum. She beat it on the edge, producing a surprisingly rich, complex sound from such a modest tympanum. “A little slower,” she said.

She closed her eyes and thought of this mysterious city built into the side of an immense, extinct shield volcano; this place that might have been her home for the last decade. But if it had been, she would never have known Suzata, Partep, or Keving. She might never have had the chance to visit her parents again. She would never have seen the cherry blossoms that lingered in the Littapo spring as if they would make the ephemeral eternal. She raised the flute to her lips and exhaled.

The bagpipe contributed a soft background plaintiveness, and the guitar was crucial too, but mostly it was the thing that was not quite an oboe that she relied on to construct her air sculpture. She coaxed the woodwind into following her, reinforcing and echoing her. Her melody dug deep into the mountain and found not the darkness and evil of mythical caves, but wonder and mystery, truth and enduring beauty. They spiraled up to the peak of Mount Kibbith and then leapt out into the void, where the thin air somehow held them up, offered them to the sun—and when the planet spun around, to the Moon. They sprang out and farther up, flew around the pocked, dead surface and found only more beauty, more knowing. She led them back down, plunged into the ocean and studied the seafloor and the fishes: even more exquisite knowledge, the sparkling bits of reality they had never seen quite so clearly before. Back into the air, and back to land, and when they were done the sadness was not for things lost but for journeys concluded and never to be repeated.

Miako opened her eyes and saw her audience rapt, some of them openly weeping. That gentle sound was the only one they made. A hush that was almost frightening persisted for several minutes. Miako had never seen an audience react that way before, even when she’d played better than today. Finally, to break the awkward trance, she turned and bowed to her fellow musicians, and they responded in kind without a word.

“I see our information was correct,” Stepha said softly. Miako felt herself blushing again; bowed, picked up her case, and returned to the Mediator’s side.

“May I see the instrument?” Chass said.

She handed him her flute. He turned it over slowly, examining it carefully, and she got the distinct feeling that he was seeing things she had never seen, although she’d owned the flute most of her life. After scanning it from one end to the other he handed it back.

“How long has it been in your family?” he said.

“No one knows exactly. We know it’s been handed down from mother to daughter for over a thousand years.”

“I knew the man who made this flute,” Chass said. Miako could feel the sudden tension in the room; she’d be willing to bet that someone in the back had just whipped



out a notebook and a pen. “Papra Windtamer. He lived in Littapo from 2510 to 2592. A brilliant craftsman of instruments. I’ve come across several of his works over the years, but none finer than this one. It was just like him to make such a beautiful, tonally perfect instrument out of titanium. Knowing Papra, that old goat, I’d guess that he made it for a woman—not his wife, he never married—and told her to pass it down to her daughter and granddaughter. And that the daughter she gave it to was his.”

Miako wished she could tell this to her mother: that the flute they’d cherished for so long was a love token, and they were both descended from its maker.

“Miako,” the Archivist said, “do you like to dance?”

“Yes, sir, very much.”

“Well, I think that exquisite song you played for us has earned you the right to some fun.” He lifted his voice. “Who will play and who will dance?”

The four musicians who had accompanied Miako were joined by a violinist, another woodwind player, and another drummer. About a third of the people who had been sitting for dinner left the room, but the rest, including the Archivist and Stepha, stayed to dance.

“Do you know the Tongat quadrille?” Stepha asked.

“I’ve seen it done, but I don’t know the steps.”

“Don’t worry, it’s fairly simple if you have someone to guide you. Jaybra!” The young woman smiled shyly and stepped forward. “Now, Miako, watch what Jaybra does, and do the same thing. Let’s show her the basic steps.”

The dance lesson took only a few moments, then the music started. She and Jaybra were joined in the square by two young men and two other couples. Their partners twirled, lifted, guided, and promenaded the women and Miako found that she had no trouble keeping up. The next dance was a slightly more elaborate version of the first, and so they spent several happy hours. Miako noticed that in the pause between each song a group of young men would form on the periphery of the crowd, argue inaudibly but with forceful gestures, and that her next dance partner would always emerge out of that huddle like a comet spinning in from the outer edge of the solar system. She finally realized that they were fighting over the right to dance with her. She wondered what criteria decided the issue of who was next; but she never danced with the same man more than twice.

She was getting tired and starting to think about going to bed when Chass stood up from his observation post in a large chair at the edge of the dance floor. He walked over to her and she forced herself not to give in to the rite that wanted to flow from her hands.

“I can see that you’re ready to stop, and I have some things I’d like to discuss before you sleep. May I suggest that we go to your room to talk?”

“Of course. Let me get my flute.”

She saw from the looks of dismay on the faces of the young men in their inter-dance conference that this was not how they’d hoped the evening would end. She smiled and bowed to them, glowing with the exercise and the satisfaction of being pursued; this was not the first time it had ever happened in her life, but it had been too long, so long that she’d almost forgotten how it felt to be wanted.

Chass followed her down the corridor, down the stairs and into her small room. She set the flute on the desk and offered him the chair. He sat carefully, as if afraid that he might break it, and she folded up her legs beneath herself on the bed.

“The Archivist’s collection of relics is much larger than Ron Haymaker’s,” he said without preamble. “It will take me at least a week to examine all of it. I will be working full-time in the Archive until I’m done, so I won’t see you again until then.”

“I see. Sir, do you think you’ll find what you need here?”

“I doubt it, but I must try. Can you find something to do for a week or so?”

“I’ve always dreamed of this place,” she said. “And they seem to like me. I don’t think I’ll have any trouble keeping busy.”

“Good. Is there anything you’d like to ask me before we part?”

She thought for a few seconds. “This morning you said the name Oma and it seemed to startle Stepha and the Archivist, and the... the perovics man. Is Oma another name for Baba?”

“Baba has many names,” he said. “But she calls herself Oma, short for Omadaz, which I understand means ‘leader’ in a very ancient tongue. I believe it has been a millennium since anyone heard her true name spoken aloud. I used it intentionally to remind them of their past, much of which their culture remembers, but the individuals have forgotten. Tongat have progressed so far that they occasionally forget that they are not the reason why people are here, or why people have thrived here. It’s good to shake them up from time to time.”

“I think it worked.”

“Good. Anything else?”

“No, sir.”

“You don’t need to stay here in the Archives. Go out and see Geshamo. I recommend a trip to the Observatory. Make some friends, and think about what you want to do when our quest is over. I’ll find you when I’m done.”

He stood up and Miako bowed deeply. “Good luck, sir,” she said.

“Luck. Yes, that would be good,” he said, and then walked out of the room.

Miako closed the door and changed into her short sleeping gown. She lay awake for a long time after the light was out, looking up at the ceiling she could just make out from the glimmers of light seeping in from the hall. Her thoughts drifted over the things she had already seen, and puzzled at the things she might yet see, here in the city of wizards.

## The Shadow of Mount Kibbith

In the morning, Miako took a shower in the communal hall bathroom. The facilities consisted of a long, narrow room with five roomy toilet stalls on one side and five enclosed shower stalls on the other, with five sinks in between. She shook her head at the numerology—so many things were counted in tens, or halves or multiples of tens—but had to admit to herself that she had taken the tenth room on the second level of the tenth hallway, so she was just as silly.

Most people seemed to be done with breakfast, but one stern-faced woman was cooking herself something, working so intently that Miako was certain that her mind was somewhere else. At a sideboard laid with a small buffet, Miako took some porridge and fruit. As she turned into the room she spotted Jaybra waiting for her at a table under a potted palm tree.

Jaybra stood as she approached and bowed, much too low for Miako's comfort. "Please, sit down," Miako said. "You needn't make such a fuss over me. I'm just a census clerk."

"You're a brilliant musician," Jaybra said shyly. "And the Mediator's companion."

"I'm an idiot who botched kethrin." She started eating. "What's your full name?"

"Jaybra Ponyhealer, Miss."

"Please, call me Miako. Ponyhealer? You're a veterinarian?"

"I'm training to be a doctor."

Miako almost choked on a spoonful of porridge. She would not have guessed that. "So you want to go back—to Mertaka, right?"

"Yes. I was born in Durkita, near the coast."

"I don't understand Ponyhealer, then, if you want to be a doctor."

Jaybra smiled a lopsided grin. "Your name is Seeker."

Miako's first reaction was indignation, but then she laughed. Who was she to claim that someone's name was inappropriate? "You're right. I'm sorry."

Jaybra smiled more broadly. "Merta don't have vets as you probably know them. There are horse-tenders, but it's not even a guild let alone a profession. I thought that if I went back home as a doctor, when there was no doctoring work I could tend the horses."

"And that's what you really want to do." She nodded. Miako glanced at the palm tree they were sitting beneath. "Do you mind if I ask you a silly question?"

"Miss—sorry. Miako. I've been put at your disposal for however long you stay in Tongatka. You can ask me anything."

Miako pointed at the palm fronds with her spoon. "How do these plants stay healthy when there are no windows in this place?"

"The lights." Jaybra pointed at the nearest sconce. "They give off full-spectrum light that varies in intensity as the day passes. During the night they dim almost all the way down, just giving enough for safety. Not all species can tolerate it, but we keep a few decat varieties. I think they soften the atmosphere, don't you? Sometimes I find all this stone oppressive."

“You must have spent almost your entire life outdoors before coming here.” Jaybra nodded wistfully. “How long have you been in Geshamo?”

“Six years.” Miako would have guessed two.

“And how long until you finish your studies?”

“Another four.”

Miako tried to imagine what that would be like. She might have spent the last decade studying here, becoming an expert in... what?

Jaybra shifted in her seat. “What would you like to do?”

“Well...”

“Please, ask me anything.”

“I don’t know how long Chass will be working here, but it might be as long as a week. Do you think I could live... somewhere else until he’s done?”

Jaybra laughed. It was a sweet sound. “You’d like something with windows?”

“Yes. And I want to cook my own meals.”

The two women looked at each other for a moment, and Miako felt something click into place. She didn’t know what it was.

“I understand you,” Jaybra said. “If you don’t mind waiting here, I’ll see to it immediately.”

While she waited, Miako watched the cook working. She was leaning over a work counter, doing something intricate and repetitive, but what she was doing or what she was working on, Miako couldn’t tell. She realized that she might be leaving soon and therefore had nothing to lose, so she walked over to see what the woman was doing.

When she felt Miako’s presence, the woman looked up and the stern lines evaporated from her face like morning fog. “Ah, I’m sorry,” she said, “I should have greeted you, Miako, but I’ve been intent on finishing this in time.”

Miako had never met the woman before. Her gray hair and lined face proclaimed that she was over fifty, but now that she was looking up there was a twinkle in her eye that made her look younger somehow. Miako realized it was not sternness she had seen in the woman’s face, which now seemed incapable of that emotion, but intense concentration.

The object of that focus was a tall confection of some kind, arranged in five tiers like a round pyramid. The surface was a little shiny and slightly grainy-looking, but overall smooth and pure white. Every juncture between layers was decorated with brightly-colored regular blobs of the same smooth-yet-grainy substance, in several colors from lilac to yellow. She held a small, obviously artificial flower in her hand, which seemed to be made of the same stuff, composed of blue and white petals surrounding a yellow center; there were already decats of the flowers studded across the layers.

“What is that you’re working on? It’s very pretty.”

“It’s a cake for my daughter. She’s just had her choiceday and chosen Tongat for kethrin. She’ll be arriving by lunchtime, they said.”

Miako didn’t know what to say. For one thing, Felitta had cakes but they didn’t look like this. They were usually only one layer, dense with fruit and nuts, never covered with whatever that stuff was, and rectangular or ring-shaped.

But more to the point, she had thought that Tongat never saw their children again. They gave them up in vessin when they were infants, which meant that the children grew up in another country, or even on another continent, and were raised by someone else. How could this woman know who her daughter was?

All she could do was to fall back on the manners her mother had taught her. “Would you like some help?”

The woman’s smile got broader. “Yes, thank you. If you could put some of these flowers on that side, I’ll handle this side.”

The flowers were leathery, not brittle as she’d expected, and seemed to be dusted with tiny sugar crystals. There was a large tray of them already made. Miako watched how the woman was arranging them and copied the pattern.

“What is your name, please?” she said.

“Debro Seasifter. My daughter will be so proud that the Mediator’s companion helped decorate her cake.”

“I’ve never seen a cake like this before.”

“I was born in Sevevessa, and my daughter was raised there. Cakes like this are traditional for choiceday and other important occasions.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Miako said tentatively, “how is it that you... that your daughter...”

“You mean, how do I know my daughter’s arriving?”

“Yes.”

“They told me—the population council. We’re very interested when one of our children comes back to us. It’s seen as a... I suppose you might say a source of pride. It was hard giving my child away, but when they come back of their own free will it’s like a validation. The council seems to think so too; maybe they think they’re concentrating some set of useful qualities, I don’t know, but they reward us when our children choose to come back.”

“It must be strange, for both of you.”

“Yes. Strange and wonderful. I can’t wait to see how she’s turned out. I hope she likes me.”

Miako smiled and placed another flower on the cake. “I’m sure she will.”

Jaybra returned and walked over to them. “It’s beautiful, Debro.”

“Thank you. Do you think she’ll like it?”

“She was raised by Sevevessa. How could she not love it?” To Miako she said, “Everything’s arranged, but there’s no rush.” She watched what they were doing for a moment. “Can I help with this?”

“Please,” Debro said, and Miako shifted over to make room. In a few minutes all the blue flowers were in place, spiraling out on each layer from the center to the perimeter.

“Will you be here for the celebration?” Debro asked them.

“I think we’ll be up on Level Five,” Jaybra said. “But wish your daughter welcome for me. I’m sure I’ll meet her soon. What’s her name?”

“Hallen Seafarer.”

Jaybra inhaled sharply. “She chose Seafarer?”

“Yes,” Debro said proudly. “Thank you both for your help. Miako, if I don’t see you again soon, I want you to know how much your song meant to me. I’ve never heard music with such intensity of emotion before. I wish my daughter had arrived one day sooner so she could have been here to experience it.”

Miako bowed to her and Debro reciprocated. She and Jaybra walked out of the kitchen.

“Was the daughter’s name significant?” Miako said when they were out of earshot.

“Debro is Seasifter. For her daughter to choose a similar name is a great honor. I think the council will reward her twice as much for that.”

“What kind of reward? Money?”

“No, not money. It’s, um... complicated. I suppose the simplest way to say it is that she’ll be promoted sooner. There’s a point system, the more points you’ve accumulated the more you get to control your researches, and the sooner you can progress to perovics. Um, that’s leaving out a lot of it, but...”

“That’s okay, I think I understand well enough. Where are we going?”

“Your things are waiting for us downstairs. You’ve been given a house on Level Five, the lowest research level.”

“They gave me a house?”

“Yes. Don’t you want a house?”

“I thought I’d just stay in a lodge or rent a room or something.”

“This will be easier. Come on.”

She led Miako downstairs, through the huge front doors and out to the portico, where Howart was waiting for them, standing beside the car.

“Nice to see you again, Miss,” he said.

“Good morning, Howart.”

“Would you ladies like to go straight to the house on Five?”

“I’m not sure,” Miako said. “The Library is on this level, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“Can I see that first? I’m not sure when I’ll be coming back to this level.”

“Of course.”

The weather was warmer than the previous day’s had been and the sun was peeking through scudding clouds. They drove along twisting streets, occasionally negotiating switchbacks with wide turns, almost all the way up to the wall of Level Six.

The Library building didn’t look anything like the Archives, but it had obviously been designed by the same people, with the same principles in mind. Just like the Archives, there were no windows in the tall, imposing walls, but this building was round, the ground-level curve made gentle by its vast size. There were five stories, each of the lower four topped by a colonnade that ran around the rim to support the roof of the next, all of it capped by an overhanging dome. Miako realized that it looked very much like Debro’s cake—without the sugar flowers—and wondered if there was some significance to that.

Howart drove right up to the front of the building, where another husky doorman opened another massive set of doors, but there the resemblance ended. The entry hall led immediately into a maze of endless stacks of sturdy shelves crammed with thick volumes. Off to one side, well in from the doorway, a man sat behind a polished wooden desk, intently hunched over a long, single sheet of paper, almost a scroll, occasionally making small marks with a pen. He looked up as Miako and Jaybra walked up to his desk.

“Miako Seeker!” he said, standing up and bowing to each of them. He smiled broadly at Jaybra before turning back to Miako. “I’d been told you might pay us a visit.”

Miako couldn’t get used to everyone knowing who she was. It was disturbing in a way that was hard to understand; she would have thought that fame—or notoriety, whichever it was—would have been pleasant, but now that she had it she longed for the anonymity she’d enjoyed on the *Tiggleday*.

“I’d like to look around, if I might,” she said.

“Would you like a tour?” he offered eagerly. Miako realized that he was quite a bit younger than she’d first thought, still in his twenties. She looked at Jaybra, who subtly shook her head.

“Thank you, but Jaybra knows her way around.”

He looked disappointed but politely didn’t insist. “Of course. Please let me know if there’s anything I can do to help,” he said, and went back to his work.

Jaybra guided her down an aisle. After several decat feet they came to a cross-passageway that seemed to be curved to follow the circumference of the outer walls. Two more turns left Miako hopelessly lost and the receptionist safely out of earshot.

“If you’d let him, he’d have kept you here all day,” Jaybra said.

“You know him?”

“Yes, he’s... um. I socialized with him for a while a year or so ago.”

Miako smiled and turned to look at the books in the shelf at her elbow. They were bound in something that looked like leather, but when she touched one it didn’t have the feel of leather. She pulled a book at random off the shelf and opened it—and was startled to see that it was a history of Felittaka. The pages were like very thin paper, but when she turned them they were stiff. She flexed the page and, suddenly by impulse tried to crease the corner. She couldn’t bend it.

“Ceramic,” Jaybra said. “The cover, too. Once they’re printed the words are indelible and the volume is essentially indestructible.”

“Just like the Archives,” Miako murmured. “Long-term planning.”

“It’s our business to think in terms of ages,” Jaybra said. She took the volume from Miako’s hands and turned to the last page. The history ended almost a thousand years ago, presumably to be continued in the next volume.

“Is it all like this?” Miako said.

“There’s a fresco on the inside of the dome that’s worth seeing, but otherwise the whole building looks just like this. The first two floors, anyway. We aren’t even close to filling the second level yet, so the top three are empty.”

Miako walked to the nearest intersection and looked in all directions. She had expected something grander, perhaps awe-inspiring or overwhelming, like the Archives. This was just... aisle after aisle of books. “I think I’d like to see my house now.”

“Of course,” Jaybra said.

The receptionist was startled to see them again so soon. “Are you leaving?” he asked, rising from his desk.

“Miako just wanted a quick look,” Jaybra said. “We’re on our way to her new house.”

“Oh. Well, please come back again. I’ll be happy to give you the full tour any time.”

When they were safely back in the car, with the doors shut and Howart pulling away from the granite layer cake, Jaybra said with a deadpan expression, “Don’t go back without me. It’s not safe to be alone with him on the third floor.”

It took a moment for Miako to understand what she meant. But then she laughed so hard she toppled over onto Jaybra’s lap.

\* \* \*

All of Level Six was perovics, which Miako had thought might be interesting, but there was nothing to see there: just the same veined granite buildings, mostly single-storied and none taller than two. She saw several small restaurants and pubs, but no services at all; no repair shops, laundries, grocers, barbers, or clinics. The architecture

here did not continue the pattern she'd seen lower down Mount Kibbith of continuing grace with altitude. It wasn't clunky, precisely, just solid, functional, and businesslike. There were many trees between the structures, but almost all of them were conifers. In the shadows of several homes lay snow that had not melted from the previous day's blizzard.

When they passed under the arch to Level Five the style shifted again, becoming less functional and with touches of whimsy that she had not seen anywhere else in the city. It was not unusual for the houses they passed to have statuary in the yards, and often they depicted animals, sometimes dressed and posing like humans, and sometimes the statues were of humans posing like animals. One was of a young man, with a thick mane of long hair down his back, on his hands and knees with his head thrown back and his mouth open as if baying at the moon. The very next house had a human-sized bronze of a rabbit standing on its hind legs and carrying a satchel, looking over its shoulder as if waiting for someone.

Howart drove on a small road that hugged the low wall between Levels Five and Six. After a while they crossed a set of railroad tracks heading straight uphill, which startled Miako, because she wouldn't have imagined that a train could possibly manage to climb the mountain's grade. Shortly afterwards the car pulled up in front of a small cottage and stopped. Miako looked at Jaybra, who nodded and opened the door.

It was cold here, noticeably colder than when they'd left the Library, and a stiff, frigid breeze was blowing. The air felt heavy, as if it might precipitate out into snow again. Miako wrapped her coat tightly around her and stood outside the knee-high wall that defined a small garden in front of the house. The garden was dormant, the shrubs and small trees all leafless and shaking in the wind. There was snow in the shadows of the house and its trees.

The house itself was modest, not much bigger than her three-room home in Littapo had been, but it was constructed of green-veined granite instead of blown ceramic, with large but sturdy-looking windows. The roof was thick ceramic shingles; they might have been either dark brown or black, it was difficult to tell in the wan light now that the clouds had closed in again.

"Come in and see the inside," Jaybra said. "Howart, can you bring the bags, please?"

They went through a low ornamental gate and up a walkway made from textured stone. Miako assumed that the texture was intended to provide better footing when the path was covered in ice, but it might just be artistic. The front door of the house was painted deep forest green. There was no lock—they simply walked in.

The interior contradicted the almost bleak exterior. They entered into a small foyer with an open room to their right, a sitting room wainscoted with half-height bookshelves. Above the empty shelves the walls were painted soft yellow and the ceiling was a paler shade of the same color. The large front window let in a surprising amount of light; it looked brighter inside than it had in the yard. Although the shelves were bare the room was furnished with a solid center table, a pair of upholstered chairs, each with a reading lamp, and a thick rug that nearly filled the room.

Past the sitting room was the kitchen, painted in the same cheerful color scheme, complete with pots and pans hanging from a ceiling rack, and a small eating area that had a round table and two chairs. Straight in from the front door was the lavatory with a free-



standing tub. To its left was a cozy bedroom just large enough to hold a good-sized bed, a large trunk, and a tall chest of drawers.

Just inside the entrance on the left was another door. Miako opened it and saw a completely empty room, the largest in the house, nearly twice the size of the bedroom. The walls were painted a soft, minty green, and though it was vacant there was something about it that screamed “workroom.”

“Shall I put the bags in your room, Miss?” Howart asked.

“Yes, please,” Miako said without looking at him. “Jaybra?” She glanced at her guide and gestured at the empty room.

“It’s traditional. Everyone has their own way of outfitting their studio. We didn’t furnish it because you obviously don’t have an assignment. Just leave the door closed if it bothers you, or tell me if there’s something you’d like to do with it and we’ll finish it however you like.”

“We can leave it empty for now. Someone told me that it’s traditional to live where you work. I didn’t realize it went the other way, too.”

“It’s quite a nice cottage,” Howart said. “Tight caulking, good windows. Very sturdy. And you’ll like the view on clear days.”

Miako walked back to the sitting room and looked out the window. She was facing almost due north. There were clouds *below* her as well as above, obscuring what must be a fantastic view of Tongat Bay.

“Is... is this really mine?”

“It is,” Jaybra said. “For as long as you need or want it.”

“But I haven’t done anything to merit this. How can I repay...”

“It’s not what you’ve done, I think. It’s what we expect you to do.”

She looked at the two of them. Howart was smiling faintly, perhaps wondering if he could go now.

“Is there food in the kitchen?” Miako said.

“It’s fully stocked.”

“Can I make the two of you some lunch?”

\* \* \*

She found some good, hearty bread in a cupboard and a selection of cheeses in the stuffed refrigerator. While slices of bread were toasting in the oven, she made a simple salad from greens and shredded beet of a kind she’d never seen before, deeper purple than the ones at home and slightly sweet. She spread a little prepared horseradish and oil on the toast and layered on very thin slices of soft, white cheese.

It was not cuisine, but Jaybra and Howart seemed to enjoy it. There were only two chairs, which Howart insisted that the ladies use, while he sat on the edge of the counter balancing a plate on each knee. It looked uncomfortable and Miako couldn’t believe he was able to eat without tipping one or both of the ceramic plates onto the floor, but he didn’t seem to be having any difficulty.

Miako stopped chewing suddenly with the realization that she had lost track of what day it was. She asked them, and when Jaybra said it was Thirdday Miako had to set her sandwich down.

“What is it?” Jaybra said.

“It was a week ago today—just ten days ago—that Chass embarrassed me at the Littapo fair so that I’d come with him.”

Howart laughed so hard he nearly did lose one of his plates. "That sounds like a story worth hearing," he said. So she told them how the Mediator had appeared in her house on the tenth anniversary of her choiceday and asked her to accompany him on a quest; how she'd initially turned him down; and how he'd called her out after a peffodia at the fair, leaving her no choice but to go along.

"I suppose I can see how you might be reluctant to toss your life aside on such short notice," Howart said. "But it sounds like a Tongat's dearest dream come true."

"I think perhaps I'm being punished," Miako said, and when Jaybra looked shocked she laughed. "That didn't come out right. What I mean is, when I was young I dreamed of adventures and quests. Never with Mediators, of course, I think the heroes in my fantasies were usually handsome young men. But I never did anything about those dreams, and maybe Baba is teaching me a lesson by making them come true against my will."

"Baba never worked like that," Jaybra said. "There's no record of her ever becoming personally involved; she always worked through Mediators, and only when people asked for help."

"I know. But I still feel like I'm being punished."

"No, Miss, I doubt that," Howart said, "but there's *no* doubt, I think, that you *are* on a once-in-an-age adventure. People will tell stories about this for centuries. People will write songs about it."

"You should write a song," Jaybra said. "For your flute. You could call it 'Miako's Adventure.'"

"I'd like to see how it turns out first," Miako said.

"So would we all," Howart replied.

Miako started gathering the dishes from the table. Then she heard a strange sound from outside, a staccato, machinery type of sound.

"What is that?" she asked them.

"It's the train," Howart said.

Miako ran to the entrance, flung open the front door, and hurried outside. The tracks were less than a quarter mile away, and she could clearly see a sleek, silvery train coming up the mountainside. It was still several hundred feet downhill from her street, so she ran toward it and arrived at just about the same time as the train did. The engine was large, more than twenty feet tall and longer than her house. It was pulling two smaller cars behind it. Through the windows she could see decats of people sitting in their seats, some intent on reading or other business, but many happily looking out the windows. A decat or so waved at her, and she waved weakly back. The engine was obviously run on fuel cells, the same as the car and the plane and all the trains back home, so it should have been quiet, but instead it made a constant repetitive sound almost like hammering, but with higher and lower harmonics thrown in.

In a moment it was past, and Miako bent down to look at the tracks. They were not the smooth metal rails that she'd known in Felittaka. These had an inverted J shape and there was something complicated going on under the overhang that she couldn't make out in the weak light. She walked back to the house, shivering because she'd run out without her coat, and closed the door behind her.

"Quite an amazing thing, that train," Howart said. "Runs from the Bay all the way up to the caldera, every day of the year, come snow or sleet or sun."

“How?” she said.

“Ratcheting rails. The front has a big plow on it, clears loose snow out of the way, and the wheels have teeth that fit into the sockets under the rails. You should see the stepper gears in that engine. I think it could climb up a forty-five degree slope, but it’s nowhere near that severe anywhere. The East Road, the one I drive the car on, gives out on Level Three. It’s just too steep after that. But the train goes all the way up.”

“Can we ride on it tomorrow?” she asked Jaybra.

“Of course. Why don’t we go up to Caldera Park tomorrow and play in the snow?”

“Does it come at the same time every day?”

“It makes two trips a day. I think the first one comes by... Actually, I don’t remember. Howart?”

“Sorry, Miss. I know what time it leaves the Low Station.”

“Hold on a minute.” Jaybra went into the sitting room and called someone on the phone. She came back a minute later. “The Level Five station is less than a mile from here. The morning run gets in at 03.88, so you won’t even have to get up early. I’ll meet you here at 03.00, if you like.”

“You won’t be needing me tomorrow, then?” Howart said.

“No, thank you,” Miako said.

“Well here, Miss.” He took a card out of his pocket and handed it to her. “That has my home number and the scheduler’s number too. If you need me, just give us a ring and a little warning and I’ll be by to pick you up.”

“Thank you, Howart.”

“Well, thanks for the lunch, Miss. I’ll be off, then. I’ll have to tell my wife about your cheese sandwich, I think I’d like to have that again.”

Miako nodded, startled at the idea that Howart—or any Tongat, but especially Howart—would have a wife. But of course, just because they didn’t raise their children didn’t mean that Tongat wouldn’t fall in love and want to live together.

She walked him to the front door and saw him out. Then she turned to Jaybra.

“I’d be happy to keep you company tonight,” she said.

“I think I’d rather be alone, if you don’t mind. I’d like to settle in.” Jaybra nodded, obviously not offended. “You know, I’ve lived alone for ten years, but in the last week I haven’t been on my own except when I was asleep.”

“I understand. If you need anything, my number’s by the phone. I only live a few minutes from here, so I can be here quickly if you need me.” Somehow Miako wasn’t surprised that they were neighbors; maybe she was just too tired for surprise.

“Thanks,” she said. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

“03.00.”

When the door was closed and the house was silent, Miako cleaned up the kitchen and emptied her bags on the bed, sorting the clothes. There was a compact laundry unit in a closet in the kitchen that she put to good use. She wandered from room to room of the small house, examining everything, and at dusk found herself sitting on the floor in the studio with her back to the outside wall, trying to imagine what she might do, someday, in this echoing room.

\* \* \*

The train station was small, just an elevated platform with a small, heated waiting room. Miako was grateful for the heat, because they’d arrived half an hour before the

train was due and she would not have enjoyed standing in the chill wind that had sprung up overnight.

Jaybra was wearing a furry white coat with a heavy hood. When Miako had opened her front door she'd thought it was an animal standing there, some mythical beast like the white bears in children's tales. For a brief moment she'd been paralyzed, then Jaybra threw back the hood and Miako started breathing again. When she put on the same coat she'd worn the day before, Jaybra frowned.

"Is that the warmest coat you have?"

"It never gets this cold in Felittaka."

"We'll get you something better at the park."

They sat on a sturdy wooden bench in the station, making idle talk. Jaybra asked how she'd slept, if she was unpacked, whether she needed anything. Miako answered automatically but she was having trouble concentrating. She wasn't tired but she didn't feel connected to the world this morning. Maybe it was just the accumulated stress of so much newness, so many events in such a short time after half a lifetime of predictability. She could barely believe that she was here in Tongatka, on a chilly mountainside waiting for a gear-driven train to take her up to the summit. After a while Jaybra realized that Miako didn't feel like making conversation and they waited in silence.

There was no one else in the station, and no noise but the whispering of the wind, trying to get in at them, so when that peculiar ratcheting sound wafted up the hillside Miako jumped up and went outside to find that the train was still almost a mile away, just barely visible coming around a curve down the hill. The grade here was quite steep, far too severe for any train Miako had ever seen before, but the silver engine clattered away, pulling steadily closer until finally, and right on time, it coasted to a stop in front of their platform.

"I brought some money," Miako said. "How much will it be?"

"Cars are very expensive," Jaybra said. "The train is free. Here, watch your step."

It was three steps up to a small platform at the tail of the second and final passenger car. The door was latched open and they stepped inside. The interior was strange; the inside and outside didn't quite look like they belonged to the same conveyance. The exterior was smooth and sleek, ceramic or possibly metal, no doubt to prevent ice build-up, but inside was dark wood panelling, with ornate sconces throwing a cheerful yellow light. The aisle between the two columns of seats was carpeted in something jet black, slip-proof, and somewhat rubbery. The seats themselves were wide enough to seat three people abreast, carved wood and upholstery that looked brand new.

Only a few people rode in the car. Most of them had turned when Miako and Jaybra entered, smiled and gone back to their conversations or their books. The two women took a seat in the middle on the right and a moment later an elderly conductor, wearing a bright yellow tunic that reached his knees, closed the door at the back and the train pulled out.

Miako had expected the clacking to be nearly unbearable inside the car but she could barely hear it. They must use some sort of soundproofing.

"First time on the West Road?" the conductor asked her. His hair was completely white, but his face was nearly unlined, round and jovial, with a small nose.

"Yes, it is. I can't believe how quiet it is."

“Took them a long time to get that right,” he said, nodding, as if she’d immediately put her finger on the key problem, when the real issue as far as she could see was how the train was able to jauntily traverse slopes that she would have had trouble climbing. With pitons and ropes.

“Did they just recently change it?”

“Well, Miss, that depends on your definition of ‘recent.’ The last major change in the design was maybe two and a half thousand years ago.” He nodded again. “Enjoy the ride, Miss.” He nodded at Jaybra and went back into the first car.

From the bottom of Level Five to the top of Level One was about ten miles as the eagle flies. The train stopped at every Level for roughly ten minutes, but in between stops it seemed to keep up a steady twenty miles per hour or more. At each stop the conductor would latch open the door, then come back to close it again just as the train was leaving the station. For those few seconds when the door was open and the train was moving, Miako could hear the clatter of the mechanism quite clearly, but when the door closed it faded into the background.

There was less variation in the architecture of the top five Levels than there had been in the lower ones. There was a tendency to build lower and rounder as they went uphill. The trees grew shorter and more stunted until finally near the top of Level Three they just disappeared. The transition from Three to Two was an escarpment so steep she couldn’t believe they could climb it, but they did, without noticeably slowing; this must have been the reason why the East Road gave out while the train went all the way up. On Level Two the houses were widely spaced, never more than one or two visible at a time.

People came and went, but more had departed than arrived, and by the time they reached the station on Level One there were only two people left in their car, a young couple who’d had their heads together since Miako came aboard.

“Do we get off here?” she asked.

“One more stop,” Jaybra said.

The last section was actually less steep than it had been the last few miles, as if the mountain were leveling off. Roughly one and a half hours after they’d boarded the train, it pulled into the High Station and the conductor came back one more time.

“Caldera Park?” he said. “Observatory? Dirigible terminal?”

“The park,” Jaybra said. “Thank you, Tisken.”

“My pleasure, Miss. And you have fun, Miss Miako.”

She was so startled by this that she didn’t really notice getting off the train. She’d thought that here at least she was anonymous, but now she realized that every single person—except possibly the snuggling couple—had known all along who she was. So it took a moment after she climbed down to realize what there was to see.

They were standing on the northern rim of the extinct volcano’s enormous caldera. The snowy, nearly barren mountainside sloped down and away to the north, plunging into thick clouds a mile or so down. Miako could see the peak’s shadow on the puffy cloud-tops to her left like the shadow of a titanic child on cobblestones. To the right three other snow-capped mountaintops poked through the clouds, widely spaced and far off.

She turned and caught her breath. Looking down into the shallow bowl of the nearly circular caldera—three miles wide and filled with snow, with just a few twisted and gnarled trees punctuating the smooth whiteness—Miako felt that she was standing on the lip of a god’s frozen skillet. Though the slope was gentle she had a moment of vertigo,

the conviction that if she slipped she would slide and never stop. When she recovered she thought how strange it had been, because the external slope was where the danger lay. She wouldn't even need an ice axe to stop a slide into the crater.

To their left and down a little way was a two-story building that somehow seemed more massive and impregnable than anything she'd seen on the lower Levels. A well-traveled path led from the train station to the lodge, bordered by ropes slung between thick posts topped with brilliant blue lights.

"Let's get you some proper clothes," Jaybra said, "then we can go have some fun."

There was a clothing shop in the lodge that also sold souvenirs and more practical items such as ice axes, snowshoes, and goggles. Jaybra helped Miako select a very warm but surprisingly lightweight coat that reached just below her hips. Miako had been interested in a similar style that went down to mid-thigh, but Jaybra suggested it might hinder her mobility. "You'll see what I mean in a while," she said.

Jaybra tried to brush off the cost of her new coat, and the matching boots and mittens, but Miako insisted on paying for them herself.

"Chass told me to be prepared to pay for the things I would need on this journey," she said. "So far no one in Tongatka has let me buy as much as an apple. You gave me the house, at least let me buy my own clothes."

The clerk, a young woman with very short hair and a pleasant face, didn't even attempt to conceal her smile as she weighed out Miako's gold.

On the downslope side of the lodge Jaybra rented them each a pair of snowshoes. Miako had never heard of such a thing, but the young man running the rental shop very patiently showed her how to buckle the clumsy contraptions on over her boots and gave her a few minutes' instruction in maneuvering in them and how to use the poles that were part of the package.

They spent the rest of the morning tramping around the slopes near the lodge. Miako would never have believed that just walking over snow could be so much fun. Her entire experience with the solid form of water before this trip had been dropping ice cubes into Suzata's drinks. They passed through small groves of trees so twisted, bent, and stunted that Miako thought they must be some form of art, but Jaybra assured her that they grew that way naturally.

After a hot lunch back at the lodge they went out again, laterally this time, staying near the rim but moving several miles away from the lodge, which shrank to near invisibility against the solid field of white. The air was noticeably thinner than she was used to, but as long as they moved slowly she had no difficulty with the altitude. When the sun started throwing longer shadows they agreed to stop, and rested for a few minutes before heading back.

"No one back home would believe this," Miako said.

"Same for me," Jaybra said. "I come from prairie land. We have lakes and streams, and the ocean of course. The big rivers are all to the south, and the mountains are far in the west. I never saw snow either, until I came to Tongatka."

"Do you get used to it?"

Jaybra laughed. "People get used to anything, Miako. Let's go back."

It seemed to take much longer to return than it had to come out. Miako was tired and breathing heavily by the time they reached the lodge. They turned the snowshoes back in, picked up Miako's lighter clothing from the shopkeeper, and made it back to the train

station with only half an hour to spare. Miako looked to the west, where the sun had already set below the thick clouds, and saw a blinking light high off the ground. She asked Jaybra about it.

"That's the dirigible terminal," she said. "Nothing to see there, but you should come back one evening and visit the observatory."

"Chass told me to do that."

"I can arrange it for you, if you like."

"Yes, thanks."

They were quiet on the train ride back down. There were fewer passengers than there had been on the morning run, and a different conductor who didn't seem to know Jaybra and pretended not to know who Miako was. Jaybra walked Miako back to her house but didn't seem inclined to come in, which suited Miako. She wanted a simple meal and an early bed; she was exhausted.

She slept well that night, but when she rolled out of bed the next morning her legs and back protested with muscles she hadn't known were there. Suppressing a scream, she hobbled into the bathroom to run a hot bath.

\* \* \*

Jaybra called on the telephone shortly after Miako finished breakfast. She laughed when Miako told her about her sore legs, then apologized and admitted that the same thing had happened to her the first time.

"The Astronomer says he'd like to meet you," Jaybra said. "Is this evening all right for you?"

"You may have to carry me to the train station."

She laughed again. "I'll come get you at 12.00. We'll eat dinner at the lodge."

That gave her almost nine hours. She spent part of it doing light exercises to limber up her aching body, and then devoted several hours to carefully constructing a shrine on top of the empty bookshelf in the living room.

The only thing she'd brought with her from her home shrine was the marble horse that Partep had carved so long ago. But she also had the medallion that the councilor had given her. Going through her things, she found the naked fighter that Zeven had pressed into her palm when they parted, and the painting that Ron had given her of Ravi the Sevessa queen. She arranged these things carefully on the shelf, but she couldn't make them cohere into a sensible shrine. Something was missing.

She looked at the collection for a while, then glanced out the window. It had started to snow again, very lightly; the flakes drifted slowly and gently down from a solid gray sky as if they had all of eternity to meet their destiny on the ground. Miako pulled on her new coat and mittens and went outside.

The cold was bracing and she forgot about her aching legs. She ambled down the street toward the train tracks. There were only two houses between hers and the tracks, and she had yet to see any sign that they were inhabited. Perhaps they'd given her this house because no one else wanted it: close to the train and close by the city's edge might be considered an undesirable neighborhood.

At the tracks she looked both ways, although she knew that the morning train had already passed going uphill and wouldn't come by on its way down for hours yet. She tilted her head up, closed her eyes, and felt the snowflakes touch her face and vanish like

a kitten's kisses. With a sigh, she opened her eyes and started to turn back home when something caught her eye.

Down near the edge of the track, among the gravel frozen together into a bumpy hard surface, something glittered in the thin light. Miako walked over to it and picked it up. It was an irregular piece of quartz, or perhaps old glass, somewhat smaller than her fist, smooth-edged and mostly transparent.

In the heart of the crystal was a multi-faceted fracture that looked just like a snowflake.

Miako clutched the rock to her chest and looked around for more. She walked thirty paces downhill, then as far again uphill, looking on both sides of the tracks. There was nothing else like it to be seen, not even any small quartz pebbles. Still grasping the omen, she walked briskly back home. Beside her other treasures the wounded crystal looked right at home. Somehow now the arrangement had a balance it had lacked before. Miako got her flute and sat in the window seat. She played softly for a while, a song of loss and snow.

\* \* \*

Tongat had a tendency to name people after their office, especially the chief of the office. She'd had to ask Jaybra specifically to learn that the Archivist was named Felip Collector; everyone simply called him the Archivist, even though there were hundreds of people working in the Archives.

She supposed it was the same with the Astronomer. In Felittaka he would likely have had the title of Chief Astronomer, or Head of the Astronomy Bureau, or something even more long-winded. Tongat simply called him the Astronomer.

The train ride up the mountain was quiet. The snow was falling much harder, which had a strange muffling effect on sounds, even inside the passenger cars. It was Fiday, a day that most people did not work, but the next day *was* a work day, so she expected that the train coming down would be much busier.

She told Jaybra about the crystal she'd found. Jaybra suggested that someone might have dropped it from the train, perhaps years ago, and no one had noticed it or thought to pick it up until today.

"I don't really believe in signs from Baba," Miako said, "but it's hard to fight the feeling that I was meant to find that special rock."

"That's the way peoples' minds work. They find patterns even in random circumstance and meaningless noise. Like the constellations."

When she was a young girl, Miako's father had often taken her out into the yard on dark summer nights and shown her the Wolf, the Snake, the Ship, the Horseman, the River, the Handmaiden, and of course the Mediator. "This feels different," she said.

Jaybra smiled and the talk ran down.

When they arrived at High Station it was just past dinnertime. Miako was surprisingly hungry. They had a simple meal of soup and chicken pepper rice. Jaybra took her watch out of a tunic pocket and said it was time.

The snow had stopped while they were eating and the clouds were breaking up. There was no transport to the Observatory, despite its distance of over a mile from the lodge. They had to walk along another of the paths lined with the tall posts, with their blue lights and ropes. Someone had cleared the snow off the path, though, and it wasn't slippery. Miako breathed the clean, sharp air and found herself enjoying the night walk. There was



no possibility of getting lost—the blue lights, spaced fifty feet or so apart, guided them well, and after a quarter mile or so the snow on each side of the posts gradually got deeper and deeper until they were walking in a ten-foot trench with hard-packed snow walls on each side.

The Observatory was not visible until they were nearly upon it. It had been built in a little hollow behind a great hump of rock that shielded it from any possible light contamination from the lodge and the train station. The blue lights stopped several hundred feet from the hulking domed building and there was no light visible from inside, so the last stretch was interesting, especially since the trench petered out at just about the same place the lights did. But the snow reflected just enough light from the stars and who knew where so they could find their way to the door.

Jaybra knocked once. They waited for several minutes before the door was flung open. The interior was unlit, so Miako couldn't see the Astronomer's face; she felt more than saw his presence in the door.

"Come in, come in, you must be freezing."

It didn't sound like an old man's voice, and when they were through the vestibule and into the main part of the building, there were enough dim red lights glowing on the walls for Miako to see that the Astronomer was a man no older than she was.

"Jaybra, nice to see you again," he said as he helped them remove their coats. "And you must be Miako Seeker. It is a *great* pleasure to meet you." He bowed and grabbed her hand and stood holding it for a long, awkward moment.

"Thank you for taking the time to show us the Observatory," Miako said. "Chass—the Mediator specifically recommended that I come up here."

"Ah. The Mediator. I don't suppose there's much chance of my meeting him."

"I don't think so," Jaybra said, "not unless you're willing to come down."

"Oh."

"The Astronomer rarely goes below Level One," Jaybra told Miako.

"Actually, I don't get down to One very often," he said. "Too much to do."

"How many people work here?" Miako asked.

"Me. And Harrtel. Sometimes Elesa spends a few nights observing."

"Three?" she squeaked. She thought of the thousands of perovics and researchers, the great staffs of the Library and the Archives. The famous Observatory, the only one in the northern hemisphere of Brezlun, had *three* researchers?

"It's not a discipline in which much happens," the Astronomer said. "The skies have been mapped pretty thoroughly. There aren't many comets or asteroids in this system, so there are no dangers we have to watch out for, but even if there were I doubt Baba would let one harm us. It's just the enthusiasts that commit their lives to this place. A few in each generation. It's enough. But let's not just stand here, come in, come in, I have some coffee and cakes ready."

Miako's eyes were nearly night-adapted from the dark walk outside. The red lights gave enough illumination for her to safely follow him down a curved hallway, traveling counter-clockwise, with occasional closed doors on their right and a blank wall on the left. They came to a door that was open and the Astronomer led them inside.

It was a spacious office, with a large desk cluttered with hundreds of wide sheets of paper that were covered with black dots of various sizes, high bookshelves crammed with very tall volumes, and a handful of armchairs scattered about. The Astronomer dragged

two of these chairs nearer to a third and gestured for his guests to sit. He fussed at a corner station for a moment and joined them with a tray of coffee cups, a thermos, and a plate of round, speckled cakes.

When he'd poured them cups and offered cream, which Jaybra accepted but Miako declined, he held out the plate. "Please try one of these," he said. "I make them myself."

Miako tasted one. It was slightly sweet, with an earthy but pleasant scent, not dense but not fluffy, either. It was quite good, actually, much better than the coffee, which was thin and tasteless in the Tongat style.

"What's in these?" Miako said.

"Poppy seed and crystallized ginger, and a lot of other stuff. Do you like them?"

"Yes, very much."

He smiled disarmingly, like a young boy. "I'd love to hear about your journey so far, if you wouldn't mind telling a story," he said. "I've only had rumors and some remarkably uninformative phone calls up here."

Miako told him an abbreviated version of how she had come to travel with the Mediator, and what they had seen and done.

"Describe the three relics that he found at the farm, would you please?" the Astronomer said.

Miako told him everything she could remember.

"I'm no expert," he said, "but I'd guess that the spidery thing is a memory chip. Probably not more than ten gigabytes, considering the size. The lemon seed is almost certainly a modulator of some kind, probably part of the uplink. The fluff blob—I have no idea."

Miako spoke all five languages, but she had no idea what he'd just said. It must have shown on her face, because the Astronomer laughed. He leaned around the edge of his chair to look at a large clock on the wall. It was around 15.50.

"Not time yet," he said cryptically. "Well, fair is fair. You told me a story, I'll tell you one." And he proceeded to tell a tale that Miako had never heard before. When he had finished, he asked if they'd like more coffee, but both women declined.

### **The Astronomer's Tale**

This is a tale of the long ago in the land of Tongatka.

At that time there were ten astronomers, the most there had ever been, and there have never been that many since. *The Astronomer* was a woman born in Sevevaka, a brilliant and driven person. Tongat of those days had only small telescopes, each one built by hand, and many were not very good. The Astronomer was determined that the Tongat should have a better Observatory with a giant telescope, but there were not enough people to build it, and no one knew how to make a mirror of the size she wanted, nor how to mount it or construct the tracking mechanisms that would make it useful.

The Tongat Mediators still visited occasionally, though not as often as in the long, long ago. Troff had not been seen in decades, but that year Yill appeared in Geshamo and the Astronomer went to him and prayed for help in designing the telescope.

*"I can't grant you that," he said. "I don't have the knowledge myself, and I can't ask Baba."*

The Astronomer went away, bitterly disappointed, but she came back the very next day.

*"I want a perfectly ground four-inch reflecting mirror," she said.*

*"That I can help you with,"* Yill said, and they discussed materials and techniques.

The next day she returned and asked how to get more workers to help her build the Observatory.

*"I can't tell you that,"* he said.

*"Then tell me what young Felitta men want."*

*"They want to be able to buy farms and raise families."*

The following day she visited again and asked how to make a mechanism that could smoothly track the stars as Brezlun rotated beneath them.

*"You don't have the means to make such a thing,"* he said.

*"Then let's discuss how to make a better clock."*

*"That I can do."* And they talked about it all day.

And once more she came to the Mediator. "How can I hang a machine that weighs a ton so that it can be freely pointed at any angle with minimal effort, yet remain stable?"

*"I have no idea."*

*"Then how can I make a better trader's scale?"*

*"Ah, here are some ideas,"* Yill said.

The Mediator went away for a very long time, no one knew where or why. When he returned to Geshamo thirty years later the Sevessa Astronomer was still alive, though grown old, and still *the* Astronomer, and this Observatory was very much as you see it today.

*"How did you do this?"* he asked the Astronomer.

*"I did not do it. You did it. When a farmer plants a seed, do we say that the soil grows the wheat, or the farmer?"*

*"The farmer grows the wheat. The soil is what he grows it in."*

*"Just so,"* the Astronomer said. "You planted the seed. Once I had ground a perfect four-inch mirror, I made a perfect six-inch mirror, then twelve, then twenty. By then my assistants knew more than I did about mirrors, and in ten years they made this."

*"And who built the Observatory?"*

*"Young men from Felitta. We call them dirshet. They come and work for ten years, and in return I give them enough money to buy a farm and get married. I had money, but I lacked labor."*

*"And the mechanism, and the mounting?"*

*"I am merely the soil,"* the old Astronomer said.

*"No,"* he said, and touched her face. *"You are the wheat."*

— — —

"All right then, it's almost time. Let me show you the observation room. Bring your coats."

He bounced up out of his chair and led them farther on in the same direction they'd been heading before. They passed three more closed doors, then the hallway ended in a much larger double set of doors that spanned its width. He opened them and led them into a cavernous space.

The cusp of the dome was over eighty feet overhead. The area below it was mostly empty, but that was not immediately apparent because of the massive tube that pointed up at nearly a forty-five degree angle, and the bewilderingly complex system of struts, supports, platforms, stairways, and machinery that supported and surrounded the telescope. The top of the instrument nearly touched the dome, and the bottom came within ten feet of the floor, but the gantry or control mechanism or whatever it was rested on a round platform slightly elevated above ground level. Jutting arms and beams, and cantilevered counterweights, reached out nearly to the walls of the room in places.

"This way," the Astronomer said.

He walked under the jumble of steel and led them to the foot of a stairway. There was a control panel at waist height. He pushed a thick lever and without waiting for a response started up the stairs. Miako could hear a soft growling kind of noise coming from above them, but she couldn't really see anything for all the strutwork overhead. She followed the Astronomer and looked back occasionally to see if Jaybra was keeping up. After just a few minutes her legs were aching again and her chest felt constricted. At a landing she stopped to catch her breath.

"Maybe we should have waited another day between snowshoeing and mountain climbing," Jaybra said. She was doing better than Miako was, but it was obviously having an effect on her too.

"I'll be all right. Would you like to go first?"

"Absolutely not," Jaybra said, and grinned at her.

The platform they were standing on was vibrating, and when she looked out she could see that the wall of the dome was moving—or, more likely, the whole mechanism was rotating slowly. Miako started up once more, and wasn't yet out of breath again when she realized she'd reached the top of the stairway. The structure and the telescope continued on another forty feet or so. The Astronomer looked up from another control panel and grinned at them.

"You did pretty well," he said. "It takes some getting used to."

Miako caught her breath and realized that she could see it; the air was cold. She looked up and was startled—while they'd been climbing, the dome had retracted nearly completely, leaving nothing but a tall wall encircling the Observatory; that was the noise she'd heard. It was hard to believe that the retracting dome could have been so quiet.

The Astronomer leaned down slightly to look through a binocular eyepiece with a soft surrounding hood. He touched another control on the console and took a step back. "Have a look," he said.

Miako stepped up to the eyepiece. The hood was padded and when she leaned her head against it, it blocked out all of the faint light coming from the room. She nearly lost her balance when she saw what was within it.

Swimming in three dimensions before her was a starfield so dense and bright she could never have imagined it. She had always thought that the night sky was a beautiful and mysterious thing, but this bore as much resemblance to what she could see with the naked eye as the sun did to a light bulb. She could actually tell that the stars were

different colors; some were sort of orange, many were yellow, there were some blue and red ones, and others looked pure white.

After a moment she noticed something odd just at the right side of the image. Something brighter than any of the stars was crossing slowly into her field of vision. It was silvery, obviously a sphere—not a point source—and she could just make out a few details around the equator. There were darker patches, regularly spaced, and outlined shapes that were perfectly square.

It couldn't be the Moon; that wouldn't rise for several more hours. It was too clear to be a comet, too regular to be an asteroid. She stood up and looked at the Astronomer.

"There's something strange... I don't know what it is."

"It's Baba," he said, smiling as if he'd just played the best trick in the world.

Miako fainted.

\* \* \*

"That happens sometimes," he was saying. "More often to artistic types, or the very religious."

"What?" Miako said. She opened her eyes. She was sitting on the cold metal floor of the observation platform, and so were Jaybra and the Astronomer. "What happened?"

"Well..." he said.

"You fainted," Jaybra said. "I think he was expecting it, though, because he caught you before you fell and set you down gently."

"Well, what are you two doing down here?"

"Keeping you company," the Astronomer said, smiling again.

"I don't think I've ever fainted before."

"You've never seen Baba before, either."

"Oma," Miako said weakly.

"Yes. Very good. Omadaz is her name, Baba is just what people call her. It's a corrupted form of Mother, I think. *Mama, Baba*—like baby talk."

"How are you feeling?" Jaybra asked.

"Better. A little light-headed. Have you..."

"Yes. Several times. It's an amazing sight, isn't it?"

"All my life she's just been a light in the night sky, like another star. To actually see her... To see her form..."

"It makes her more real, doesn't it?"

"I always believed in her. But it didn't mean anything." She gathered her legs and stood up. No one insulted her by trying to help. She stood looking at the eyepiece again for a moment. Then she asked the Astronomer, "May I?"

"Please," he said.

The mechanism must have been tracking Baba across the sky, because she had barely drifted from the center of view. Miako looked for a long time. Now that she knew what she was looking at she could see more detail. There were regular markings, striations, in both the upper and lower hemisphere, and the repeated dark areas were clearly ovals. Sometimes, just after she blinked her eyes, Miako could barely make out something marring the smooth limb of the sphere, perhaps something sticking out here and there, but a moment later she couldn't see it at all. Finally she stood back from the telescope and realized that her back was stiff.

“Thank you,” she said huskily, and the Astronomer bowed low. He led them back down the stairs and out to the entrance to the Observatory.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” he said when they had stepped outside, “please mention to the Mediator that he is always welcome here.”

“I’ll tell him,” Miako said, “but don’t put your hopes in it. He’s very...”

“Focused?”

“Yes.” She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you, Stelikin Sorter.”

She missed his deepest bow yet as she turned away and started back along the path through the snow. Jaybra linked her arm in Miako’s. They didn’t speak a word on the mile-long walk beside the blue lights.

“We have adjoining rooms,” she said when they reached the lodge. “If you want to talk, or need anything during the night, just knock on the connecting door.”

“Thank you,” Miako said, and stifled the urge to perform the rite of thanks for a special gift. She felt as if part of her language had been ripped away, not being able to perform the rites she’d known since childhood. But Jaybra wouldn’t have understood it—she was born Merta—or noticed or appreciated the grace notes Miako might have added for a life-changing experience and warm regard for a special friend.

The room was cozy, warm, and comfortably furnished. She thought she might not be able to sleep, but after a brief shower she sank into the soft bed and drifted off immediately. She was shocked awake long after sunrise by a tentative knock on the door between her room and Jaybra’s. She rolled out of bed and opened it.

“Sorry,” Jaybra said. “I thought you might like to get something to eat before we have to go.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“The Tongat Council wants to meet with you this afternoon. If we catch the first train down and have Howart meet us on Three, we should be able to make it.”

“The Council?” That would be the three leaders she’d already met—President, Archivist, and Perovics—and the heads of the peace force, legislature, and high court.

“Why do they want to meet me?”

Jaybra just looked at her with a mixture of pity and awe.

“Give me ten minutes,” Miako said, and trundled off to the bathroom without closing the connecting door.

## Promises and Threats

Howart was waiting at the train station on Level Three when they arrived. He opened the car door for them and waited patiently while they got situated, but once they were belted in he drove away from the station much faster than Miako would have thought safe. She closed her eyes when they hit the first switchbacks, but that only made her more nauseous, so she tried to focus on a fixed point, but there was none. She didn't know how long it took, but she almost cried aloud in relief when she saw the tall columns that flanked the road to the Capitol building.

The smooth columns were carved from a red-tinted granite. Each one was wider than she was tall, and at least thirty feet from the pedestal to the graceful capitals. Atop every one stood some kind of sculpture, but the nearby ones were hidden by the columns they stood upon, and the farther ones were too far to make out.

"What is the significance of this colonnade?" she asked Jaybra. It was the first time anyone had spoken on the trip down from Three to Eight.

Jaybra started to say something, then shook her head. "It's too complicated. I'll tell you later."

Hundreds of the columns lined the long road to the Capitol. The building itself seemed modest at first, but that was merely distance; it wasn't as large as the Library or the Archives, but it was almost as big as Government Building in Littapo, even though it served a country with only five percent the population of Felittaka.

The other big difference, apart from size, was that this building was obviously not intended to be defensible. There were many windows all over the façade, on all three stories, and the approach, while impressive, was inviting, not forbidding. The central part of the wide structure was capped in a shallow dome, like the one at the Library. Also like the library, each story was stepped back from the one below, but here she could see trees growing on the roofs of the bottom two levels. They must be gardens, Miako thought.

You couldn't drive up to the front of this building, however. There were shallow, very wide steps leading from the road up to the entry, with numerous fountains (not operating) and planters full of trees and shrubs on each level. It would be a chore to walk all that distance if you were in a hurry, but a pleasant stroll if you could take your time, especially in the summer.

Howart didn't give her the chance to find out. He followed the road past the stairs, to the left, and drove around the side of the building. There was a small parking area there, but he passed that as well and pulled right up to an unembellished door of painted wood. It looked a lot like the door to Miako's house on Five.

Miako got out and waited for Jaybra, but she just leaned over and said, "I can't go with you, Miako. The invitation was for you alone. Howart and I will wait here for you."

"But where am I supposed to go?"

"Just go in that door. Someone will help you."

Miako reluctantly shut the car door and walked to the building. The door opened easily. Inside was a warm and well-lit reception room, with a handful of stuffed chairs and a small desk, behind which sat a very small, trim woman.

“Miako Seeker,” she said. It wasn’t a question. The woman stood up and came around the desk to bow. Her head came only to Miako’s shoulder. “I’m so glad to meet you. You made very good time coming down from the Observatory, you’re not at all late. You have time to freshen up if you’d care to.”

“Yes, please.”

“Let me take your coat. It will be waiting for you here when you’re done with the Council.” She hung Miako’s coat in a small closet behind her desk, then showed her the facilities. When Miako came out, the woman gestured to an open door and led her out into a long hallway.

“I understand you’ve already met the President, and the Archivist and the Perovics as well.”

“Yes. The President gave me a tour of the Archives. Then we had lunch and went swimming.” She immediately felt foolish for babbling.

The woman smiled over her shoulder. “That’s most unusual. She must like you.”

“She was very nice,” Miako said weakly.

They were walking down a tall, very wide, perfectly straight hallway. All the doors they passed were unmarked and closed. Miako would be willing to bet they were all locked, too. After a long stretch they came to an open area—the central atrium. It was at least fifty feet wide and open all the way to the dome, which was painted in frescoes so large that Miako could easily make out the scenes, though she had the feeling that no matter how close she got to it she would see more detail.

She could see the paintings, but it took a moment for her to understand them. One showed a crossroads on a sunny plain, with four groups of people walking away from each other and the intersection; one of the groups was composed of women only. In another scene, something like soap bubbles were floating in a deep blue sky. There was a farm, a fishing fleet, wild men with shaved heads riding horses. Suddenly it came to her: the frescoes depicted the broad history of Brezlun. The soap bubbles were the landing pods, or whatever they had been, in the Gentle Fall. The crossroads was the parting of the four nations, which had lived together within Baba but were now free to go their own ways and live separate lives. And then those distinct lives were shown.

“There’s a special viewing gallery on the third floor,” her guide said, “but it was designed to be seen from exactly the spot where you’re standing.”

“Who did this? The technique is incredible.”

“It’s quite something, isn’t it? The artist was Fer Dreamsower. He spent twenty years on it, and died a few weeks after it was completed. Almost three thousand years ago.”

“How is it possible that it’s still so vivid after so long?”

“No one knows. He made his own paints. Every few centuries someone suggests that they scrape off a bit to analyze it, and each time they’re shouted down. It’s one of our national treasures.”

They continued on to another hallway, this time much shorter, and the woman stopped at an unmarked door just like the decats of ones they’d already passed. She gave a short bow and opened the door for Miako.

It instantly reminded her of the room where she and Chass had been introduced to the President and the others four days ago. There was a blaze burning in a wide fireplace, lots of comfortable furniture, a thick rug, and sconces on the walls. Stepha, the President, separated from a group that had been talking near the fire and walked over to Miako.



“How are you?” she said.

“I’m... fine, thank you.” Miako’s hands twitched to perform the appropriate rites, but she controlled herself. “It’s very nice to see you again.”

Stepha smiled. “Let me introduce you to my colleagues. You’ve met the Archivist and the Perovics.” The two men, middle-aged jebesha and white-haired elder, bowed politely. Miako returned the gesture. “This is the Peace,” a straight-backed man with salt-and-pepper hair, whose wiry forearms, where they protruded from his tunic, looked capable of bending steel. “The Judge,” a woman nearly as old as Stepha, but with much less stern features; she looked more like someone’s aunt, and one who loved practical jokes, than the head of the high court. “And the Law,” a very serious face, younger than any of the others except the Archivist.

“Let’s sit down,” Stepha said. “Miako, you sit here, by the fire. Did they give you time for breakfast?”

“No. I mean...”

“Gloreja, would you bring us something? Hot chocolate and sweet rolls, perhaps?” She looked at Miako for confirmation; she nodded, and a young woman who had been standing near the door bowed and went out. Everyone settled into the couches by the fire.

“I understand,” the Judge said, “that you made quite an impression on the Astronomer.”

“Did I? I can’t think why—I fainted into his arms.”

“That’s more than enough,” the Peace said, “to make a permanent impression on most young men.” All the Tongat laughed—even, she was surprised to see, the dour Law.

“Think of the impression she would have made,” Stepha said, “if she had played for him.”

“Now, that is something we have only on hearsay,” the Judge said. “You didn’t by any chance bring your instrument?”

“I did,” Miako said. “It’s in my bag in the car.”

Stepha reached behind her and picked up a telephone handset; she started speaking without punching any numbers. “Bring Miako’s bag in from the car, please.” She hung up. “We won’t ask you to play just yet. You must be nervous wondering why you’re here, and I admit that this gaggle of which I am the supposed leader can be pretty intimidating. It wouldn’t be fair to ask you to play until we’ve set your mind at ease. Ah, here’s your breakfast.”

The young page had returned with a tray loaded with cinnamon rolls, nut rolls, fresh fruit, and a big steaming pot. She laid out the food on the table in the center of the seating group, then poured everyone a steaming mug of dark cocoa. Miako thanked her, and to her surprise so did all the others. She had never imagined the Tongat would be so polite—they were wizards, after all, or so everyone outside Tongatka thought—but she had not encountered anything but the highest civility since she’d arrived. It must either flow down from these people, she thought, or be so ingrained in their culture that even the leaders obeyed the unwritten laws. She was used to politeness from Felitta, who had hundreds of rites that existed precisely to express it, but was still startled to encounter it in these people.

Stepha encouraged her to take what she wanted—a cinnamon roll and an orange—and the others selected something as well, but she noticed that only the Judge actually ate it. The rest nibbled or sampled just to be polite. Miako was ravenous but forced herself

not to take a second roll when the first was gone. By the time she was done someone had handed her bag in to the page, who set it on the floor beside Miako's couch.

"Now to business," Stepha said.

The Archivist said, "I believe the Mediator will be finished with his researches sometime tomorrow."

"So soon?" Miako said. She'd been assuming she would have more time. There was so much more of the city to explore.

"Our indexing is quite good, and he has not been forced to examine every piece, as I believe he was in the Felitta reliquary?" She nodded in agreement. "Therefore you will probably be leaving late in the day tomorrow."

"Then he wasn't able to find what he needed here, either?"

"I'm afraid not. Six components so far, but it's not enough. He has not told us the functions of all these pieces or what he still needs, but I gather that he has less than half of what's required."

"Oh." Then she was not finished traveling yet. "Did Chass say where we were going next?"

"You have a space reserved on the dirigible to Sevessa."

Boat, horse cart, plane, car, train—and now a dirigible. Miako felt as if she were on a sampling tour of every mode of transportation on Brezlun.

"Your departure sooner than expected is the reason we asked you to meet us today," Stepha said. Miako wasn't sure she would agree that she had been *asked*. "We wanted to talk to you before you go."

"Is there something I can do for you?"

"I believe," the Judge said, "that it will work both ways."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"It will be clear in a moment," Stepha said. "First, do you have any reason to believe that the Mediator would object to additional travelers in your party?"

"I'm sorry? You mean you want someone, a Tongat, to go with us?"

"Exactly."

Miako thought about it. Finally she said, "He's never said anything that would make me think he would mind. As long as it didn't interfere with his mission."

"Of course our representative wouldn't be a burden. He might even be useful, although probably not in Sevessaka."

Miako wasn't at all sure they'd even let a male Tongat *into* Sevessaka. But it wasn't her place to remind them of that.

"Actually," the Perovics said, "I believe it might be *two* representatives."

"Two?"

"Jaybra Ponyhealer has asked to go with you. If you don't mind."

Miako was stunned, then elated. The prospect of this long journey alone with the Mediator had always been daunting. To have a friend along made it suddenly seem almost... exciting.

"I would be honored to have her as a companion."

Stepha smiled and her eyes twinkled. "I'll be sure to tell her your exact words. We would like you to ask the Mediator for permission to take these two along."

"Of course, as soon as I see him again. Who is the other?"

"Turbasek Starwatcher. I believe you met him the other day."

“Yes, wasn’t he the man who questioned Chass after dinner the day we arrived?”

“That’s correct. He’s an experienced traveler and a wise man. He’s been to Sevessaka several times and is known there. I believe he’s only visited Mertaka once, but that was also a successful trip.”

“I see. Naturally it would be a great honor to travel with one of your elders. I’ll discuss it with the Mediator as soon as possible.” She thought for a moment. “You may not know this, but he can be very abrupt. You might suggest to Jaybra and Turbasek that they be ready to go at a moment’s notice.”

The Tongat all laughed. “They were all like that,” the Peace said, “always. Helpful but always rushing around.”

“It’s not so much impatience,” the Archivist said, “as an overburdened schedule. I think they always felt that there was so much to do, they didn’t have time to linger. There are hundreds of stories of Mediators rushing in, saving the day, and rushing right back out before anyone could even say thank you. Then they’d vanish for decades at a time.”

“Why?” Miako said.

“No one knows for sure, but we have very detailed records of the locations of all the Mediators going back to just after the Gentle Fall. There is a small branch of the Archives that travels around the world looking for tales of Mediator activity and trying to correlate and date them. I’ve studied these records and I believe the long absences were when they visited other countries, including spending a lot of time in uninhabited sections. I have no idea what they were doing there, but we know that all of the Mediators except the Merta’s visited every country more than once.”

“Why not the Merta Mediators?” Miako said.

There was an awkward silence. “They didn’t last long enough to travel,” the Archivist said at last. “A few generations after the Gentle Fall one of the shoraz, the Konata, decided that the supreme test of manhood must be to kill a Mediator. The idea spread to the other shoraz, and several generations went by in which every warrior was looking for an opportunity to destroy their Mediators. They only had two, like all the rest of us, and while Mediators are powerful they’re not invulnerable, so it was just a matter of time. No Mediator has visited Mertaka since.”

“That we know of,” the Peace said.

“True. Merta aren’t what you would call forthcoming.”

“They’re damned barbarians.”

“No,” the Judge said. “They’re not. They deliberately shun technology, and they embrace violence, but that doesn’t make them barbarians. If they were barbarians they wouldn’t have their wars on schedule, would they?”

“I’m sorry,” Miako said. “They schedule their wars? I didn’t know that.”

“Yes. Every few years the leaders of the six shoraz meet on neutral ground and schedule the next decade’s wars. They rotate the opponents and take population and hardships into account. It’s quite civilized.”

“Why do they do that?”

“They’re breeding themselves,” Stepha said. “The way they breed their horses. They’re convinced that someday Brezlun will need to be defended. They see themselves as our saviors.”

“So,” the Peace said scornfully, “they engage in constant combat to weed out the weak and keep themselves ready. It’s preposterous. Baba protects us, and if she didn’t,

Tongat would. What are Merta going to do if carnivorous aliens show up, throw spears at them?"

"Let's get back to the business at hand," Stepha said. "Miako, there's something else we'd like you to do for us."

"Of course... if I can."

"You've been given an opportunity that no one else has had for over a thousand years. The last time anyone was invited to travel with a Mediator was when Podd took Hebra Sunsinger on his circumnavigation of Blast Bay."

"I know that story," Miako said in a small voice. "They never came back."

The Judge laughed. "That was a once-in-a-millennium hurricane. I don't think you have to worry about that."

"The point is," Stepha said firmly, "you have a chance to observe the last Mediator up close on a daily basis. No one has even seen a Mediator for over four hundred years, and you've been traveling with this one for a week now."

"Yes," she said.

Stepha took a book off the table near the serving tray and handed it to Miako. It was a standard-sized volume, about six inches by eight, and surprisingly light for its thickness.

"We want you to write everything down. Everything you observe, everything he says and does, everything you're thinking. And we want you to go back and start from the moment you first met him." She pointed at the book. "This is a library book—I understand Jaybra took you there."

"Yes."

"The pages are ceramic, thin but very tough, almost indestructible, and once written your words are indelible. There's a supply of the special pens you'll need on the table there."

"But..."

"What is it?"

"I've never kept a diary before, and... Well, wouldn't Turbasek do a better job than I could?"

"You have a head start on him," Stepha said, "and there will be things you see and hear that he won't. Especially in Sevessaka, but even in Mertaka, if you make it there. Women have a special role in both those cultures, one that Turbasek won't be able to participate in." She leaned forward and looked intently into Miako's eyes. "Will you do it?"

"Of course. I'll start tonight."

"That was the tit," the Judge said. "Now for the tat. What do *you* want?"

Miako looked around the gathering. These people were the rulers of Tongatka. They were elected rulers, but within the constraints of their laws they could do anything they wanted.

"I want kethrin to Tongat," she said.

The Judge laughed again. "I don't think you have the hang of this, my dear. You're supposed to ask for something that *you* want that *we* don't want to give you."

"You didn't really think," Stepha said, "that we would let you go back to Felittaka to be a census clerk? After this?"

Miako felt a flood of relief, mingled with apprehension. No matter what happened with Chass now, her life would never go back to the way it had been.

“What else?” the Archivist said.

“I want to be involved in whatever comes of the Mediator’s efforts. If he contacts Baba, if he reveals new knowledge, I want to help develop what results.”

“Fair enough,” the Perovics said. “Very logical, and quite fair.”

“And what else?” Stepha said.

“I want to be trained. I’ve missed out on ten years. I want to learn everything there is to know.”

Several of them chuckled. “A very tall order, but we’ll see what we can do. What else?”

Miako suddenly thought of the Astronomer, with his passion and intensity, and decided that if that was something she wanted she would get it for herself. “You’ve already given me a house,” she said. “I think that will do.”

Stepha leaned back, and the others all relaxed as well.

“Our business is done,” Stepha said. “Council?”

“Agreed,” they all said.

“Then who will play with Miako, or shall we have a solo performance?”

It was a pre-arranged, minor conspiracy. Stepha and the Perovics, it seemed, did not play instruments, but the Peace retrieved a set of Tongat bagpipes from behind a chair in the corner of the room, the Archivist took a violin case from under his couch, the Judge got a small tambourine from a table, the Law—who hadn’t spoken a word during the proceedings—pulled a bar bell out of his tunic pocket.

“I’ve heard of those,” Miako said, “but I’ve never seen one before. Could you show me how it works, please?”

The instrument was formed from a solid bar of metal, about eight inches long, intricately drilled and tooled to make it essentially a tuning fork, but one in which every spot on its length gave a different tone. It was a Tongat invention, and they were reputed to be nearly impossible to master. The Law held the bar by its insulated handle, raised the thin, ceramic striker wand, and suddenly his right hand was a blur as he struck a melody from the bell. Each stroke produced a distinct note with a tone so pure and liquid it made her throat tighten and tears come to her eyes. Without another word she opened her case, put her flute to her lips, and began improvising on the melody the Law had offered.

They weren’t brilliant musicians, these leaders of Tongatka, but what they lacked in inspiration they made up with enthusiasm. Within a few minutes Miako had taken the lead, and the shimmering notes of the bar bell were buttressed by an exuberant violin, the carefully muted pipes, with the shaky beat of the tambourine behind them all. Miako could feel their hesitation at several points, but she gathered them up and took them places they’d never been before—never dared to go before. They followed her down into the depths of their own souls and burst up into the clear air of a sunny mountain day. When she could feel them weakening she slowed down and let them oscillate like a pendulum to a gentle ending.

The others lowered their instruments, and Miako realized that Stepha was weeping silently. The Peace set his pipes aside and crossed over to her. He took her hand; it looked like a child’s nestled in his strong, bear-like paws.

“My dear,” he said gruffly, “I’d heard reports from dinner a few nights ago, but I didn’t believe them. As far as I’m concerned, you are Tongat as of this moment, whether you follow the Mediator or not— and I don’t care if you never do another day’s work the

rest of your life, you have a place here forever.” He squeezed her hand and walked out of the room without looking at anyone else or saying another word.

“As for me,” the Judge said, standing up and smoothing her tunic, “I could die right now and be happy. Miako, please come back safely—and soon—from your travels.” She followed her colleague out.

The Law and the Archivist didn’t say a word. The former seemed to be in a trance, staring at the floor as if hypnotized, and the Archivist stared at Miako as if she were a new kind of Mediator that Baba had sent down to amaze them.

“Well,” Stepha said. She wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. “There are no words that could possibly be relevant after that, so I won’t even try. I think we’ve taken enough of your time today. You’ll want to get ready to leave, and perhaps you could set aside some time today to start your journal.”

Miako packed her flute away, gathered her things, and stood up. “I hope I’ll see you again before I go,” she said.

“I doubt that,” the President said, “but we’ll meet again when you return. You take care of yourself and come back to us. This is your home now.” She leaned in to kiss Miako on the cheek and escorted her out into the hall, where the short receptionist was waiting for her.

Miako walked back in a daze and suddenly found herself outside. Howart got out of the car to open her door.

“How did it go?” he said.

“The President cried,” she said absently, “and I think the Peace nearly did the same.” He gaped at her and stood holding the door long after she was settled. Jaybra leaned out and called his name. He shook himself and closed the door. Miako turned to Jaybra and said, “You’re coming with me. Tomorrow.”

“Let’s go to my house then,” Jaybra said happily. There was no mistaking the elation in her face. “I want to cook for you once before we go.”

\* \* \*

It was very much like Miako’s house, but the studio was filled with work tables covered with carefully organized lab equipment, plus storage cabinets and bookshelves. The living room was darker than Miako’s, a sort of brick red that was inviting and warm, and this room too had overflowing bookshelves. In the corner, on a small carved table at chest height was a small shrine that contained only three objects: a chunk of obsidian that had been worked into a rough egg shape, a pony’s hoof polished so it was almost as shiny as the glass—and a knife with a carved antler handle and a wicked-looking, six-inch steel blade that had been incised with ancient Merta runes.

“I made that,” Jaybra said.

Howart set Miako’s bags down. “Shall I wait?” he asked.

“Thank you Howart,” Miako said. “I can walk home from here. I don’t think it’s half a mile.”

“I’ll see you two tomorrow, then, I assume. Only Baba and the Mediator know when.”

They thanked him again and he left.

“When did you make it?” Miako asked, gesturing at the knife.

“When I was sixteen. It was part of my passage training. Merta women make the weapons that their men go to war with, so we apprentice with our mothers to learn the craft. It was my first successful blade. I’m still proud of it.”

“It’s beautiful. What do the runes mean?”

Jaybra looked embarrassed. “Perhaps I’ll tell you one day.”

“All right.” Miako tried not to look disappointed.

“What do you want for dinner?”

“Something spicy followed by something sweet.”

“I can do that. Would you like to sit over there while I cook? Then we can talk.”

“I’d rather help.”

“Okay.” Jaybra opened her pantry door and started rummaging around inside. “Now tell me everything that happened with the Council.”

Miako did her best to recount the conversation, but glossed over the music. By then she was nearly done mincing the root vegetables while Jaybra finished searing half a rabbit.

“He just walked out of the room?”

“I thought he was going to kiss my hand first.”

“But he didn’t?”

“Just squeezed it. He could have broken every bone but he was gentle.”

Jaybra shook her head. “That’s very unusual—almost unbelievable. If it were anyone else, I’d think it was exaggeration or even a lie. The peace force people are mostly drawn from Chashee, and they’re very tough and very serious. I’ve never heard anyone describe the Peace as gentle, and I’ve definitely never heard of anyone bringing him close to tears.”

“What’s Chashee?”

“It’s a martial order, almost a cult. You may have heard of them, they use singing staffs in some of their disciplines.”

“I saw that! On the *Tiggleday*, coming up from Littapo. There were two of them, Zeven and... I forget the other one’s name. They gave an exhibition aboard. They were dressed just in...” She didn’t know how to say it.

Jaybra smiled at her. “I’ve seen them. Impressive, isn’t it?”

“Zeven won the fight by leaping over his friend’s head and attacking from behind.”

“When the Peace was young he was the champion jasheeyam. People still say he was one of the best there’s ever been. I would have liked to have seen him kiss your hand.”

“He *didn’t* kiss my hand. I just said I thought he was going to.”

“Hmm.” Jaybra smiled to herself and said nothing else. She added the vegetables and a good handful of peppers to the stew and put it in the oven. Then she mixed an unyeasted dough for flatbread, and set it aside to rest under a bowl. There was nothing else to do until the stew was closer to done.

“Can I see the journal?” Miako got it out. There was nothing impressive about its appearance: it was just a leather-bound book with unusually thin and tough pages. Jaybra examined it and gave it back. “Will you start it tonight?”

“If I have time. I have to pack.”

“Dinner will be about an hour. Would you like to see my studio?”

Miako nodded. Jaybra showed her the microscope, a small chromatograph, and several other instruments that made even less sense to her. Before long she had lost the

thread of Jaybra's explanations and was overcome by a powerful feeling that she would never understand even a small fraction of what Tongat had known for millennia. She hadn't felt this way since she was a child, looking up at the stars with her father; she hadn't felt it this strongly even looking through the Astronomer's telescope. Jaybra seemed to realize that she had left Miako behind and stopped suddenly.

"There's nothing you can't learn," she said gently. "None of this would have made sense to me when I got here six years ago."

"I'm afraid I'm too old to learn."

"Nonsense! You're only four years older than I am. Anyway, Tongat are very good teachers."

"But I don't have any idea what I should do."

"Miako—they've been training people since before the Gentle Fall. They know how to find a person's strengths and direct them to the area where they can do the most good. Don't worry about that."

Miako took a deep breath. "Could I see your yard?"

There wasn't much to see. The front was a small gated garden tidied up for winter, almost identical to Miako's. The back was another matter. Small trees huddled together in clusters, with a rocky path winding around them just visible through the snow. There were flat, open spaces that Miako assumed were seating areas when it was warm enough. "I'd like to see it in summer," she said.

"You will. Let's go in and check on dinner."

The stew was nearly ready, so Jaybra started forming thin loaves of the flatbread and frying them on a dry pan over the electric stove. By the time the stew was done there was a stack of warm bread ready.

"Tell me about where you grew up," Miako said when they'd sat down and started in.

"Our shoraz is called Durkita," she began.

"That's like a clan, right?"

"Larger than a clan but not really a nation. We have a chief that rules all the Durkita clans, and he recognizes no higher authority on Brezlun. The clans are very close-knit. People usually marry within the shoraz, but about one in ten goes outside."

"Is it men or women that leave?"

"Usually women, but sometimes a man will switch if he really loves his sweetheart and she has a reason not to want to leave. Those men are lucky; they are always warmly welcomed by their new shoraz and often end up with a second wife much sooner than if they'd stayed home."

"Did you grow up in a big family?"

"My father had four wives and seven children. It was an average-sized family. I think everything about us was average."

"Do the children... did you know which of the wives was your mother?"

Jaybra laughed and passed a small crock of chutney that Miako had nearly run out of. "Of course. I suckled at her breast, how could I not know her? But all of the mothers raised all of the children. I was just as likely to be cuffed or kissed by one of the others as I was by my own."

"It seems so strange to me," Miako said, "but I imagine the idea of a single child being raised by a paired man and woman who live their entire adult lives in one place must seem strange to you, too."



“After six years in Tongatka, the word *strange* doesn’t have the meaning it once did.” Miako looked at her shyly. “I can speak Merta.”

“What!”

In Jaybra’s native tongue, she said, “I know all five languages; two dialects of the Plains tongue, but nothing of the Mountain speech.”

“How did you learn to speak Plains?” Jaybra said in the same language.

“The Census office often had to coordinate birth and vessin rates with the other nations. Several of us were trained in the other languages to make it easier.”

“But why not just use Common?” Almost everyone Miako had spoken to in Tongatka had automatically assumed she wouldn’t know their language and had spoken Common to her. She had been looking for an excuse to surprise someone.

“When you’re talking to a Sevessa local councilwoman or a Merta elder, it’s much easier to get them to cooperate if you speak their own language.”

Jaybra switched back to Common to say, “So have you picked up anything you weren’t supposed to hear in Tongat since you arrived?”

Miako shook her head sadly. “I was hoping to get some practice, but I don’t think I’ve heard ten words of Tongat since we got here.”

\* \* \*

Dessert was an apple crisp that Jaybra threw together while Miako started cleaning the kitchen. The apples were very small and green, and quite sour, which made a pleasant contrast with the very sweet, crumbly topping. They agreed to cut the evening short so they could both pack. Jaybra had a lot more to do than Miako, who had been living out of her backpack for over a week. And, as Jaybra said with laugh, they would be seeing more of each other in the near future than was probably good for them, so there was no reason to prolong this occasion. They both hesitated for a moment as Miako stood at the front door, but she stepped back inside and gave Jaybra a quick hug, which was returned sincerely after a slight pause.

“Tomorrow you’re going to be a Mediator’s companion too,” Miako said. “We’re equals now.”

Jaybra didn’t say anything, but hugged her even harder before she let her go.

The night was cold, but Miako didn’t really feel it. The sky was clear and moonless, but there was enough light from the occasional house for her to see her way. The stars glittered overhead as if they were snowflakes that Baba had thrown back into the sky. She walked slowly the half mile west to her own house. When the door closed behind her, she realized how barren and empty it looked compared to the comfy jumble of Jaybra’s house.

It didn’t take her long to take down her shrine, wrapping each item carefully and fitting them into the bottom of her pack. There was nothing else, really, but her clothes, so Miako sat down at the kitchen table to start organizing her thoughts for her journal.

By bedtime she had covered two pages with her compact, tidy handwriting. She stopped when she reached the point when she had told Chass she would rather not go with him. It was embarrassing, but she put in everything she could think of as honestly as she could. She would rather seem awkward, hesitant, or even silly than leave anything out. As she was writing she imagined that she was telling the story to Stepha, so she strove to be clear and complete; she could imagine the old woman sweetly asking her on

her return if she had written down *everything*. Miako wanted to be able to say honestly that she had.

She packed the journal and the special pens away and went to bed.

It was still dark when she awoke suddenly. The bedside clock told her it was still many hours before dawn. She wondered what had wakened her; she never woke in the middle of the night. She rolled onto her back and stiffened suddenly, certain that someone else was in the room. There had been a soft rustling, but she couldn't hear anyone breathing.

"Who is it?" she said, thinking that perhaps Chass had finished a little early and was waiting for her to wake up.

No one answered, but she heard the sound again. She sat up and saw a shadow blocking the door to the bedroom. She couldn't make out the shape. It was large, filling most of the doorway, but not like a person's silhouette. Where the head should have been was something curving and thick.

"Turn on the light," a voice whispered in Tongat.

Her hand was shaking as she reached for the switch. The light was dim enough that it didn't blind her, so she could immediately see what was standing in her doorway—and she screamed.

A massive, shaggy head, with a huge snout, beady eyes, and enormous, curving horns on either side of the skull. It was ugly and horrific. Then Miako realized what it was: a kantabeti, the mythical mountain creatures that children frightened each other with. It must be a mask, because she was absolutely certain that the creatures—men with the head of a bison and the horns of a ram—were entirely fictional. She felt her heart slamming in her chest, but she sat up and composed herself.

"Who are you?" she said as calmly as she could. "Why are you trying to frighten me? What are you doing in my house?"

The man in the mask laughed and leaned against the doorframe.

"I should have known this wouldn't work," he said. "You're really something, you know that?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm a messenger," he said. "Do you want to hear my message?"

"No."

"No?"

"You woke me up at midnight and intentionally tried to terrify me. I couldn't be less interested in what you think you have to tell me."

The kantabeti walked into the room and sat down in a chair in the far corner to Miako's right. He crossed his legs and just sat there. The outsized, bizarre head contrasted with the casual posture would have been funny under other circumstances.

"You look ridiculous with that thing on. Take it off."

"Not just yet. I think you'll listen more carefully to the message if I leave it on."

A horrible thought entered Miako's mind. "Stelikin?" she said hesitantly.

The kantabeti laughed. "No, I'm not your precious Astronomer. That is the last thing I am." He put up a hand as if to rub his forehead, but of course the mask got in the way. "My message is a warning. Do you want to hear it now?"

"If it will make you go away, go ahead and say what you came to say."

"I think you should be taking this more seriously."

“Well,” she said, “it’s hard to take anything seriously when it’s coming from a creature that even eight year-olds know is a fantasy.”

“I’ll tell you what’s a fantasy: the idea that we can reestablish communication with Baba. Or that we should.”

“You’re obviously Tongat, so you must know that that’s exactly what the Mediator is trying to do.”

“That is exactly what he must *not* do.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Have you ever heard of the Shenza sisterhood?” A chill ran down Miako’s back. She crossed her arms over her chest. “I’ll take that to mean yes.”

“They’ve been gone for thousands of years.”

“Yes, they have. But there were two sides to the coin of that cult. Do you know the other half?”

She coughed and said in a shaky voice, “Roakay.”

“Very good. Two sibling cults, one purely female and given to uttering prophecies that had an alarming habit of coming true. The other purely male, and their specialty was...” He trailed off, inviting her to finish.

“Assassination.”

“Yes.”

“The Roakay are extinct too.”

“No.”

Miako waited, but he let the silence drag on. Finally she said, “The Shenza predicted that the Roakay would vanish from the earth.”

“And that’s why there are no more Shenza. What did you *think* happened to them? After three thousand years they just died out?”

“Are you saying the Roakay...”

“We silenced them. No more irritating prophecies.”

The trembling in her hands was threatening to spread to her entire body. “We?”

“I am not *just* a messenger. If you don’t stop the Mediator, I will also be the *instrument*.”

The Tongat word he used had strong, unpleasant connotations. It was used for weapons and other lethal devices.

“I don’t understand what you want me to do. Or why.”

“We want you to convince the Mediator to accept that his time is over. He should let himself break down, or better yet shut himself down right now. He should have gone with the rest of them long ago.”

“I don’t understand. All he wants to do is let us talk to Baba again.”

“If Baba wanted to talk to us, she would. It’s been twenty-three centuries since anyone has spoken to her—do you think she couldn’t contact us if she wanted to?”

“Chass said we have to ask her.”

“That’s nonsense.” He uncrossed his legs and sat forward in the chair. “Listen, Miako, you have no idea what the universe is really like. We’ve been struggling for over four millenniums and we still aren’t even close to the technology that was available before the Gentle Fall. If Baba had wanted the Mediators to last forever, they would last forever. But they’re mortal—they break down, they can be killed, they’re fallible. What do you think that means?”

Miako was confused. She'd never thought of the Mediators as anything but perfect messengers from Baba. Yet now there was only one left of the original eight. What *did* that mean?

"I don't know," she said.

"Your willingness to admit ignorance is commendable," he said with feeling. "Let me tell you, then. It means that the Mediators were a phase we were supposed to go through, and then leave behind, like childhood. After the Gentle Fall we were inexperienced, ignorant, nearly helpless. The Mediators were given to us to help us get on our feet. And then they were supposed to go away. This one is stupid and stubborn and he's defying the will of Oma."

"She— she wants us to go on without her?"

"She wants us to meet her on her own level, in our own time. As equals."

Miako gasped. Heresy was a very rare thing on Brezlun; she had never heard anyone blaspheme before.

"You think I'm a heretic. Just the opposite. The Roakay are, and always have been, protectors of the true faith. We've studied and probed the history of all the peoples of Brezlun, and we have documents that predate the Gentle Fall. I'm telling you the simple truth. If Baba wanted to speak to us, she would. Nothing on Brezlun could stop her. Since she does not, we know that she chooses not to, and trying to subvert the will of Baba is the true heresy."

It sounded so sensible. But she *knew* that Chass was a loyal servant of Baba. She couldn't think; she felt dizzy.

"You don't have to decide tonight," the kantabeti said. "Think it through. Look inside yourself and you'll know what's right—don't be swayed by the mere presence of the Mediator. They were created by Baba to fulfill a purpose, and that purpose was concluded long ago."

"So you want me to convince him to give up his quest?"

"Yes. You can do it, Miako. He trusts you. In his machine heart he must know that what he's doing is evil and wrong."

"I don't see how I can convince him of that."

"Try. Because if he succeeds in finding what he needs to contact Baba, the Roakay will kill him—and everyone with him—to prevent what we *know* is against the will of Oma."

The creature stood up and pulled off its enormous mask. Beneath it was a normal human head, with a face that she knew.

"Zeven," she whispered.

"We've been following you since the Littapo fair," he said. "We'll be one step behind you no matter where he takes you. I swear, as I am a true and faithful servant of Omadaz, if I think that the Mediator has regained the ability to talk to her, I will break him into pieces so small that you'll need a microscope to identify them. And then I'll slaughter Jaybra, and Turbasek, and anyone else who has stood beside him, including you; especially you. Put *that* in your little journal."

He picked up the kantabeti head and walked out of the room. In a moment Miako heard the front door open and then close. She sat upright for a long time, trying to think, before huddling down under the covers and trying to get warm again. In the long

remaining hours of the night, she never fell back to sleep and she never did feel warm again. She left the light on until dawn came and someone knocked on her door.

\* \* \*

Chass looked different to her, somehow. She was so tired that she couldn't pin it down, or even decide whether it was real or just a reaction to what Zeven had said. He stood outside her door for a moment without speaking.

"You don't look well," he said at last, his strange voice sending shivers up her back. Or was it the frigid morning air? The sun was just peeking over the edge of the horizon and the sky was cloudless. Miako could see her breath.

"Would you like to come in, sir?"

"No, thank you. I believe you were warned to be prepared to leave?"

"Yes, I'm nearly ready. I just need to splash some water on my face and get dressed. Would you... Sorry, I'm not really awake yet."

"I looks as if you haven't slept at all."

"Not much. Sir... has anyone spoken to you about... traveling companions?"

He looked down at her with his expressionless face. "How many?" he said after a long pause.

"Two. Turbasek and Jaybra."

"I have no objections," he said. "As long as they can make the dirigible."

She hadn't realized until she gave a sigh of relief that she'd been holding her breath. She wouldn't have had the energy to try to argue him into it, and she wasn't sure she could have left without Jaybra. "How much time do we have?"

"Almost an hour."

"I'll call them."

She stepped back, and when he seemed determined not to come in she reluctantly closed the door on him. She punched in Howart's number and told him she needed the car immediately. Jaybra answered on the first ring and said she would arrive in five minutes. Someone at the capitol had given her Turbasek's number as well; he also answered immediately and gave her an address. By the time she was dressed and had packed up some food from the refrigerator and the pantry, Jaybra was standing outside trying not to stare at the Mediator, and Howart was just pulling up.

Miako closed the door behind her and lingered for just a moment, wondering when or if she would be back. Then she piled into the car with the others and told Howart the address Turbasek had given her. It was nearby, and Turbasek was standing outside when they arrived; he must have planned for short notice.

Their luggage was in the trunk, or they'd never have fit in the car. Turbasek sat in front, and Chass sat between Jaybra and Miako in the back. Miako could feel her friend's anxiety radiating out and through the Mediator. She wished they could have sat together; she found herself once again shy around Chass after four days without seeing him, and she could vividly imagine what Jaybra was feeling, squashed up against a legend that had the quality of myth.

No one said a word for the entire breakneck race to the Level Three station. They arrived just moments before the train pulled out, but Miako didn't feel any need to rush; she was certain beyond any shadow of doubt that they would have held the train for the Mediator.

She had time for no more than a breathless goodbye and a bow to Howart. “I’ll call on you when you return,” he said formally. “Take care of yourself down there in the wild world.”

The train was half full. They took two seats across from each other, Jaybra and Turbasek on the right and Miako and Chass on the left. People glanced at them and politely looked away, except for one young man near the front of the car who turned around in his seat to stare. Miako wanted to ask Chass how his search had gone, but she knew the gist of it from the Council meeting and she didn’t dare bring it up in a public place.

She had almost fallen asleep when the train jolted to a stop at the High Station. They gathered their bags and walked out into a ghastly, freezing wind. It seemed to suck the air out of Miako’s lungs, and it made her teeth hurt. The Mediator seemed unaffected; he simply strode away from the lodge toward the dirigible tower.

For the first time in her life, Miako got a close-up look at one of the dirigibles. They were the fastest way to get to the southern hemisphere—an airplane could carry enough fuel to make the trip, but only if it had no passengers or cargo—but there was no dirigible port in Littapo. Miako didn’t know why; there were many ocean-going ships that made the trip from Felittaka to Sevessaka, but they were significantly slower. She thought it would have made sense to have a dirigible line, since there was much more commerce between Sevessa and Felitta than with Tongat. She would have to ask someone. But not now; her teeth were chattering.

The dirigible was enormous, hundreds of feet long. It was elongated, ovoid, matte black, and utterly smooth except for a complex mechanism at the rear, and fins here and there. Beneath it hung the gondola, which looked bigger than the *Tiggleday*. The mooring tower was like a long, standing pin beside a cucumber.

They reached the base of the tower, walking carefully across pathways swept by a swirling light dusting of snow. The gondola was as large as a medium-sized building. Its bottom surface, the same dull black ceramic as the hull, was only twenty feet over their heads.

“I didn’t think it would be so big,” Miako said. “What do they use for lift, hydrogen?”

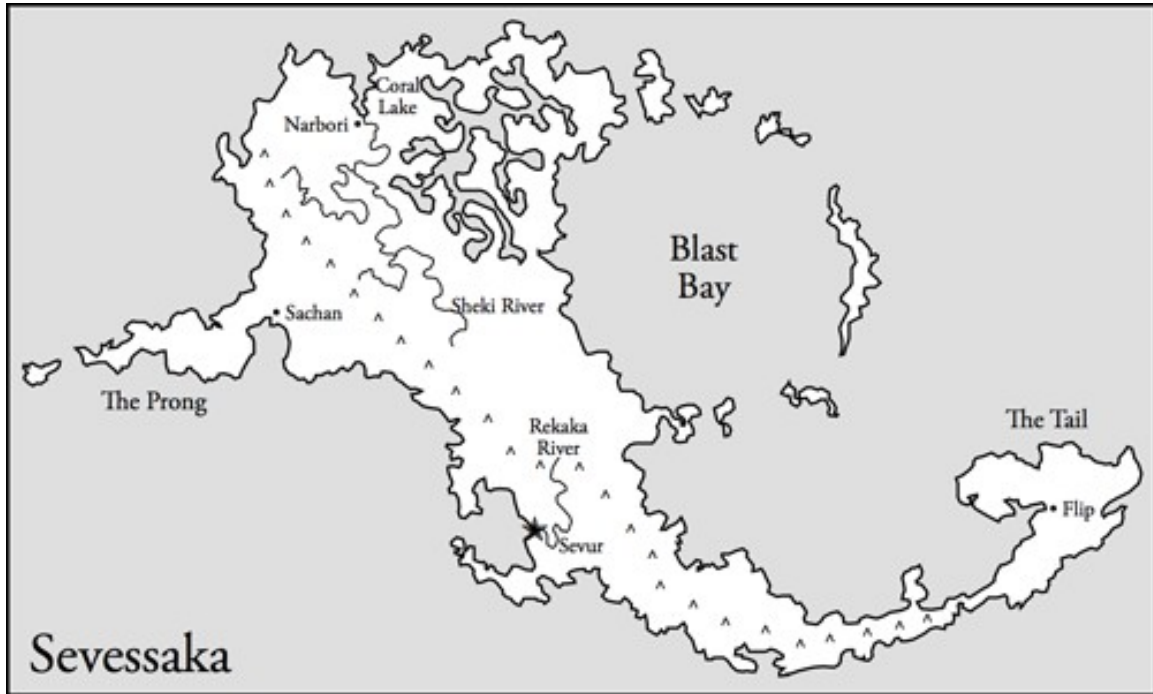
“Vacuum,” Turbasek said, and helped her start up the stairs.

The reception area onboard was functional but elegant, with polished brass and textured floors. The walls were painted deep green, the green of the forest floor under a thick canopy of trees. A steward took charge of their group and led them down a long, dim hallway, then up two flights of stairs to a better-lit hall with staterooms on each side. Chass touched her arm as she was about to open her door.

“Get some sleep,” he said. “We’ll talk this evening.”

She nodded and entered the room. It was as different from her cabin on the *Tiggleday* as it could be: airy and spacious, filled with light. Her window looked out on row after row of saw-toothed mountains marching away to the horizon. She could see Tongat Bay far down the slopes of Mount Kibbith, waves sparkling in the early morning sun like something jiggling under Jaybra’s microscope. Miako didn’t give the majestic views one moment’s consideration. She dropped her bag, threw the bolt on the door, drew the curtains, and collapsed onto the bed. She never felt the undocking or the gentle sway as the dirigible pulled away from its tower and started the long journey south, toward the land of Sevessa, the baby-thieves.

## Part Four: Sevessaka



## Thistle gull

She was aware of the vibration before she was really awake. It was constant but not steady, a soft thrumming that rose and fell. She was warm and comfortable, someplace very dark. Miako opened her eyes and remembered where she was: the dirigible, bound for Sevessa. She disentangled herself from the bedclothes, stumbled to the cabin windows, and threw open the curtains.

The air was impossibly clear, the image of the mountains far below more like something etched on ceramic than anything real. Wave after wave of snow-topped peaks stretched away in the late afternoon light, their long shadows throwing the crevasses between them into gloom. Many of those valleys were filled with clouds, as if an ocean of puffy stuff had flowed in and buried them.

She wondered if she had slept just half the day or a day and a half. Either seemed possible. She used the cabin's small bathroom and washed her face in cold water. Fully awake now, she left her room and was halfway down the hall before it occurred to her to go back and check the cabin number so she could find it again. The hallway was sparsely lit by caged lamps spaced evenly on the walls. There was carpet underfoot and the walls were painted in two different dark colors which she couldn't identify in the dimness.

At the end of the hall a curved stairway led only down. At its foot she found a desk staffed by a young woman in a one-piece uniform.

"Miss Seeker," the woman said. Her hair was short, cut rather severely, but Miako thought it suited her face. Was everyone on board going to recognize her as they had in Tongatka? Then she realized this woman was probably Tongat, and so were all of the crew. Perhaps when they reached Sevessaka she could go back to being her invisible self.

"Yes?"

"I was asked to look out for you. Your friends are in the forward lounge on this level. Down this passageway and it will be on your right. You can't miss it."

"Thank you."

"My pleasure. Please let us know if we can do anything to make your trip more enjoyable."

It was not far; she had come most of the length of the dirigible's gondola on the upper level. She walked into the room and stopped short. On the right the mountains she had seen from her cabin were now lit only at their tips, but on the left a vast expanse of water swept away to the horizon. Judging only by the view from her room she never would have guessed they were flying right on the edge of the continent. White specks visible in the sea below must have been huge for her to see them from this height, but someone called her name before she could puzzle out what they were.

She looked around and they waved. Jaybra and Turbasek rose to meet her.

"Are you all right?" Jaybra asked. "You've been asleep for almost seven hours."

"Seven hours?" Miako shook her head and sat down with them. "I didn't sleep well last night."

"Neither did I. But I couldn't have slept through my first dirigible launch."



“Can I get you anything to eat or drink?” Turbasek said. “Dinner will be served in less than an hour.”

“I’d like some Felitta coffee if they have it.”

“I’ll go and see.”

“You missed the first two tours,” Jaybra said, “but they’re having another one after dinner if you’re interested. We waited to see so we could all go together.”

“They give tours?”

“Of the superstructure. I’ve heard that it’s worth the discomfort—it’s cold up there.”

“Yes, I’d like that. Have—is Chass around?”

“We haven’t seen him since we left. He asked us to meet him in his cabin this evening but didn’t specify a time. Do you suppose it would be all right to wait until after dinner and the tour?”

Miako nodded. Turbasek returned with a small ceramic pot and some mugs and poured for all of them. It was the best coffee she’d had since leaving Lamia and Pippil’s farm. Miako sighed and sat back in her chair. Turbasek seemed to be enjoying his, but Jaybra set hers aside after a single sip.

“What have I missed?” she said.

“Just beautiful mountains,” Turbasek said. “There was a safety drill shortly after departure, nothing that common sense wouldn’t tell you.”

“And pointless,” Jaybra added. “There has never been a dirigible accident.”

“Like the *Tiggleday*,” Miako said.

“I’m sorry?”

She told them about the river boat line that had never foundered a ship in its three thousand years of operation.

“That’s the advantage,” Turbasek said, “of building from a nearly indestructible material. And now we’re heading to the place where they make the stuff.”

“But Stepha told me that Tongat invented it.”

“Yes, but Sevessa perfected it. It’s strange that no one seems to know who it was. Most inventions of that magnitude can be assigned to a known person. All we know is that it was a woman, born and raised Sevessa, who lived on the Prong a little over three thousand years ago.”

“Perhaps Sevessa know who it was,” Miako said, “and just don’t feel like telling.”

Turbasek laughed. “That would be just like Sevessa.”

They watched the light fade from the world beneath them, though at their altitude the sun was still above the horizon. “What are those white flecks in the sea?” Miako said at last.

“Icebergs,” he said.

“I’m sorry?” Miako said. Jaybra echoed her.

“Large chunks of ice. You know that both poles have ice caps, right?” They nodded. “They’re not very large, but they’re permanent. Every now and then a piece breaks off and floats away. They’re called icebergs. They don’t usually last long in the northern ocean, but if they get stuck in Tongat Bay they can float around for weeks before melting. At any given time there are a few thousand of them, which makes shipping rather interesting.”

“They must be gigantic,” Jaybra said.

“A few decat yards, typically. They’re easy to see because they’re very nearly pure white.”

In a short while a bell rang to announce dinner. The dining hall was directly below them, so they got in line to walk down a small spiral staircase at the back of the lounge. It was not quite wide enough for three people to walk abreast, so Turbasek followed the ladies. As soon as they reached the main level Miako realized that meals were going to be a more formal affair than on the *Tiggleday*. Round tables seating eight people were spread with the very thin woven mats that Sevessa used on formal occasions. Every table had a vase of flowers in the center surrounded by squat, evenly-spaced white candles. Each setting featured the traditional ten-piece set of Sevessa cutlery that no other people on Brezlun used—one pronged skewer, two knives, three spoons, and four forks—as well as three different cut-glass goblets of various shapes.

“Is there a dress code?” Miako whispered to Jaybra.

“No. The formality is all on their side. Don’t worry, you look fine.”

“Do we have assigned seats?”

Turbasek took her arm casually, then did the same with Jaybra. “It’s elegant, not ceremonious. Allow me to escort you, my dears.”

He led them to a table one rank away from the forward windows. It was now past nightfall outside, so all they could see in the glass was the reflection of the candle-lit room. The dining hall was only about half full; apparently this flight was under-booked. Altogether Miako counted about fifty people. They had their table to themselves.

“Miako,” Turbasek said, “perhaps you could help us prepare for our meeting with the Mediator this evening. We don’t really know what to expect.”

Miako unfolded her napkin across her arm—she knew that much about Sevessa table manners, anyway—and thought back to her earlier meetings.

“He doesn’t require deference,” she said. “Almost the opposite, in fact—he’s often impatient. He was very cross with my Felitta rites and asked me to stop performing them.”

“That must have been difficult,” Turbasek said.

“I haven’t been completely successful in stifling the urge. But I’ve only actually started them a few times since he told me to stop.”

“There’s no need to be inhibited around us,” Jaybra said.

“Yes, please feel free to be yourself,” Turbasek said. “For instance, what would you be doing right now at home?”

“The rite of thanks for food to be eaten.”

“Can you show us?”

Miako looked around self-consciously, but no one was looking at them. She performed the rite, and it felt like slipping out of formal, tight clothes into a bathrobe.

“I’ve seen that one before,” Turbasek said. “I could follow some of the glyphs. Could you do it again more slowly?”

It took a conscious effort to slow it down; every rite had its proper pacing, which took most of one’s childhood to learn. She struck the opening position, with right hand slightly cupped and raised, facing palm out, the left hand with splayed fingers parallel to her body and level with her chest. Then, concentrating carefully, she swept her right hand up and then down and back while her left closed and pulled toward her waist. Her right arm gracefully turned at shoulder, elbow, and wrist and her right hand reappeared from

behind her back, now clenched into a fist that relaxed and opened, ending palm up with her fingers pointing straight away from her body. Meanwhile her left hand had been making three swift but smooth circles, parallel to the floor, and ended up supporting the right at the wrist.

"It's like trying to tie your shoes slowly," Miako said.

"It's beautiful," Jaybra said. "Like a dance."

"But it's really a language," Turbasek said. "Every motion has a purpose, and though they've been ritualized and formalized you can still see the underlying meaning. It's a lot like the written language Merta use, which was originally based on stylized pictures that represented the word, but over the centuries became simplified into the pictographs they use today."

"Well, what does it mean?" Jaybra said.

"It's thanks for the gift of nourishment," Miako said, "and an invitation to share."

"The first position is a gesture to Baba," Turbasek said, "then a depiction of rain and sunlight coming down to bring forth the crops. The left hand represents the annual cycles of sowing and harvesting, but also the cycle of human generations. And these things combine to become an offering."

Miako laughed softly. "I think you know more about it than I do. This is something I was taught at the same time I learned to speak Felitta and the Common tongue. I don't think I could parse the rites any more than I could parse a sentence."

"Well, it's a beautiful custom. What does the Mediator have against it?"

"Time. Formality. I think he is a very straightforward... person, and he has just one thing on his mind right now."

"What else can you tell us about him?"

"He prefers that I deal with social situations, unless he's trying to—um..."

"Throw his weight around?"

"Yes."

"I heard about what happened at the Geshamo airport," Turbasek said.

"What?" Jaybra asked. Miako told her how Chass had essentially ordered the airport staff to provide them transportation. "But that's what I would expect from a Mediator," Jaybra said. "He's working for Baba—and for us."

"Well, just be prepared for inconsistent behavior," Miako said. "He's been kind, indifferent, arrogant, helpful, insightful, and almost cruel."

"Dear me," Turbasek said as an older woman began serving them a thick soup. "He sounds almost human."

The soup was good; Miako discovered that she was quite hungry. When they had nearly finished it, she said, "Turbasek, Stepha told me that you had traveled all over the world."

"Yes," he said. He leaned back in his chair and ran his hands through his shoulder-length white hair. "I've been to Felittaka too many times to count, mostly Littapo, but I've seen the West too. You were born in Shusha, correct?" She nodded. "I've been there. Sevevaka three times. Mertaka once and lived to brag about it. I've seen the Hook Islands, Fugitive Island, the Tongat islands, and both polar ice caps."

"Fugitive Island?" Miako said, just as Jaybra was saying, "Hook Islands?" They all laughed. "What were the islands like?"

“Wild. Deserted. Some say they’re haunted, but I saw no ghosts. Just lush, untamed wilderness.”

“They say no one has ever survived more than one day and night on the Hook Islands,” Jaybra said.

“They’re wrong,” Turbasek said. “I spent half a week there. We were on a long sailing voyage back in ’50 or so, and we stopped there to replenish our water and food supplies.”

“You didn’t see the fefferpahs?”

He sat forward again and peered at her. “Do you believe in fefferpahs?”

She smiled. “No, but I grew up with a lot of people who did.”

“Good girl. To answer your question—no, I did not see any cannibal ghosts. We didn’t see any sign of humans, alive or dead. Just jungle, exotic birds, and small wild pigs.”

“It’s odd, though,” Miako said. “I’ve read that people have tried to colonize the islands half a decat times, but every attempt has failed. After a generation or two people notice that they haven’t heard anything from the colony in a long time, send an expedition, and find no evidence that anyone ever lived there. Why do you think that is?”

The server whisked away their soup bowls and replaced them with steaming plates of slivered vegetables, very thin slices of meat, and a perfect hemisphere of brown rice. Turbasek tasted his, smiled, and ate a few mouthfuls before answering.

“My guess, and it’s just a guess, is that the colonies deliberately removed themselves from the flow of genes that the four cultures thrive on. We need vessin and kethrin to survive. Maybe that wasn’t always true, but we know that these patterns predate the Gentle Fall. Take a small group of people out of the mainstream for even one generation, and they’d either tear themselves apart or dry up and blow away. Can you imagine a society in which young adults were forced to live in the group they happened to be born into?”

Jaybra shuddered.

“Adolescents go through a rebellious phase,” he continued between mouthfuls. “And it comes at a critical time, when their personalities are not fully formed and their brains are still developing. For some it doesn’t amount to much—Miako moved from a small backwoods town to the largest city on the planet, but the people there speak the same language, sing the same songs, and eat the same food. But Jaybra abandoned everyone and everything she knew because she believed she was not meant to be some warrior’s second wife and spend her life making swords and tending a garden. I did the same, though not for the same reason, and so did every Tongat, and about ten percent of the rest of the population.” He took a sip of his water; the spices on the meat tended to creep up on the palate.

“I think that a small society without that safety valve, and the gene mixing that comes with it and with vessin, would die out within a generation or two. The jungle takes care of the rest.”

When they were finished the server offered dessert. Miako declined but Turbasek selected an orange and Jaybra a small triangular seed cake.

“The tour starts in a few minutes,” Jaybra said. “Are both of you interested?”

“I’ve seen it before, but I wouldn’t mind doing it again,” Turbasek said. Miako just nodded.

They left the dining hall and went toward the center of the gondola. Just past the embarkation point was a small room with a thick ladder leading up to the ceiling.

“Are you here for the tour?” a young woman said. Miako realized it was the same crew member who had sent her on to find her friends. “We’ll start in a few minutes. I don’t think we’ll have many more. Nearly everyone went on the earlier tours.”

In the end they were joined by two couples, one quite young and clearly Tongat, their faces flushed and happy. Honeymoon, Miako thought. The other couple consisted of a middle-aged Felitta man and a younger woman. There was something strange about the woman that Miako couldn’t quite pin down until she introduced herself. She was Sevessa-born, probably only a few years past kethrin, and still had that indefinable air of the alien about her. Miako had known several such women, and in her experience it took five years or so before they were indistinguishable from Felitta-born.

“Well,” the crew woman said cheerfully, “welcome to the evening tour. My name is Yolatta and I’ll be your guide. I think you’ll find this very interesting, and it’s somewhat more dramatic taking the tour in the evening, so I believe you’ll be glad you waited.” She smiled at them and pulled a heavy chain hanging from the ceiling near the ladder.

A panel in the ceiling opened and let down a draft of cool air. It wasn’t as cold as Miako had expected. She looked up into the opening. She had thought it would be dark, but the area above was well-lit, although she couldn’t really see anything. She waited her turn and started climbing up.

The ladder was steady as she climbed, and almost wide enough for two people to go abreast. The treads were deep, inlaid with something rubbery that ensured her feet would not slip. She stepped off the ladder onto the floor of the superstructure and looked down. Turbasek and the young couple were following, and a moment later they were all gathered together again.

“Very good,” Yolatta said. “Let’s begin.”

Miako had been preoccupied with the people coming up behind her, and their immediate surroundings looked a lot like the staging area below, so she hadn’t really taken a good look around until now. She stepped back in shock, and Turbasek grabbed her elbow to prevent her taking another step and falling down through the hatch.

She couldn’t understand what she was seeing at first. There were enormous spherical shapes about the size of her house, with rough, pebbly exteriors that were pure white. They were stacked in some way she didn’t yet understand, but the space between them wasn’t empty—it was filled with filaments and strands of the same stuff the spheres were made of, but spun out as if a gargantuan spider had tied its egg sacks together. The webbing was uneven, almost random, but dense; there were thousands of strands visible, and she could see just a tiny portion of the dirigible’s interior. Where the filaments touched the spheres they wrapped partially around the surface before trailing off, climbing on top of each other like vines clinging to the curved surface, turning the exteriors of the spheres into jumbles that looked organic. The spheres and strands faded away into darkness above them, and forward and back. The complex shadows were spooky and disquieting.

“There are seventeen chambers,” Yolatta said quietly. Miako looked around. Everyone, including Turbasek, was standing just as she had been, heads tilted back and mouth agape. “Each nearly forty feet in diameter, and filled with nothing—literally. Most of them are as close to a perfect vacuum as you can get without going into space. Some

of them are partially filled with air to achieve the proper buoyancy for cruising altitude. They're packed together in triads, two ranks of six above and one rank of five below."

Suddenly Miako realized what the assemblage reminded her of. The spheres looked like micrographs she had seen of bacteria. And the struts between them looked like the webbed interiors of living bone.

"Let's go forward," their guide said, and led them along a wide walkway beneath the chambers. Now that they were in the center of the dirigible's body Miako could see how the spheres were packed together. Two were side by side across the upper width of the envelope, and below them a third nestled into the gap between pairs, nearly touching four upper chambers.

"The webbing between the chambers stiffens the structure and holds the chambers in place. It's many times stronger than steel and weighs just a tiny fraction of what solid metal would. The walkway we're on now is the roof of the gondola, but the entire structure—vacuum chambers, webbing, envelope, and gondola—was grown all at once, as one piece. It's almost three hundred feet long, almost a hundred feet tall through the gondola. The *Thistlegull* and its three sister ships are the largest one-piece ceramic constructions ever made."

"Sevessa-made, of course," Turbasek said.

Yolatta smiled. "Of course."

Miako could see why Yolatta had said it would be more dramatic at night. The walkway was well lit, but no attempt had been made to illuminate the upper reaches of the envelope. The giant round shapes and the creepy, stringy webbing fading off into the darkness were almost frightening.

They were able to walk nearly to the front of the dirigible before reaching a solid wall with a closed door. Miako looked more closely into the spaces between the chambers and saw ladders climbing up the sides, obviously added after the struts had been grown, because they did not go straight up, they dodged around the strands.

Yolatta talked about propulsion, the two sets of pumps for evacuating and filling the chambers, the problems of steering, navigation, and wind in a lighter-than-air craft—but Miako didn't really listen. She just kept staring up into the darkness, half-waiting for the giant spider that had spun this web to come down and see what it had caught.

\* \* \*

When the tour was done, the others didn't seem eager to troop off immediately for their meeting with Chass. Miako was sympathetic; she could remember all too well the shock of her first meeting with him and her reluctance to become involved with his quest. But that had passed, and as the senior member of the entourage, in duty-time if not in age, she was determined not to keep the Mediator waiting any longer. Somewhat to her embarrassment, she had to ask them where he was.

"In the cabin right next to yours," Jaybra said. Then she felt embarrassed again, because she should have guessed that; it was the same arrangement they'd had on the *Tiggleday*.

She *was* able to find it by herself, so she was spared a third humiliation. She knocked softly at the door, which opened a moment later. The other two followed her into the dark room. When the door was closed, the Mediator said in his eerie voice, "Turn on the light if you want."

Turbasek, standing closest to the door, flipped the switch and the room was flooded with warm illumination. Chass stood against the far wall, a head taller than any of them, with his impassive face like melted wax betraying nothing.

"There's only one chair," he said. "I will stand."

Turbasek and Jaybra seemed uncertain for a moment, so Miako pointed the man to the chair and she and Jaybra sat facing the others on the bed.

"Did you get some rest?" he asked Miako.

"Yes, thank you. I didn't sleep well last night."

He looked at her without speaking for an uncomfortable interval. She had not had time to come to terms with the reason she hadn't slept; hadn't decided if she should tell the Mediator that fanatical assassins wanted him to stop his search, or *how* to tell him if she decided to. She didn't know whether Zeven was right and Baba wanted the people of Brezlun to grow up without her. As the silence lingered she wondered if Chass already knew everything and was waiting for her to bring it up.

But he simply looked at the others in turn and finally spoke to them all. "You know my purpose for this trip," he said. "When I began I thought there was a modest chance of success. The reliquaries of Gebertala have forced me to revise the probabilities downward. I thought my best chance was Tongatka, which has the knowledge and the incentive to preserve Landing-era technology, but the Archives were a disappointment."

"Sevessa have an extensive museum," Turbasek said.

"Yes. But they are not much interested in preserving bits of junk. They're a very practical people, strange reproductive strategies aside, and though they revere Baba they don't care much about ancient gadgets." Turbasek nodded and slumped back in his chair. "In any case they won't let me see their relics."

That startled them.

"But why not?" Miako said. "Surely they know you're a Mediator. And if they revere Baba..."

"I am not *their* Mediator," Chass said. He leaned back against the wall. "Everyone knows that Mediators are not organic; not alive in the sense that you are alive. Yet somehow through the ages people have insisted on assigning us to one sex or another, when it's obvious to anyone who cares to look that I am no more male or female than is a rock. Most everyone has treated us as male, probably because of our size and the lower pitch of our voices."

He looked at them one by one. "Merta treated Ripp and Foss as invading males, and challenged them repeatedly until they were finally destroyed. Troff and Yill were always treated well by Tongat, but as if they were senior *male* advisors. Jann and I were obviously father figures to Felitta. But Sevessa—they believed that all the *other* Mediators were male, and *theirs* were female. That's the only way they could accept Kepp and Podd into their inner rites and holy places. It wouldn't matter to Sevessa if Baba had personally sent me to them on a flaming chariot towing a mile-long banner proclaiming, 'Let him in.' That *him* would limit what they would allow *him* to do and to see."

"But perhaps if you explained," Miako said.

"I tried that long before you were born," Chass said. "They were polite but intractable."

"And so Miako," Turbasek said.

Chass turned to him. “That is one reason I need Miako. She’s been essential to me in many other ways already, more than she can probably guess, and if we must go to Mertaka she will play a crucial role there as well. But yes: I cannot get access to the Sevessa relics without her.

“Now, for your roles.” He turned from Turbasek to Jaybra, who seemed to shrink under his stare and then collect herself and square her shoulders. “In Sevessaka, Jaybra Ponyhealer, you may perhaps be an asset. But I believe your bigger contribution will come if we return to your homeland. And you, Turbasek Starwatcher, I have known your name since you were young. You are widely traveled, well educated, and respected by people on every continent. I tell the two of you honestly, I doubt you will be able to help me directly, but indirectly you may do me an enormous service.”

“How, sir?” Jaybra said, and Turbasek echoed her.

“As companions to Miako. She is strong, but your friendship will make her stronger. What we have yet to do dwarfs our efforts so far, and most of what remains must be done by her, not by me.”

Miako felt herself blushing. She bowed her head and restrained her hands from performing the rite of unworthiness, but in her mind they fluttered in the intricate movements. She wondered if Turbasek and Jaybra could tell.

“It is our honor and our duty to help you in any way we can,” Turbasek said formally. “It’s our good fortune that helping you takes such a pleasurable form.”

Miako blushed again and bowed from the waist to him. He bowed back, smiling broadly.

Chass said, “I can see that the tales of your charm were not exaggerated.”

Turbasek bowed to him as well, still smiling.

“Very well, then. If you need it, I formally give you my blessing to travel with us. Thank you both. Now—we have three more days aboard the dirigible. It is my custom to refrain from complicating things by mixing socially, so we may not meet again until we dock in Sevr. But if you need me for anything, feel free to visit me here.”

He looked at Miako when he said this, and she nodded, understanding him perfectly. She stood up and the others followed her lead.

“Good night, sir,” she said, and they filed out.

Her friends half-heartedly proposed going back to the lounge, but Miako begged off and said good night. She closed the door of her cabin behind her and wondered what Chass did in his room all alone for days on end. Perhaps he was studying his enigmatic bits of electronic junk, or reliving old memories, or praying to Baba. She couldn’t even imagine how a being such as he thought. She could barely understand herself sometimes.

Despite her long nap she was past ready for bed. Yet she lay for a while under the covers, wide awake and listening to the soft thrumming of the distant engines, worrying about the trials that Chass had all but promised her, and wondering whether she would be capable of meeting them.

\* \* \*

On the second morning they flew past Hungry Lake, so vast it looked like an inland sea. Since the lake nestled up against the border between Felittaka and Tongatka at the forty-fifth parallel, Miako felt that she should have been happy to be back in her homeland, but she was several miles above it and found that she felt no connection at all to the rolling grasslands and dark forests so far below.



The dirigible's gondola had seemed huge when they were boarding, but by the end of the second day Miako was feeling something like cabin fever and wished the trip was over, no matter what challenges faced her when they landed. There were fewer public areas on the airship than she had expected, since the lower two levels of the front end were devoted to the flight crew and most of the rest was cabins and cargo storage. The forward lounge was large and the views out its windows were stupendous, but by mid-day Miako had discovered a much smaller room on the first floor aft that no one else seemed interested in, and she spent most of her waking hours there, working on her journal.

There was an elegant and delicious dinner that night, followed by a lively peffodia at which Miako played three songs to rapturous applause. There was enough time afterwards for socializing, and she made an effort to join in the conversation with her traveling companions and some of the other people who had been at the peffodia, but her heart wasn't in it. She found herself thinking about Suzata and her other friends in Littapo. It had finally sunk in that when she was done with this tortuous journey, she would not be returning to her old life; she would be starting a new one as a lowly trainee in Tongatka. She was only thirty but she felt old, and didn't know if she had the strength to begin that journey—assuming she found the fortitude and the luck to survive this one.

Jaybra asked to join her the next morning, and they spent the day quietly in the small lounge, Miako thinking and writing and Jaybra reading. Overnight they had crossed the channel separating Gebertala and Sevevaka, so they spent the entire third day hugging the western coast of Sevevaka. The spine of the continent was a massive, forbidding mountain chain that ran its entire length; they could just see its snow-covered peaks in the distance. Below them when they were over land was jungle, not like the peaceful hardwood forests that Miako knew from home, but a high canopy in a thousand shades of green where different species of trees tried to crowd each other out of the light. Around dinnertime the dirigible began crossing the base of the Prong, the twisted peninsula that jutted westward into the Vessin Ocean. Miako retreated to her cabin as soon as dinner was over.

They spent the whole morning of the fourth day over open water. Turbasek joined them in their small lounge and seemed to understand their mood. He had brought a tall stack of books from the ship's library and worked through them methodically throughout the entire day, reading selected passages from some books, entire chapters from others, and a few he merely leafed through without stopping. At lunchtime they crossed back over land, and in mid-afternoon the dirigible began a slow, gentle descent. The sun was perhaps an hour from setting when they spotted Sevr in the distance, its tall, graceful spires rising up out of the trees.

Miako realized that the jungle they had seen yesterday was gone, though the land was still covered in thick woods. Sevr was nearly as far south of the equator as Geshamo was north, but the topography was completely different, and Sevr's climate was much milder. The mountains retreated in this part of Sevevaka, surrounding a wide, broad plain that drained into the Rekaka River, at whose mouth the flowing city stood.

They sailed down smoothly until the tops of the trees looked close enough to touch. Miako and her friends gathered their things and headed back to their cabins to get ready to disembark.

Miako watched the mooring from her cabin. A tall, very thin mast became visible in the distance, growing steadily closer. Moments later the unseen engines went from a murmur to a roar to dead silence, and the airship hung motionless, tethered once more to the earth. Miako picked up her bags and went out into the hallway. Chass was waiting for her, and Jaybra and Turbasek joined them a moment later. The four of them walked down the stairway to the reception area and waited their turn to step onto the soil of Sevessaka.

## Living Legend

When they got to the front of the line they crossed a narrow, textured ceramic walkway that led, not to a stairway as Miako had expected, but to closed double doors. A Sevessa stood there smiling at them, obviously waiting for something. She wore a loose shirt tucked into heavy pants, which were themselves tucked into brown leather boots that came up nearly to her knees. The woman's hair, black of course, was long and braided, falling across her shoulder onto her chest and nearly to the wide belt that held up the pants. The belt was leather inlaid with wires of silver, closed with a heavy silver buckle that sat on her hip.

After an awkward moment, the doors opened onto a small, featureless room. Six people she didn't know preceded them into the room, followed by the Mediator, Miako, and their two companions.

The woman who had been waiting with them said, "Enjoy your stay in Sevessaka," and pushed a button on the wall. The doors closed and the floor fell out from under them.

Miako had heard of elevators but had never seen one before. Felitta tended to avoid unnecessary electric devices, and Government Building was the only structure in the country over two stories tall. While Tongat could easily have built elevators they didn't really need them: there were no buildings taller than five stories in Geshamo, and those invariably had ramps. After a very brief moment of panic Miako found she didn't mind the sensation at all and wished the walls were transparent so she could see the view as they descended the tall tower.

Another Sevessa, dressed much the same as the first, stood at the elevator doors when they opened to direct them to the admissions queue. Three women were sorting the arrivals in a small gallery that ran along a solid wall on one side and was open to the outside air on the other. It was pleasantly warm. Apparently these women were quite efficient because the last of the previous batch of arrivals was leaving as Miako's group reached at the desks. One couple from their group had got ahead of them and Chass was hanging back as he had in Tongatka, so Miako went ahead to the left-hand station, where a very tall woman with a clipboard was waiting.

The official smiled and said in Common, "Nationality?"

Miako hesitated. She wasn't Tongat yet, despite the promises of the Tongat Council. "Felitta," she said.

"What is your name, please?"

"Miako Tomaza Seeker."

The woman gaped at her and the other two customs women also broke off their conversations to stare at her. "I'm sorry," the tall woman said, "could you repeat that?" Miako did. There was utter silence in the room. Miako could hear the elevator arrive again with the last batch of passengers. There were seven of them, chatting happily among themselves until they arrived at the queues and realized that no one was speaking. Their conversation died away and the room was still for a moment.

The official on the far right visibly shook herself and raised her voice. "I'm sorry for the delay everyone. Miss Seeker, could you step aside for a moment so we can let these other passengers get on their way?"

"We're with her," Jaybra said. Turbasek came to stand beside her.

"Very well, would you please join her just off to the side here?"

"Am I in trouble?" Miako said.

"Absolutely not. We'd just like to... to ask you a little about yourself. Henfi, could you call the supervisor, please? Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize again, we can help you all immediately." She turned to Chass, whose hood was up, and said, "Sir?"

Chass tossed back the cowl and said in a loud, clear, but disturbingly inhuman voice, "I am also with Miss Seeker."

Miako almost wanted to laugh. The three customs officials looked as if their hearts had just stopped, and the passengers, who of course had had no idea they'd been traveling with a Mediator, were silent for only a moment before they all started chattering again.

"If... I'm sorry, I understand," the woman in charge said. "If you would also wait for just a moment, we'll let these people through first."

"Of course," he said, and went to stand by Miako.

Every one of the other passengers was trying to stare at their foursome without actually looking at them. In hushed tones the officials asked everyone their county, name, and business and let them pass. By then an older woman had come from the other end of the gallery. When the last of the other passengers was out of sight, she said, "I understand we have some distinguished guests today. My name is Shora Urcula, I'm the manager of the facility. Could you introduce yourselves, please?"

Miako waited for Chass to go first, but he simply stood, quietly and imperiously, with his hands folded in front of him. Finally Turbasek stepped forward.

"Turbasek Starwatcher, from Tongatka," he said.

"Ah, Turbasek, it's a pleasure to have you visit us again."

"Very kind, madam. Please allow me to introduce my shy friends. This is Jaybra Ponyhealer, also from Tongatka. This is Miako Seeker, from Felittaka, soon to be kethrin to Tongatka. And this is Chass, whom I think you have heard of."

"Indeed," Shora said, but it came out as a bit of a croak.

"As for our business here," Turbasek said, "that is not my place to say." He took a step back and looked at Chass. Everyone else did too.

Chass reciprocated by turning slightly and looking at Miako with his expressionless eyes. She was confused for a moment before she realized why he had been so passive; she was to play the role he'd given her. She nodded at him, then bowed to Shora.

"We are on a quest to reestablish communication with Baba," she said clearly and forcefully, with much more bravado than she actually felt. "I am here as the Mediator's emissary to humbly request permission from your queen to examine and perhaps remove whatever antiquities in your museum might help us in this historic mission."

She felt like a total fraud, but the Sevessa looked shaken and impressed. "One moment, please," Shora said, and the four of them retreated a ways and put their heads together.

"Very good," Chass said so softly that Miako almost missed it. She intentionally fluttered one hand in the key part of the rite of acceptance and caught Turbasek smiling at her.

The customs agents returned, the three inspectors hanging back in an arc behind Shora. “We honor your request,” she said, “but it is not in our power to grant this. We can arrange for transportation into Sevr and for temporary housing for the four of you while we confer with the local council.”

“Thank you,” Miako said in Sevessa, which startled the women, “we accept and...,” she strained to remember the proper form she had learned in language school, “we honor your gracious offer. Might we know when we can expect to hear from your local council?”

“Ah... I think I can guarantee that they will contact you tomorrow morning.”

Miako bowed. Jaybra and Turbasek followed suit, but Chass merely nodded.

By now it was completely dark outside, but the grounds alongside the gallery were lit by small, low lamps that highlighted the trees. There were paths and sculpted shrubs; it seemed to be a garden, and Miako would dearly have loved to stay a while and explore it in daylight, but she followed Shora along the lighted gallery to the end of the building. They came out to a circular drive, broad and well-lit, but empty. Miako wondered if they had any of the cars like the one that Howart had driven them around in, but Shora led them down the drive to a covered platform that was simply a comfortably familiar train station, almost exactly like the ones in Felittaka.

“There’s no scheduled run tonight,” Shora said, “but I called the engineer and she should be along in just a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” Miako said, reverting to Common, since that was what the supervisor was still speaking.

“I’ll call ahead. Someone will be waiting at the North station—that will be the only stop the train makes—to show you to a place where you can get some food and rest tonight.”

“You’ve been very kind,” Miako said, and they bowed politely to each other.

The train pulled in shortly afterwards. It was as different from the sleek, silvery, Tongat mountain-climber as it could be and still use the same name. The cars were smooth-sided but they ballooned outwards slightly as if from over-pressure, and each of the three cars was a different, intense, but soft color: coral, turquoise, and butter yellow. The engine was more aerodynamic but still strangely rounded and bulbous. It was purple.

Turbasek was smiling softly, but Jaybra and Miako simply gaped at the apparition. A stocky, powerfully-built woman dressed like the others hopped down onto the platform from the engine. She strode up to their group and bowed with a perfunctory crispness.

“Honored guests,” she said in a raspy voice, “climb aboard and we’ll be on our way. I imagine all of you—well, all but one—are hungry enough to eat an armadillo.”

Miako didn’t know what an armadillo was, but she *was* getting hungry. The engineer opened the door to the first car, the yellow one, and they climbed up a few steps into the train.

She had ridden a train nearly the length of Gebertala, three times, and recently been on the ratcheted Geshamo train. Those had been different from each other, but only in details: their carriages were an orderly arrangement of rows of seats, with an aisle down the middle and storage racks above and below. This train car looked as if it had been *grown* instead of built—like a melon. Seating areas were scattered over the interior, with no clear aisle yet with ample room to move around. The seats themselves came in various shapes and sizes, no two exactly the same, except that all were low to the floor of the

carriage. They were plump, like overstuffed armchairs, but not ridiculous, merely strange. Some faced forward and some backward; they were canted or straight; some could seat one person, some curved around on themselves and could have held entire committees. They all seemed to be covered in the same tough, leathery material, but the colors were as varied as those of the cars, and invariably pastel.

The engineer had followed them in and was grinning at them.

“Are all your trains like this?” Miako asked.

“This girl is unique,” the engineer croaked. “She’s called the Tropical Nectar. Every train in Sevessaka is different, you know; we only make things the same when we have to. Now in Felittaka, I’m guessing you would know, because you sound like Felitta to me, I suppose they have nine or ten trains in service, all of them exactly the same, all dark gray. Very sensible. Very boring. Very Felitta, if you’ll excuse me for saying so. We do things differently here.”

“I’m beginning to see that,” Miako said.

“You’re the Seeker, they tell me.” Miako nodded. “And you’d be the last Mediator, then.” Chass didn’t react at all. “So what does that make you two: Queen Ravi and Morgat the Pirate?”

She guffawed at her own joke, and turned without waiting for a response, closing the door behind her. A moment later the train started smoothly forward. They found a close grouping in the center of the train where they could sit facing each other.

“You don’t look a thing like Morgat,” Chass said.

Turbasek jerked his head up. “Don’t tell me you knew him?”

“I sailed with him for a while. He liked these waters, you know, liked the idea of preying on Sevessa. ‘Irony!’ he used to bellow into the wind when he was close up on their stern. He was very gallant toward Sevessa he captured. A decat of them liked him so much they gave up their Sevessa citizenship and became his wives. He was a little like you that way.”

“I’ve never had a wife,” Turbasek said primly, making Jaybra laugh.

“Why did you sail with a pirate?” Jaybra asked. “Did you try to stop him from pirating?”

“I sailed with him to learn from him,” Chass said. “He was an interesting man. Born Merta, kethrin to Felitta, which is very unusual, and ten years after his choiceday—when he was Miako’s present age—he decided he’d had enough of being a farmer and stole a ship. Used that to steal a better one, and spent twenty years terrorizing ships on three continents and both oceans before he vanished.”

“Vanished?” Miako said.

“Some say,” Turbasek said thoughtfully, “he was lost in monstrous storm.”

“Like the one that took Kepp,” Miako said, and the Mediator looked at her thoughtfully, then nodded slightly.

“Others say he’d finally gathered enough wealth to support his wives—though I’d heard the number was closer to *two* decat—and retired to Fugitive Island, where he drank and feasted and fornicated until he was an old man.”

“And then,” Chass said, “when he was so old he couldn’t remember his own name, he went out one last time in a ship, just him and his three oldest wives, and they scuttled her intentionally and went down into his beloved ocean, clinging together and singing drinking songs. I’ve heard that one too.”

“Is that true?” Miako said.

Chass smiled his toothless smile. “Now to answer your other question,” he said to Jaybra, “it has never been the role of Mediators to stop people from doing bad things. We are not guardians of the good or protectors of morality. We are not shepherds or jailers or guides. We’re Mediators. Our only purpose is to bridge the gap between you and Baba. We’re facilitators. That’s all.”

Miako turned a little in her seat and watched the night flow by outside. It was impossible to tell how fast the train was moving, because there were few lights out there and the Moon was not up. Nevertheless, despite the smooth ride, she had the feeling that the Tropical Nectar was a very speedy train and that they were riding along much faster than the trains she’d taken in Felittaka.

It wasn’t long after their conversation ebbed that she began to realize there was a growing glow up ahead, and shortly afterwards the train began decelerating. It pulled into a dimly-lit station, but there was enough light for Miako to see that half the platform was taken up with potted plants, some of which looked like palm trees, which shouldn’t have grown this far south. The train stopped smoothly and a moment later the engineer opened the carriage door.

“North Station,” she said. “Boring, normal people should stay aboard, but the interesting and unusual might want to get off here.” They gathered their bags and walked out onto the station platform. “It’s been a pleasure driving you, and not an experience I’m likely to forget. Or one that anyone’ll believe, either, I’m sure.”

Miako nodded politely but Turbasek paused in front of the engineer and smiled. “It doesn’t matter, does it? You’ll be getting free drinks from this story in every bar in Sevur for two years.”

The engineer guffawed and clapped him on the shoulder, which nearly knocked him over. She bowed to them all and climbed back into her purple engine. The train pulled out and left them standing alone on the platform.

Miako looked around. The customs agent had said they would be met, but all she could see was a wide variety of thriving, potted plants. But a moment later a young woman appeared from between two shrubby scheffleras and hurried up to them.

“I beg your pardon,” she said breathlessly and bowed deeply. “I’m sorry I’m late, I didn’t think the train would get here so quickly. My name is Keppa Yava, I’ve been assigned as your guide. You must be Miako the Seeker, and...” She stopped for a deep breath. “Chass. Turbasek and Jaybra. Please, follow me. We’ve assigned you a small house that you can use during your stay. Can I help anyone carry their bags? It’s not far, just a few minutes’ walk.”

Chass said nothing, but the others assured her that they were traveling light and needed no assistance. They walked out of the station onto a well-lit street, narrow but smooth and clean, bordered closely on both sides by a dense hedge. A short way from the station the hedge pulled back from the road and melted into thick woods. It was in fact less than five minutes before they were standing at a solid wooden gate in a tall stone-and-mortar wall. The stone was dark and smooth, its top out of Miako’s reach. The gate looked sturdy enough to defend against invaders, like the thick doors on the Archives and Library in Tongatka, but Keppa opened it by lifting a lever and simply pushing, and Miako realized that the gate had no lock.

Inside was a garden, lit by gas lamps hanging from the wall and from posts here and there beside curving gravel paths. It was too dark to make out more than the fact that the plants were tended. They followed Keppa down one of the pathways about a hundred feet to a small cottage that had been invisible from the gate. Its roof was something very thick that came down so low that Chass had to duck beneath it to enter, but inside was a brightly lit, cheerful room with tall ceilings. It seemed to be a combination kitchen, dining, and living room. A heavy table off to their right was set with food. Each end held a cluster of thick pillar candles, their flames dancing in the breeze of their entry.

Chass bid them goodnight and stooped through a doorway into the back of the cottage. Keppa urged the other three to sit and eat, and after taking a moment to wash up they all sat around the sturdy trestle table and started filling their plates. There was a slender loaf of bread that was crusty outside but soft within, cheeses, cold roasted chicken, seven different kinds of pickles, a fruit salad and one of marinated vegetable chunks, five different wines, and hot tea. Keppa didn't join them, she just sat watching until they had blunted the edge of their hunger, then she got up the courage to speak again.

“Are you the fulfillment of the prophecy?”

Miako almost choked on a piece of melon. Turbasek clapped her on the back and she spent a moment coughing and wiping tears from her eyes before she managed to croak, “What prophecy?”

“The Shenza sisterhood—have you heard of it?” Miako nodded; that was the group that Zeven claimed the Roakay had extinguished. “They made a lot of predictions, most of which came true.”

“Seventy-three percent,” Turbasek said. “They were truly astonishing.”

“Some of their prophecies were for the far future,” Keppa said. “There are four still standing. One of them says that a female Seeker will lead us into the Fifth Age.”

Miako suddenly remembered that Chass had mentioned this the first evening they met. She'd completely forgotten about it; she'd have to remember to add it to her journal.

“What is the Fifth Age?” Jaybra asked.

“The Ages were another Shenza idea. First there was a world with no people. Second, people came to be, but they had no knowledge of the Mother. Third, the people lived within the Mother but were unaware of her. And in our Age, the Fourth, people know the Mother but have no contact with her. The Fifth Age is supposed to be the completion: we will both know the Mother and be part of her.”

“I assume,” Miako said, her voice under control again, “by the Mother they meant Baba.”

Keppa nodded. Miako didn't think of herself as someone who could lead the world, or any part of it, into a new Age. She hadn't had much luck so far even sorting out her own life. But this “completion” sounded an awful lot like Chass's mission. Perhaps it wasn't too early to start sowing the seeds of success.

“I wouldn't presume to claim to be the fulfillment of any prophecy,” she said, “least of all one made by the Shenza. But I *am* trying to help the Mediator reestablish communication with Baba. It seems possible to me that that might be a step toward your Fifth Age.”

The young Sevessa thought about this for a moment and accepted it with a nod. She stood up from the table.



“You must be tired. Let me show you to your rooms. The clan council will want to speak to Miako in the morning, and perhaps the rest of you as well.”

She led them through the door in the back of the room. There were nearly a dozen rooms off the corridor: some bedrooms, a sitting room, a large storage room, and a washroom. Only one of the doors was closed, evidently the one that Chass had retired to. The bedrooms were all nearly identical, each with a single bed, a tall chest and armoire combination, an easy chair, and a small table for a shrine; but the furnishings in each room were very different. Some of the bedframes were wooden, others metal or ceramic; the chests were plain or elaborately carved; the lighting came from a lamp in the ceiling or ornate standing lamps beside the chairs. Turbasek selected a very masculine-looking room with lots of wrought iron accents. Miako chose something more feminine, but not as frilly as the one Jaybra selected, which had lacy coverings for the table and a lace-edged bedspread.

“I won’t be staying here,” Keppa said, “but I’ll be back an hour after sunrise tomorrow to escort you to the council. I hope you all sleep well. If you need anything, you’ll very likely find it in the storeroom.”

They wished each other goodnight and Keppa left—no doubt, Miako thought, to report to her mistresses on every word and gesture that had been exchanged. She wondered who the guide was working for, but almost immediately gave up the speculation. She had only the roughest idea how Sevessa politics worked: there were councils at several levels leading up to the queen, who was elected for life. She ruled absolutely but only with the consent of the national council, and that contradiction was Sevessaka in a nutshell. Until Miako knew more about how things really worked, it was pointless to try to guess. She was going to have to feel her way cautiously.

Meanwhile, she still had not determined how or when to broach the subject of the Roakay’s threats with the Mediator.

She discovered after unpacking that she wasn’t sleepy yet. She didn’t feel up to more conversation, so she began unwrapping her shrine objects and setting them up on the table provided for that purpose. Her room had a wooden table with an inlay of polished, creamy stone edging on the top. Shrine tables were immediately recognizable because they were too tall to be used by someone sitting down; they were intended to put the shrine at an easy viewing level for someone standing up.

She set Partep’s marble horse in the center of the table and glanced up. Chass was standing in the door of the room.

“You’re not tired?” he said.

“Not really. Please, come in.”

The Mediator had to stoop to walk through the doorway. He closed the door and sat in the chair, which was upholstered in a complex fabric, a spiraling pattern of leaves and twigs in muted earth tones. The chair creaked slightly under his weight.

“I heard what our young hostess said about the prophecy,” he said. Miako wondered how he had managed to hear that, in a closed room halfway down the long hall, but she shoved the thought away. “You might think that Sevessa will be cooperative because my mission and your name seem to be the fulfillment of that prophecy, but that’s not how their minds work. They’re as patient as Tongat when it comes to the evaluation of things they care about, and sometimes it can be difficult to tease out just what that is. Despite

the prophecy or their own desires, they will not grant me access to their relics. They may not even let *you* have access.”

“What do we do then?”

“Wait, and hope they make a decision before my time runs out. There’s a reason why we’ve traveled this path, and it’s not just geographical. Starting with Felittaka, at each step it’s more difficult to get what I need. I was hoping that we wouldn’t even need to come here, but now it’s almost certain that we’ll have to go to Mertaka as well. But first we need to get everything we can from Sevessa, because it’s more likely that they’ve preserved their old technology than that the horse people have.”

“What should I do here?”

“Work your way up the bureaucracy. That will take some time. Be patient. Listen well, talk well. Be humble but magisterial.”

Miako laughed. “I speak their language but I’m not sure I understand them. They seem to embrace contradiction.”

“Exactly the opposite of Tongat, who always want to reduce things so they can be understood. You were born Felitta, Miako, but your mind is Tongat. You’ll have to reach outside your experience to deal with these women.” He sat in thought for a moment. “There is something that may help you. Every culture on Brezlun believes that it alone is the true expression of Baba’s will, and each is correct in its own way. But Sevessa are unique in more ways than the obvious. Don’t be distracted by the exclusion of men from their society, or their history as baby thieves. To understand them you must remember that they are descended from the people that ran Elpida.”

“Elpida? What’s that?”

“Elpida is the ship whose mind is Baba—the starship that you saw in Stelikin’s telescope. In the far distant past, there was a caste of people charged with the control and maintenance of the ship. Sevessa are their direct cultural descendants. So their claim to dominance is not based just on an interpretation of Baba’s maxims, as the other cultures’ claims are. In the long ago they actually *were* the top of the hierarchy, and they’ve never forgotten it.”

Miako’s head was spinning. “Are you saying that their ancestors were in charge of Baba?”

“No. Omadaz ran the expedition and was in command of the ship. But human beings can’t seem to live without a hierarchy, and the ancestors of Sevessa were at the pinnacle of that, supporting Oma and managing the physical environment. They are the Chosen, they stand apart from normal people. It might help you to keep that in mind.”

Miako nodded. “So I must be deferential but commanding.”

“Precisely.” Chass stood up and paused as he looked at her partially-completed shrine. He picked up the painting. “Ravi and the Storm. Interesting. Where did you get this?”

She told him how it had been part of the shrine at the Beekeeper farm, but Ron had given it to her after telling her the story of the tempest that had killed Kepp.

“This is very old,” he said, “almost contemporary, by a famous Sevessa painter named Indiri.”

“Is it valuable?”

“It’s priceless. I wonder how it ended up on a farm in Felittaka?”

“Not just any farm,” Miako reminded him.

“Perhaps you’re right. It might have something to do with the reliquary, handed down from one frenik to the next.” He set it back in its place. “Wait a few days, then you might want to contrive to let Keppa see this.”

“Do you think it will make a difference?”

“It can’t hurt,” he said.

\* \* \*

Miako awoke before the others and ate a solitary light breakfast of oatmeal with fruit. By the time Keppa arrived, the three human companions were ready, waiting silently in the sitting room. Miako was nervous, and Jaybra seemed to be also, but Turbasek sat apparently at ease, paging slowly through a small book he’d found in his room. Keppa knocked on their door an hour past dawn, as promised. Jaybra ran to let her in and everyone gathered in the common room.

“The clan council has asked to see Miako alone,” Keppa said. “I hope you won’t take offense.”

“Not at all,” Turbasek said. “I was hoping to visit the Tongat embassy today. Jaybra, would you like to join me?” Jaybra looked disappointed, but she nodded.

Miako had gathered a few things including her flute into a small, hand-embroidered bag she’d found in the storeroom. She slung this over her shoulder and followed Keppa outside. They walked on a gravel path around the cottage and continued for a moment until they reached a junction with three other paths. The sky was clouded over and the air was cool, the start of autumn here. Miako felt odd, knowing it was the start of spring back home. The plants growing alongside the paths were thick and seemed alternately well-tended and luxuriantly wild. She recognized most of them: maples, birches, philodendrons and rhododendrons, and decats of others, but here and there were shrubs she had never seen before, many of them in flower, and the occasional smooth-trunked palm tree made the gardens seem mysterious and exotic.

They turned left at the cross-path and walked for several minutes without seeing another building. Miako wondered how far they were going and decided to put the time to good use.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Not at all,” Keppa said. The path was wide enough that they were walking side by side.

“Which clan’s council are we going to meet?”

“Most of North Sevur is owned by the Hidrasil clan. This is their nownsha we’re walking in.”

“I’m sorry, what is a nownsha?”

“Um. It’s a, well, a sort of compound. The word can mean anything from a camp to a city.”

“The Hidrasil own a city?”

“Actually, they do: Flip, on the Tail. They’re the only clan to actually own an entire city.”

“It must be a huge clan.”

“Hidrasil is the largest clan. Over a hundred thousand women, twice the average, with five major nownshas.”

Miako thought back to her work as a census clerk. “But that means that one in ten Sevessa are in the Hidrasil clan.”

“Yes.”

They could see a cluster of low buildings off to the left, but Keppa took a fork that led away from them and a moment later only plants were visible again. Miako realized that she had no chance of ever finding her way back to her cottage again without help.

“Do you belong to Hidrasil clan?”

Keppa smiled at her. “Yes.”

Miako did some math in her head. “And there are about two hundred clans?”

“Just over two hundred.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand Sevessa very well.”

“Non-Sevessa seem to find our hierarchy complicated,” Keppa said, “but it’s not, really. Clans are composed mostly of people related to each other, plus their kethrin and vessin associates, who of course have equal rights to natives. Every clan has a council—actually, it’s typical for every nownsha to have a council, then the clan council is composed of members of the smaller councils. And that pattern is repeated at every higher level. The city council is composed of members of the clan councils, the regional council of members of the city and outlying councils, and the national council of members of the regional ones. It’s fractal.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I just meant that Sevessa politics looks the same no matter what level you’re looking at.”

“Except for the queen.”

“Of course. There’s a lower limit and an upper. The lower limit is usually a single person who’s the head of a household. And the queen is the upper limit, again one person who’s the head of the nation. So even the top and the bottom look the same.”

Now Miako knew how many levels she had to navigate. But it didn’t make her feel any better, because she had no idea what she was going to do even at this lowest level. Then she remembered that the Tongat council had liked her, and blessed her effort, so she decided that this would probably work out as well. It would just take more time and a lot more meetings.

The trees were thinning out and the path they were on reached the edge of a cliff and turned to the right. The city of Sevur was spread out below them on the left. It looked so different from Littapo, which other than Government House was more like a large fishing village with suburbs than it was like the complex terraced city of Geshamo. This city had a smaller population than Littapo, perhaps as much as three hundred thousand (and therefore more people lived here than there were Tongat in the world), but it was far more grand. There were several narrow, graceful towers that seemed to reach up to puncture the sky, surrounded by clusters of much lower, brightly-colored, domed structures; somehow this reminded Miako of a flower, with petals surrounding a central stigma.

The path led them to a modest-sized, elegant stone building that looked out over the city. Much of the exterior wall facing the city was glass. Between the panes were columns that were narrower at the top than the bottom. The stone was polished, light-colored marble veined with golden streaks. They walked up the decat or so steps to the entrance and Keppa paused, putting a hand on Miako’s arm.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “Hidrasil is a generous clan, and the council is kind and wise. They’ll probably ask you a million questions, but they mean you well.”

She pulled on a golden handle to open the large glass door and ushered Miako inside.

\* \* \*

The scale of the council building was much smaller, but in other ways it reminded Miako of the grand public buildings she'd seen in Geshamo. The foyer was vaulted stone, lit by sunlight coming through the enormous windows, with an intricate parquet floor made of at least a dozen types of wood. A colonnade ran around the three interior walls, causing Miako to wonder what it was that made columns so popular both here and in Tongatka. Felitta never used them.

Keppa led her straight through and opened a door in the far wall. Miako walked through it and without warning was the center of focus of the Hidrasil council.

The chamber was as intimate as the foyer had been intimidating. It was only large enough to seat perhaps twenty people, and the ceiling was a normal height. The walls were hung floor to ceiling with vertically-pleated fabrics whose color was impossible to pin down; they seemed to shimmer across the spectrum as she took another tentative step forward. There was a fireplace in the wall to the right, stacked with wood but unlit.

Large chairs were set in a half circle facing her. Many of them were unoccupied, including one seat near the center and both ends of the curve. In the central section nine women watched her, some smiling gently, some with no expression at all. Two pairs were leaning together as if she'd just interrupted a private conversation. The women were not at all alike—some taller or shorter, older or younger, dressed in tunic and pants or flowing gowns, and one of the younger ones was wearing shorts and a filmy blouse—but their expressions had something in common that Miako didn't recognize at first. As they stared silently it occurred to her that it might be hope.

Keppa spoke. "May I introduce Miako Tomaza Seeker, from Felittaka." Then she introduced the council members, but none of their names stuck in her memory for more than a few seconds.

"Thank you, Keppa," one of the older women said. She had pure white hair but a nearly unlined face, yet her hands shook as she gestured to the empty chair at the far left. "Please take a seat. Miako, generally the speaker will stand just about where where you are..." Miako looked down and saw that the parquet pattern radiated from a small circle half a step to her left. "But I fear this meeting may go on for a while and it is not an inquisition. Would you care to sit here?" She tapped the empty seat beside her.

"Thank you, ma'am," she said, and crossed the floor to sit in the offered chair. She set her shoulder bag behind her feet.

"I know that you have requests and questions, and we have more questions than we can get to in a day, which is all that we can devote to this discussion. The city council is impatient to talk to you, and I've already had questions from the regional. I can't imagine what the national council will be like by the time they get their hands on you—probably hopping from one foot to the other like a child that can't hold its water."

Miako couldn't stop a bark of a laugh from exploding past her lips.

"Nevertheless, since this will be a long ordeal for you, and despite the frustrations we all feel, let us begin on a civilized note. Can we get you anything to eat or drink?"

"No, thank you ma'am, I've just had breakfast."

"Are you ready to begin?"

"I'm not quite sure what it is we're beginning," Miako said.

Now it was the older woman's turn to laugh. "Why," she said, "getting to know you."

They asked about her childhood. Someone wanted to know if she was *tevessin*, and Miako replied in surprise that no, she was her parents' child. The questions were gentle but rapid-fire, coming from almost every one of the nine councilors. In a surprisingly short time they had covered the highlights of her life before the Mediator arrived; Miako was so dazed that she wasn't sure if this was due to the skill of the questioning or the lack of events in her life.

The questions became sharper and stranger as they discussed the Mediator, though no less gentle. Had she originally mistaken him for human? Had she seen him eat or drink anything? Did she have any idea how much he weighed? Was there a scar or a tattoo on his right shoulder blade? Did he make any whirring sounds when he wasn't speaking? What did he carry with him and did he have baggage? Did he always wear the same clothes? Had she ever seen him unclothed?

She couldn't think of the purpose of half of the questions, and some of them she simply didn't understand. She answered them all as well as she was able, and it never even occurred to her to lie—she couldn't possibly have managed a lie under the onslaught. During the back-and-forth, Miako managed to catch the name of the white-haired woman sitting beside her: *Gemeny*. Despite her initial assertion that this was not going to be an inquisition, that was just exactly what it felt like. After several hours *Gemeny* called for a break.

*Keppa* showed Miako to the washroom. When she came back someone had set out a table with tea, fruit juices, and small elaborate cakes. Miako took a cup of tea with some honey and sat down again.

"Now," *Gemeny* said, "let's discuss why you're here."

No amount of preparation was enough; despite thinking about this moment for days, Miako was still not sure exactly what she should say.

"Five days ago I had an astonishing experience," she began slowly. "It was so overwhelming that I actually fainted, which I don't think has ever happened to me before." She leaned forward in her chair. "I looked into the biggest telescope on *Brezlun* and saw *Baba*—not as a moving point of light, but as a metallic sphere sailing across the stars. For most of our history, *Baba* has been no more than that speck of light in the sky. To some people she's not even that. They've forgotten, or don't care, that everything we are, everything we have—our cultures, our ethical system, even our lives—we owe to her."

Three seats to Miako's left, a striking middle-aged, thin-faced woman named *Hecaja*, who had been one of the most persistent questioners, bent her wrist to raise her hand slightly. Miako nodded at her.

"Forgive me, but *Felitta* have willfully forgotten much of their history. *Sevessa* have not. We can explain to you—" *Gemeny* shot her a look, and she continued hastily, "at a more appropriate time, of course, just how the cultures arose. *Baba* had very little to do with that."

"Of course, I was oversimplifying to make my point," Miako said. "I know that you are descended from the caretakers."

"We say 'crew.'"

"But you were the crew *within* *Baba*. Our cultures could not have arisen in any other environment."

"Granted."

No one spoke for a moment, until Gemeny said, “So, we freely acknowledge our debt to Baba. But why are you here?”

“To fulfill the prophecy,” Miako said bluntly. Several of the women gasped, even though they must have been expecting her to say just that. “I know how to usher in the new Age.”

They waited. She let the pause lengthen. Again Gemeny spoke first. “By reestablishing contact with Baba.”

“Yes. And to do that the Mediator needs your help.”

“He’s not our Mediator,” Hecaja said.

“He’s the only one on Brezlun,” Miako replied calmly. “That makes him everyone’s Mediator.”

She could see that some of the councilors were willing to consider this, but there were some whose faces went stony. These—over half the council—sat back in their seats and crossed their arms or looked away. For these women the meeting was essentially over. Miako was relieved that Gemeny was not one of them.

“Well,” Gemeny said, “I understand you want to examine our museum collection to find parts that the Mediator can use to restore communications. Personally, I’m relieved that this council cannot make that decision, because I don’t know how we’d come to agreement. I think you’ve set yourself a serious challenge, and I wish you luck with the higher councils. Let’s return to some less contentious issues.” She reached for her tea and took a sip. “Do you like music?”

With that the earlier mode of questioning resumed. The probing now was an odd mix, investigating in roughly equal parts her life, her observations of the Mediator, and her thoughts on her journey so far—but all jumbled together, so that a question about her mother’s recipe for chicken stew was followed by someone wanting to know whether the Mediator turned the lights on when he was alone in a room. It continued until, despite repeated applications of honeyed tea, Miako was beginning to lose her voice. Finally there was a long pause and Gemeny rose from her seat.

“That’s enough torture for one day, I think. Miako, on behalf of the entire council, I’d like to thank you for your cooperation. You’ve given us much to think about, and it will probably take us all night to condense this into a report for the city council. Do you have any final questions or comments?”

“Thank you for taking the time to talk to me,” Miako said hoarsely.

Most of them laughed appreciatively at that. “Keppa will take you back to your cottage for dinner. Good luck with your quest.” Gemeny took both of her hands, drew her to her feet, and kissed her on the cheek.

Miako stumbled out of the room, slightly dizzy and tired beyond anything she had ever experienced before—worse even than she had felt after Suzata’s all-night parties. She barely registered the long walk back to their house.

Keppa left her at the door to the cottage. When she stumbled in, Turbasek and Jaybra were sitting at the table in the common room. They took one look at her and jumped up to help her to the table, got her some food which she didn’t remember eating, and tucked her into bed. Miako barely had time to wonder what they’d been doing all day before she fell sound asleep.

\* \* \*

She'd been the first to waken the day before, but by the time she showered and dressed the next morning she was fairly certain that the others had been up for hours. The morning was well advanced, and she was starving. She found some smoked fish and fresh bread in the kitchen, slathered the bread with honey and wolfed it down while Jaybra sat across from her, grinning. Turbasek was nowhere to be seen.

"I've never seen you eat like that," Jaybra said.

"I've never been the subject of an inquisition before."

"Tell me what happened."

Miako's voice was not completely recovered, but the honey helped. She described the experience as well as she could, but the nine hours of talking had already faded into a blur in her memory. When she was done she said, "What did you two do while I was turning on the spit?"

"Turbasek took me to the Tongat embassy. They knew him the moment he walked in. I thought the receptionist was going to lie down, she bowed so low, but he told her to go back to her work and just walked on past. Everyone seemed to know him. The embassy is an amazing place, sort of a buttressed dome, as if a Tongat building had mated with one of those tall spires and had a mongrel that was part stocky and part soaring."

Apparently one of Turbasek's myriad responsibilities was acting as a courier. He'd delivered more than a decat messages, verbally or by letter, to various embassy personnel, letting Jaybra tag along and listen in. She hadn't understood half of it, but there had been something about vessin quotas, another conversation about a large, custom ceramic casting that was impossibly complex and half a year overdue, and several personal messages from people back home. They'd had lunch there and then gone out to see some of the city.

"He gave me a list of things he thought you might like to do today."

"Don't I have another meeting today?"

"No. Keppa came by early again and said that the city council would see you tomorrow. Apparently they're planning to give you at least one day off between each meeting."

"Is that so they can digest what I've said or to let me get my voice back?"

Jaybra smiled. "Probably both. Do you feel like going out today, or do you want to rest?"

"I feel pretty good," Miako said, "but I can't promise how long I'll last."

They gathered a few things, sweaters and insulated containers of water. While they were preparing, Chass entered the room.

"I won't keep you," he said. "How did your first day go?"

"I think half the clan council is receptive," Miako said. "The other half..."

"Half? Miako, you astonish me. I thought you might sway one." He looked at their backpacks and waved at the door. "Go exploring. It's a beautiful city. Rest your mind. Have fun." He disappeared into the rear of the house.

Miako realized that she was gaping. She closed her mouth. Jaybra suggested that they take walking sticks from the carved wooden bin near the cottage door, and they went outside.

"It's very difficult to comprehend him," Jaybra said softly when they were well away from the cottage, walking down the gravel path toward the gate.



"I know," Miako said. "I can understand the words, but I can never even guess at what he's thinking or what he'll say next. I thought he'd be disappointed."

When they opened the heavy gate to the street, there was a small throng of women standing and sitting outside, perhaps thirty or so. The sitting ones jumped to their feet when Miako stepped out.

"Oh, tailknots!" Jaybra spat. "I forgot to warn you. They were here yesterday, too."

The women were mostly young, and they didn't seem angry, which was Miako's initial fear; they were excited, chattering and babbling so she couldn't understand any single voice. She realized after a moment that they had been waiting for *her*. She tried to separate out the individual voices.

"Are you the Seeker?" they said, and "Will you touch my talisman? Please rub my belly, I'm ten weeks pregnant. Have you come to lead us?"

Miako handed her walking stick to Jaybra and held up her hands. In a moment the crowd had quieted down.

"Yes," she said, "my name is Miako Seeker. I've come to ask your councils to help me and the Mediator Chass reestablish communication with Baba. If you'll sort yourselves out I'll be happy to say hello to each of you in turn."

More quickly than she would have believed possible, the young women formed a line from the gate leading down the street to the right, away from the train station. Miako worked her way down this line, bowing or touching hands with each woman, asking her name, rubbing their touchstones, family seals, and two pregnant bellies, one of which looked ready to deliver. When she reached the end, Jaybra handed her the walking stick and Miako turned and bowed to the line of Sevessa, who stood silent and still. She turned and started off down the road with Jaybra, disturbed by their silence, but stumbled when the entire crowd burst into song together behind her. She turned back and the women waved as they sang, clear voices merging in rich harmonies, but she couldn't understand the words. It must be an ancient form of Sevessa. The song continued behind them long after they were out of sight around a bend in the road, fading finally into the sighing of the light wind in the trees.

"What was that?" Miako said.

"They were awfully disappointed yesterday when I had to tell them I wasn't the Seeker."

"Were they the same ones?"

"Some of them. I'm not sure."

The sun was warm on their faces as they walked down the hill into the city of Sevrur. For a while they could see little but the trees and occasionally the tips of the spires rising above them. But then the road turned, the trees thinned out, and the entire city was spread out below them.

This was nearly the same view she'd had from the ridge the morning before, but they stopped for a moment to admire it anyway. The flowing, colorful buildings were so different from anything in Felittaka or Tongatka, in both of which the structures that weren't imported from here were constructed of solid, dependable, graceless stone. Sevessa were geniuses of ceramics, and their structures tended to look like colored eggshells, or impossibly extended soap bubbles. There were only a handful of tall buildings, so they could see the Rekaka River winding through the center of the city, the water sparkling in the morning light, with wide green parks on both banks.

“What’s on your list?” Miako said.

“Um. The zoo. The harbor. Pons Park. There were a few others that didn’t sound very interesting.”

“Really? Such as?”

“The factory where they fabricate the train engines.”

“Oh. Maybe later. I like the park idea.”

“The zoo and the park are pretty close to each other.”

“Let’s go, then.”

It took only half an hour to reach the heart of the city. Many of the buildings had the same nubby texture as Miako’s house in Littapo, which seemed to be characteristic of blown ceramic structures, but some of the walls were smooth, and others were ribbed vertically, like corduroy. Close up the city was less imposing and more human-scale than she had expected when seeing it from a distance. There were plants everywhere: tall trees, climbing vines, potted shrubs, arbors, trellises, lawns. The spaces between buildings weren’t exactly streets, more like ambitious paths; the larger ones were paved, with ceramic of course, but many of them were gravel or some kind of tough grass. Everything looked well-tended.

The people were as varied as any crowd in Littapo: most were short to average, with the occasional tall woman standing out but not drawing any special attention. Dress tended toward the short tunic-and-leggings they had seen so much of already, but there were many flowing dresses as well. People smiled at them, some nodded. Miako had the feeling that everyone knew they were outsiders but no one seemed to mind.

It took a little while for Miako to realize what was really odd. They had walked several miles from their cottage and passed several hundred people, and not one of them had been male. Suddenly it struck her how strange this was: on this entire vast continent there were probably only a few hundred men, almost all of them aspirza hoping to earn a stake to buy a farm by impregnating a Sevessa. She might spend years visiting this country and never see a man other than Turbasek.

They came out of the buildings into a well-tended woodland, part of the park that ran along both banks of the Rekaka River for the entire length of the city. Miako had heard of this, that no building in Sevur directly overlooked the river. It wasn’t just because of flooding, although that did happen every few decades. There seemed to be a philosophical basis for it: that the river and its environs were not a part of the city, but the setting for it; that it belonged to everyone and therefore no one should have a commanding view over it. The result was the biggest park in the world, a thousand feet of trees and greenery on each bank of the river, for almost ten miles. It was almost four square miles in area, so large that it was divided into twenty smaller administrative areas, each of which had its own charter and staff.

They followed a path down to the riverbank, where they found a kiosk with a map. They studied it and discovered that they had arrived at the sub-park called Hishisha, on the north bank, which was a kind of arboretum featuring hundreds of trees that were over two thousand years old. The zoo was the next one upstream, to their left, also exclusively on the north bank, and Pons was the one after that, spanning the river.

Tidy paths wound among the trees, never approaching the trunks too closely. The trees themselves were spaced far enough apart that they walked in sunlight at least half the time. It was difficult to tell which ones might be the true ancients, but there were

many whose girth was so huge that ten people holding hands could not have encircled them. Many of these were oaks, but Miako also recognized sequoia, fir and pine, spruce and yew.

The path meandered, closing on the river and then drawing away. Cross-paths intersected every now and then, but they followed the small signs pointing to the zoo. After a while the trees began to thin out and they came to an arch spanning the walkway. It looked like a twisty strand of pasta, striated and curled back on itself as it rose up to three times Miako's height. On either side of the arch a low stone wall ran off into the woods.

"That can't possibly keep anything in," Jaybra said, the first time either had spoken since they left the map.

"Or out. Maybe it's just to mark the boundary between sub-parks so the caretakers know where to work."

A small building stood a little beyond the archway. A plump, elderly woman sat on a padded wicker chair just outside it, reading. She looked up as they approached.

"Ah, visitors!" she exclaimed. She seemed excited to see them. She set her book aside and stood to greet them. "Now from the look of you I would guess Felitta and Tongat. Am I right?"

"Yes!" Miako said. "How did you know?"

"Just the little things. I've seen a bit of everything in the years I've worked here. Is this your first visit to the zoo, then?"

"Yes," Jaybra said. "Neither of us have been to Sevessaka before, and a friend recommended that we see the zoo."

"You have a wise friend. This is the best zoo in the world. Not that we have much competition."

"I've been to the one in Littapo," Miako said.

"Of course you have, and I'm sure it's very nice. This one is three times its size, though, with five times as many species. I'm not bragging, you understand, just stating facts."

"Thank you."

"Now, each of you take a guide map." She reached into a basket just inside the building and retrieved two folded paper guides. She unfolded one and pointed to one edge. "You're here, at the west entrance. You won't be able to see it all in one day, so don't bother trying. If you'd like some advice, I'd recommend the kangaroos and the giraffes especially. I doubt you've either of you seen one of those before."

"Thanks," they said.

"Go on, now," the woman said, "and enjoy yourselves."

The map suggested that the giraffes were not too far away, so they headed off to the right, toward the river. Miako had heard of giraffes, of course, and seen pictures, but the old woman was right, she'd never seen one in life. Most species lived on all three continents, but there were many that could only be found on one. Horses, for instance, lived wild in Mertaka, but nowhere else, although they were domesticated by all four cultures. Miako was fairly certain that tigers could only be found in the mountains between the source of the Whip River and Shell Lake, along the Felittaka-Tongatka border. And giraffes and kangaroos, among other things, only lived in Sevessaka.

The wide pathway narrowed. They came to a sign for the giraffes which led them up an open flight of stairs to an elevated tube.

The tube was an enclosed walkway with a flat floor wide enough for four people to walk abreast. Vents spaced closely just above the floor let in fresh air but because of the curvature of the tube would not admit rain. Soft lighting came from flush panels spaced evenly on the right-hand wall. They walked along for several minutes until they came to a sharp curve in the tube. Past the curve the entire left wall was now transparent—either glass or ceramic, Miako couldn't tell which. They were more than ten feet above the animal enclosure, looking down.

The paddock contained lush, rolling grassland, punctuated by tall trees spaced irregularly. It was large enough that the trees blocked their view of the far walls. At first they saw only the vegetation, but as they continued walking the tube curved again, to the right, and suddenly they were nearly face to face with a giraffe.

It must have been grazing on the acacia tree that shadowed the walkway. Leaves and small branches hung from its prehensile lips, and it chewed just like a cow. When it caught sight of them it walked closer to the tube with a stilted, rocking gait that was like nothing Miako had ever seen before, until they could have touched it if not for the glass. Miako and Jaybra knelt down so they were looking into the creature's eyes.

It seemed curious and not at all afraid. After swallowing its mouthful, it put its head closer to the tube, so its heavy, puckered lips nearly touched the glass, and turned its head one way and then the other to look at them out of each eye. Its short, ridiculous horns had furry tips and its ears twitched constantly. The giraffe's eyelashes were thick and dark.

"I think this is the most amazing thing I've ever seen," Miako said.

"After the Mediator, of course," Jaybra joked. "And Baba in the telescope."

"Oh, hush."

The giraffe exhausted its curiosity and ambled away back to its tree. They watched it forage a while longer before continuing on. The tube curved back and forth until they were completely unsure which way they were headed. They saw other giraffes in the distance, but never got close to one again, and finally reached the walkway's end, climbing down another flight of steps and coming out on a small open plaza. Miako checked her guide map and discovered that they were still quite a way from the kangaroos. They headed off to the right.

In the giraffe viewing tube they had not seen another person, but now that they were outside they passed several groups of either one or two women, always accompanying a young girl ranging in age from toddlers to adolescents. Every one of the adults smiled and nodded at the strangers.

"No solitary adults," Jaybra observed.

"It's the middle of the day. Perhaps adults don't visit the zoo for entertainment during working hours."

"Um. Just mothers educating their children?"

"Look!" Miako said.

They had just come to an open-air enclosure that was mostly bare rock and sand, with scrubby bushes scattered about. The sign said "Armadillo."

"This is what the engineer was talking about."

"What?"

“She said we looked hungry enough to eat an armadillo. When we first got on the train.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“Do you see it?”

The pen looked empty. Miako was disappointed. But then something moved and she saw a small creature that was almost the same color as the dirt, banded and scaled with a pointy face, like a cross between a fox and a lizard. It reached out a paw and used wicked-looking claws to dig in the soil.

“I don’t care how hungry I was,” Miako said, “I would not eat that.”

“I still don’t remember her saying that.”

After the giraffe and the armadillo, the kangaroos were weird but not very exciting. They hopped around a bit, and the babies were funny, but there wasn’t much to the experience until something spooked them and they all raced off, bounding like giant jackrabbits and vanishing into the trees.

By this time they were close to the east end of the zoo, so they agreed to move on to Pons Park. Miako felt that she could have spent several days just in the zoo, but given their schedule and the other things they wanted to do she had to ration her time.

She had no expectations of the next park, since the map had just labelled the sub-parks without describing them, so it came as a big surprise. The land was nearly devoid of trees, just a handful of carefully-tended large specimens punctuating the enormous formal gardens surrounded by manicured grass. Some of the gardens were spectacularly colorful, others were devoted to the infinite shades of green that plants seem capable of.

But the biggest surprise was the bridges. As far as they could see upstream, bridges of every description spanned the river. Some arced high over the water, others hunkered down low to the banks. Several were constructed of solid dry-set stone, but most were made of the omnipresent ceramics, which allowed them to be thinner and take on whatever shapes their builders could imagine. Miako thought that some of the designers had clearly been unhinged. The third one they came to looked as if it were made of beeswax that had been left out on a hot summer’s day, melting, sagging, and running down almost into the water, but when they reached out to touch it the shapes were dry and firm.

They walked across the river on planks hung from ropes, crossed back on a narrow meandering pathway with guard rails made of great ceramic roses. That one changed its mind three times about where it wanted to come ashore, almost reaching the north bank before heading back out into the middle of the river again. At the terminus of each bridge lay a completely different type of garden: mazes of low shrubs, geometric arrangements of flowers, spirals of herb beds that threw off daughter spirals that gradually grew taller as they receded from the water.

Once more across the river on a bridge that looked like a series of soap bubbles miraculously made permanent. They could see *through* the material of the walkway to the green water flowing slowly by. On the south shore they took a moment to rest on a bench. Miako noticed a boat landing just downstream, with a small shed and several boats tied up at a dock that jutted out from shore.

“Do you suppose they sell boat rides down to the harbor? It’s a long way to walk.”

“I don’t know,” Jaybra said. “Let’s find out.”

A young woman came out of the shed as they approached. She was about Jaybra's age, in her early twenties, and very slender, but the sleeveless blousy shirt she wore showed off well-muscled arms. Her boots were unusually sturdy and short compared to the typical Sevessa fashion, so her trousers hung down over the tops instead of being tucked in. She pushed a loose lock of hair behind one ear and smiled.

"Looking for a boat?" she said.

"Yes," Miako replied, "we'd like to go down to the harbor. Is that possible?"

The woman's mouth gaped open. "Felitta?" she said. "Are you the Seeker I've heard about?"

Miako and Jaybra shared a look. Was her accent that bad? "Yes," she admitted.

"Then I'll take you upriver to the water's womb, if that's where you want to go, for nothing."

"Just down to the harbor will be fine. And we'll pay for the ride, please."

"I don't think I could take the Seeker's money."

"I'm afraid we'll have to walk, then."

An internal debate played itself out comically on the young woman's face, but eventually she grudgingly agreed. She named a price that was ridiculously low and Miako tilted her head at her.

"The prices are listed on that board," she said.

The woman looked behind her as if she'd never known the building was there. "Well, did you want a power boat or the poled?"

"What do you think?" Miako asked Jaybra. "We're not in a big hurry, are we?"

"I think poled might be better. Quieter."

They turned back to the boatswoman. "Poled," Miako said, "and please just charge us the standard rate."

"It doesn't feel right. It's like charging my mother."

"It wouldn't feel right to us for you to pole us five miles for nothing."

"All right then. How?"

Miako took a partial gold bar out of her bag and the woman sliced off a very thin coin and handed it back.

"I'm Fressa Rachella," she said.

"Miako."

"Jaybra Ponyhealer."

Fressa held out a hand and Miako hesitated before she remembered that you were just supposed to brush fingertips. She didn't understand the rules for when the formal greeting was used. Perhaps just in business transactions, because no one else had offered it so far. Fressa repeated the greeting with Jaybra.

"Pleased to touch you both. We'll be taking the red skiff there. If you'll follow me I'll help you aboard."

Fressa stepped down first and held out a hand to steady them as they followed. The boat was small but stable, rocking only a bit as they climbed aboard. There were four seats for passengers, in two rows, low but padded and comfortable, all of them facing forward. Their pilot untied from the dock, unshipped a pole that was longer than the skiff, and pushed them off the dock.

“This was a good choice,” she said. “Poling’s the best way to tour the river. It’s like a hot air balloon, you know. You’re traveling with the flow instead of trying to rush ahead of it or buck it.”

“Until you have to turn around,” Jaybra said.

“Oh yes, going upstream is a bit more work, but I still think it’s the best way.”

They were out in midstream now, floating silently past the decat or so bridges between their embarkation point and the edge of the park. In a few moments they were alongside the zoo. Miako didn’t expect to see anything from their low vantage point, so she was surprised when they came to a section where a handful of crocodiles were sunning themselves on the banks. All of them turned in unison to follow the boat’s progress.

“They can’t—” she began, and then laughed. She had been worried about what might happen if the crocs decided to follow them, until she realized that there was a transparent barrier between the reptiles and the open water.

“Nasty creatures,” Fressa said. “Always watching. You can’t help thinking they’re calculating what they’d do with you if anyone ever opened the gates.”

“Are there any crocodiles on the Rekaka River?” Jaybra said.

“Sure. Not this far down, usually. They’ve been trained to stay away from the harbor area, but if you go a day or so upriver you’ll see plenty of them, and no glass walls, either.”

“How do you train a wild crocodile?” Miako asked. She looked over her shoulder, but Fressa just grinned and dug her pole into the riverbed.

They didn’t see any more animals from the zoo, unless some of the hundreds of birds were escapees. Miako identified herons, hawks, seagulls, one golden eagle, and countless smaller birds— floating on the water, roosting in the trees, and passing low over the water with their wing tips twitching and nearly touching the surface.

Across from the zoo the park was mostly grassy swards. They saw small groups of people picnicking or stretched out on blankets enjoying the sun. Past the zoo was the arboretum. The left bank, which they hadn’t seen much of on their walk to the zoo, was populated with bushes and trees, some of them enormous, carved into elaborate and jaw-dropping topiaries: animal shapes, human forms, abstract swirls of leaves and branches. Downstream from that on the right was the grassy area where they’d first entered the park.

Then both sides were joined in one park, with bridges connecting the two sides; not like the hundreds they’d seen in Pons, but impressive enough. Every bridge was identically constructed of stone, differing only in the elaborate, mostly abstract carvings that covered both faces. The parks were also mostly stone—amphitheaters, terraces, broad plazas, and single-story shelters—separated by gravel or sand. Standing among the barren rock were hundreds of large planters also made of stone, growing bamboo and thin-boled trees, including vine maple, birch, and aralia.

After the rock gardens the city drew closer to the river, until finally, as the banks began to draw apart, the parks ended and the commercial district crowded against the right shore. There were more boats on the water now, mostly powered and all brightly colored, but nothing large. Fifteen minutes later Fressa poled their skiff in to a dock and tied up. Downstream not a hundred feet away the stern of a big three-masted ocean-going ship towered over the river like a cliff.

“This’s as far as I’m allowed to go. Harbor master controls all the waters down here and she’d skin me and hang my pelt from a topgallant if I dared to cross that line. Before you go, though, could I trouble you, Miss Seeker...” She reached a hand into her trousers and pulled out a strangely-shaped worry stone. After her encounter with the crowd outside the Hidrasil compound that morning, Miako knew what to do. As she took it she realized that it was a vertebra from a fish, polished smooth with handling, but perhaps also treated with some kind of resin. She rubbed it self-consciously and handed it back.

“Thank you for the touch,” Fressa said. “My daughter will never believe it. Me, poling the Seeker!”

“How old is your daughter?” Miako said.

“Eight, and tall as a giraffe.”

“Please tell her that I would have liked to have met her.”

“I will. She’ll never believe it. Now if you’d give me your hand I can help you ashore.”

They had no trouble getting out, and their pilot waved once more before shoving off into the slow-moving current and starting the long, slow push back upriver.

“I can’t believe she didn’t chatter the whole way down,” Jaybra said.

“You said at the beginning you wanted it quiet. She must have taken you at your word.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Starving.” She searched down the dock. “Look, there’s a little fish shack just like my favorite place in Littapo.” They walked down the planks to the gray-shingled shack and ordered fried cod with lemon slices and bitter green salads. While they ate Miako told Jaybra about Carl and Stepha’s fish shack, hundreds of years old but always looking as if it were just about to collapse on the clients, with the best, freshest fish in the city.

“My parents used to take me down to the ocean when I was little,” Jaybra said.

“There’s a point in Durkita with two large islands just offshore, called the Rabbit’s Ears, not too far south of the Equator. When I was nine I decided I wanted to catch a fish, so my father cut a bamboo pole, strung a line, and baited a hook for me. I sat down on a rock with my feet in the sea. Fifteen minutes later something big took the hook and it pulled me right into the water.”

Miako laughed. Jaybra smiled.

“It almost wasn’t funny. It never occurred to me to let go.”

“What—it pulled you out into open water?”

“My father claimed he had to swim out half a mile to get me back, and by then he was ready to let the whale have me.”

“But... I thought whales were mythical.”

“They are, but that’s what he claimed that I caught. Or what caught me.”

Miako laughed again and they finished their lunches. They walked around the waterfront for over an hour, poking into the shops but not buying anything, and staring at the tall blue-water ships. Most were sailing ships, because Sevessa had a long, long history of sailing the oceans and liked it, but there was one sleek vessel called the Hupamoy with no masts. It wasn’t the largest they’d seen, not even close, but they asked some of the crew who were lounging around the dock, who said that its cargo capacity was larger than any of the sailing ships, but because it had to carry fuel cells the shipping costs were higher. Mostly it was used for perishable cargo including, of course, babies.



By the time the sun was beginning to get low they were both tired and ready to go back. Miako was very glad they'd come down to the harbor—it reminded her so much of her home in Littapo, except that every person she'd seen had been female. They walked back several miles out of the city, then had to trudge up the hill leading to the entrance to the Hidrasil nownsha.

Turbasek had dinner waiting for them, a thick chicken stew with dumplings, and a mixed root vegetable salad tossed in a spicy vinaigrette. They told him about their outing and he reported that nothing remarkable had happened at the embassy that day.

"Do you want to see it?" he asked Miako when they were finished eating. "It's not very interesting."

"I thought it was," Jaybra said, "but I've never seen an embassy before."

"I'm not sure I do," she said. "There's so much else to see here, and my meetings... Oh. Do I have a meeting tomorrow?"

"City council," he confirmed sheepishly, as if it were his fault. "Keppa stopped by a few hours ago. She said she'd pick you up after breakfast."

"I'd better get to bed, then. Thanks for the outing, Jaybra."

Jaybra smiled and bowed in her seat. Miako went back to her room and got ready for bed. But after she'd turned off the light, she sat cross-legged on the bed with her flute for half an hour, letting the long day on the river work itself out in soft, breathy notes that seemed to hang briefly in the air before evaporating.

\* \* \*

The morning was cloudy and it felt like rain. Miako was nearly done with her oatmeal, eating alone, when someone knocked at the door and Keppa's head appeared around the jamb before she could get up.

"Good morning," she said. "Are you almost ready?"

Miako swallowed the last bite and said, "Give me five minutes. Are we walking today?"

"No, it's too far. I'll wait for you at the gate."

Miako was expecting another crowd like yesterday's, and she wasn't disappointed, although this one was perhaps a little smaller. As far as she could tell none of the women were repeaters, and none of them were pregnant this time. She shook hands, kissed cheeks, rubbed talismans, and touched fingertips. Near the end of the line, a very pretty woman a few years younger than she leaned in as they clasped hands and asked her quietly if she had a partner.

"I'm sorry?"

"I understand your stay here may be short, so I'd be willing to accept a temporary liaison. More than willing, actually."

The next woman in line hissed at her and said, "She's Felitta, you silly girl, leave her be." She was older, and Miako realized with a start that she could have been her mother's identical twin.

"Thank you for the compliment," Miako said sincerely to the younger woman, "but I don't think I will have time for..."

"Ignore her," the older woman said firmly. "Get on to your meeting, now." Miako kissed her cheek, touched hands with the last woman in line, and suddenly realized that the two-horse carriage past the last supplicant was for her.

Keppa held out a hand to help her in. The carriage was open at the moment, but there was a folding canopy in case of rain. The seats were well-padded, covered in a sturdy, dark gray fabric. There was an elevated bench at the front on which the driver sat, a very tough-looking middle-aged woman with long braided hair and leathery skin. Her bare arms were both encircled by complex, entwined tattoos just above and below the elbows.

“All set, Jypha,” Keppa said. The driver flicked the reins and they started down the sloping road. “How was your outing yesterday?” she asked. Miako gave a short account and asked what to expect at today’s meeting.

“I think you’ll find it will be very much the same as the last one. All of the city council members are also clan councilors. Gemeny will be there, representing Hidrasil.”

The carriage took them into the city and across the stone bridges to the south shore of the river. The city council building was larger but not nearly as grand as the Hidrasil structure; it was made of the same dark stone as the bridges, with a decat steps leading up from the drive. The inside was more businesslike, as if they didn’t need to try to impress visitors.

The meeting room was larger, however, to accommodate over fifty councilors. Evidently the council was not simply composed of one representative of each clan, or they would need two or three times that many seats to accommodate every clan that had a nownsha in Sevrur. Several women came up to her and introduced themselves, and the fourth was Gemeny, the woman who had led the Hidrasil council meeting.

“You survived, I see,” she said.

“Just barely,” Miako said warily.

Gemeny laughed. “We’ll see if we can’t do you in today.”

And they nearly did. It was very like the first meeting, only with twice the number of people asking questions. Only a few were repetitions of the ones she had already answered; evidently these people had absorbed the Hidrasil council reports and did not like to waste time. Once again the thrust of the questions completely eluded Miako: what color was the gold the Mediator used to pay for their ship passage, did he wear shoes, what had he done at the fair after calling her to the quest, and on and on. By the end of the day Miako’s voice was a husky rasp that no amount of honeyed tea could help, and she fell asleep on the ride back to their cottage. When they arrived Keppa helped her inside and she went immediately to bed without even trying to eat anything.

They gave her another day’s rest before the regional council convened. Miako spent it mostly alone in the gardens surrounding the cottage. Jaybra found her in the late afternoon, asleep, leaning against the thick, gnarly bole of a giant yew tree. Miako woke up when Jaybra settled down a few feet away and started reading, and they waited for dinnertime companionably but without speaking.

The regional council was smaller than the city council, surprisingly, and they met in the same building. But the experience was so similar that Miako felt waves of dizziness sweep over her several times during the day. She seemed to be reliving the same horrible meeting, over and over, doomed to repeat it until the maddening buzz of the probing questions, the hostile stares, and the inquisitive, puzzled frowns rubbed her away to a small stub. Gemeny was present yet again; that was a small comfort that just heightened the haunting familiarity.

“Two days off,” Keppa told her when she dropped her off late that night.

Miako spent half of the first day asleep, getting up late and drowsing in the garden, and most of the second day working on her journal. It was easier now, since her interrogators had probed into every little nook of her dealings with the Mediator, so that even minor details of the last few weeks now seemed fresh and easily recalled.

She was hunched over her book in the dappled afternoon sunshine, at a stone table in a private glade she'd found a few hundred yards from the cottage, when a shadow fell across her journal. She looked up and saw Chass standing like a door between two close-set maple trees.

"You're meeting with the national council tomorrow," he said. Not a question.

"Yes."

"The queen will be there, at least for part of it."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's an opportunity. Take your flute. I know this has been hard on you, but you're doing well."

"How do you know?"

"Because they haven't sent us away."

She looked at him for a while. He seemed content to look back. She realized that his strange, inhuman appearance—his face like a melted wax likeness of a human visage—no longer looked strange to her. It was just Chass. Her Mediator.

"I'll do my best tomorrow."

"I know you will," he said. "Thank you." He turned and walked away, leaving Miako breathless with the gift of his gratitude.

## Queen's Favor

Miako enlisted Jaybra's help in a scheme to be carried out the next morning. She had barely seen Keppa at all outside the council meetings, so she hadn't yet had a chance to follow Chass's suggestion to show her the painting of Ravi and the Storm. Two days off had left her well rested, so she woke early that Ninday and ate a meager breakfast of buttered bread and berry juice in her room. When Keppa arrived and knocked at the door, Jaybra was up earlier than usual, making breakfast for herself and Turbasek.

"Is Miako nearly ready?"

"She's had her meal. I think she'd like you to join her in her room for a few minutes before you leave."

"All right." Keppa walked down the hall and knocked at the bedroom door.

"Come in," Miako said. She was sitting on the edge of the bed with her hands folded in her lap and her backpack ready to go on the floor beside her.

"Is something wrong?" Keppa said.

"I'm just a little jittery. Will the queen be there today?"

"Most likely. It's natural to be nervous, but I think you'll be surprised. She's not a crocodile; she's very gentle."

"I don't know the proper protocols. In Felittaka I'd have memorized all the appropriate rites, but here..."

"You're not expected to perform any rites, Miako. You're not a subject of our queen, and anyway we don't have rituals like the ones you grew up with. No one expects you to be anything other than courteous. I've watched you over the last week; you've behaved admirably, and there's nothing to worry about."

Miako nodded. Keppa was standing in the doorway, facing her and away from the shrine, so Miako stood up and walked over to the tall table. The five objects were arranged carefully on the star-shaped lace doily that protected the burnished wood surface. She adjusted the position of Partep's horse and pondered whether she should destroy the statue that Zeven had given her of the naked athlete, given the way her feelings about him had changed. Just as she was wondering if Keppa would ever notice the painting or if she was going to have to do something blatantly obvious, she heard the Sevessa draw in a sharp breath.

"That painting," she said softly.

Miako turned to look at her. "Yes?"

"Do you know what that's a painting of?"

"Queen Ravi and the Storm."

"Where did you get it?"

"The caretaker of the Felitta relics gave it to me."

"Where did *she*—he get it?"

"I don't know." Miako picked up the painting and examined it again; it really was exquisitely done, almost abstract at first glance, but the longer you looked at it the more detail you could see. "He told me the story and suggested that I take it with me. It seemed appropriate given my companion, and I love the piece, so I accepted the gift."

“May I?”

Miako handed her the painting. It was fairly small, only two hand’s width square, on thin but very strong ceramic. Miako still had trouble believing it was thousands of years old. She let Keppa spend a few minutes examining it before saying, “Perhaps we should go.” Keppa nodded and reluctantly returned the painting. Miako set it very carefully in its place and picked up her bag. “I’m ready.”

Today there were only half as many women waiting for her, and again she didn’t recognize any of them. Miako went through the rituals without receiving anything more than murmured thanks—she was grateful not to have to fend off another proposition. She wondered if someone had passed the word that it wouldn’t be welcome. The cart was standing at the end of the line, with the cover down, as before. The sky was a patchwork of blue and clouds but it didn’t portend rain.

Around the bend and down the hill, shafts of light were spearing down on the city. The colorful buildings lit up when the sunbeams hit them. Miako hadn’t yet seen Sevrur on a totally sunny day, and she suspected that if she ever did it would take her breath away.

Keppa seemed even more withdrawn than usual. Miako had to fight to keep from smiling when she snuck peeks at her guide. Chass had been right again; the painting seemed to have knocked her off balance. She was a strange kind of guide in any case, not like Jaybra had been in Geshamo. Like Keppa, Jaybra had arranged transportation and lodging, but she had been open, welcoming, and chatty. Keppa was either holding a grudge or protecting secrets; Miako couldn’t decide if she resented her role or just wasn’t very friendly.

Miako had expected they would go to the same building the last two meetings had been held in, but they never got close to the river, turning west in the middle of the city, toward the sea. The carriage traveled slowly down the city streets, the horses’ hooves clattering on the almost-smooth, textured roadway. Pedestrians didn’t bother moving out of their way, and the driver didn’t seem to expect them to.

At length they pulled up to one of the graceful towers that Miako had first seen from the dirigible. It was slender, perhaps only a hundred feet wide and well over a thousand tall. The sides were softly fluted, the subtle spines curving up in a slow, graceful helix from the street. Each shallow hollow between the ridges was a different color, but those colors shifted as they rose from the street, so that each division was always differently colored from the adjacent ones, but also different from the same section ten feet lower. There were no visible windows, and no signs or numbers on the exterior of the building. Keppa led her up the short walkway to a simple set of double glass doors.

The lobby was a small unpretentious room, floored with a mosaic of small tiles of every color imaginable. Miako thought that there might be a discernable pattern, but she didn’t have time to work it out. Keppa guided her briskly to one of two elevator doors, which was open and waiting for them. A tall, stern-faced woman looked them over carefully, giving Miako the unpleasant and inexplicable feeling of being naked. When the operator had satisfied herself, she pulled a lever and the doors closed.

This machine was much smoother than the one at the dirigible station had been. There was no unpleasant acceleration. After a moment the light changed and Miako turned to discover that the back wall of the elevator was transparent, and either the building’s skin was also transparent or they were actually climbing the exterior of the structure. She

stepped closer to the invisible wall and looked out, and then down. The river lay a mile or so away, with fewer ships in the harbor than there had been before. As they climbed she could see out to sea, where decats of small sailing ships were skimming back and forth on the smooth water.

They rose rapidly, until the entire city lay stretched out beneath her, except for two other towers, which seemed to be nearly as tall as this one but otherwise nothing alike. One was dark and streaked, as if the rain had smeared gray paint, and the other was a solid pastel blue at the top, shading darker as it descended until she couldn't tell if the base looked black by design or because it was in shadow. The shapes were distinct as well, the streaked one very angular and encrusted with spires and adornments, the blue one a smooth and unbroken needle.

She could see but not feel the elevator slowing. She hitched her pack to a more comfortable spot on her shoulder and reluctantly turned to face the doors.

Keppa stepped out first and Miako nodded uneasily at the elevator guard, who produced the merest hint of a smile, before following. She stopped in surprise. She had expected something like the council rooms she had seen before—but this was nothing she could have imagined.

The tower had narrowed somewhat as they rose, so the council room was perhaps only eighty feet across. It occupied the entire floor of the building, and the walls, all the way around, were completely transparent.

No, not all the way. The elevator shaft behind her was opaque, and directly across the round room was another exit that Miako guessed might be a stairway. But the rest was seamless and utterly invisible. Only the lack of a howling wind and the impossibility of the ceiling—and who knew how many floors above—balancing on those two slim supports were proof that the chamber wasn't open to the sky. Miako desperately wanted to spend some time walking around the perimeter and looking down, but there was a small knot of very official-looking women standing nearby and she had work to do.

She realized that the lack of visible walls had given the illusion that the room was nearly empty, but in fact there was a shallow amphitheater sunken into the center of the large room, and a few decat women were already seated there. Keppa guided her around a handful of conversation groups toward the seating. As they approached, Gemeny jumped up and greeted her.

"A lesser woman would be dead by now," the Hidrasil councilwoman said.

"A greater woman would have already convinced you," Miako responded.

Gemeny laughed and invited them to join her. The amphitheater was formed of four concentric rows of seats made from a very dark stone or ceramic, each tier lower than the last, encompassing almost a full circle. Miako suddenly realized that at each step she had risen in the Sevessa hierarchy, the circle had become more and more complete; the Hidrasil chamber had been a half-circle, and this one was nearly closed. She sat down between Gemeny and Keppa. The hard surface of the benches was made comfortable by firm pillows underneath and at her back.

The lowest, innermost circle was perhaps twenty feet across, with a good distance between each row. Miako occupied herself with arithmetic for a few minutes and concluded that about two hundred and fifty people could fit easily in the amphitheater. There was nothing like that number present today; possibly not even fifty women. After several minutes of unrestrained gawking she turned her attention back to Gemeny.

"I've seen you at every step of this process," she said.

"Yes. Hidrasil is the largest clan, so we have a duty to listen and to speak when necessary."

"It's been comforting to have at least one familiar face among my inquisitors."

"Is that how you see us?" Gemeny said, but she was smiling. "I'm relieved you didn't say torturers."

A bell tone rang out, high and sweet. Miako didn't see who had made it, but the clusters of women standing around the periphery of the chamber began moving inward.

"Miako," Keppa said. She stood and led Miako down an aisle to the center of the circle. Miako glanced back and saw that Gemeny had followed them and was now seated in the innermost row. It took only a few moments for the councilors to settle themselves. In the perfect silence left when the rustling ended, Keppa left her standing alone in the center of the ring. Miako felt herself beginning to tremble and forced her back straighter. Her mouth was dry.

She turned slowly to look up at the councilors, who were nearly all staring back at her. Most of the women bore no expression at all, but here and there was a small smile or a frown. They were mostly older, fifties and above, but three other than Keppa looked as young as she was, or younger. She recognized only a handful of them.

The stillness lasted over a minute before the doors at the far end of the council room opened and a short, very thin woman entered, followed by two attendants. There was nothing remarkable about her at first glance: long, gray-streaked hair, a simple floor-length sleeveless gown of heavy fabric, gold bracelets around the left biceps and right wrist. As she came closer Miako could feel the silence deepening, which she would have thought was impossible. Another attendant met the woman at the top of the open wedge of the circle with an ornately carved but obviously lightweight chair. The two women who had accompanied the queen took seats in the first tier and the queen seated herself with no fanfare or ceremony.

The councilor to Gemeny's right stood up. She was middle-aged, of average height, but somehow projected great strength. Miako vaguely remembered having seen her at one of her ordeals.

"My lady, the council is in session. May I present the petitioner, Miako Tomaza Seeker, Felitta shul-kethrin Tongat. Miss Seeker, Rawea Flachendra, Queen of Sevessaka."

"You're a little old to be *intending* kethrin, aren't you?" the queen said. Her voice was soft and musical, and the tone was friendly.

Miako bowed as low as she dared. "Yes, ma'am."

The queen waited for more, then smiled. "Brevity. Very refreshing. Councilors, please proceed."

The woman who had introduced them bowed slightly and turned to Miako. "We have three questions," she said.

She felt a shiver run down her back. Only three? She had fielded as many or more per *minute* at the worst of her previous sessions. "I'll answer to the best of my ability."

"I understand you are familiar with the story of Queen Ravi," the councilor said.

Miako nodded, very pleased that Keppa must have been talking about the painting.

"Please explain to us the nature of your quest and your relationship with the Mediator in reference to that bit of history."

An *essay question*? Miako felt her skin flush and she broke out in a sweat. She thought back to Ron telling her the tale in his cracked, friendly voice that night before dinner. The image of the painting rose up in her mind's eye and she suddenly felt calm.

"My quest is the echo and the coda of Queen Ravi's tragedy," she said slowly. "First, the Mediator Kepp was a frequent and welcome passenger on Sevessa ships." She reminded herself that Sevessa thought of their Mediators as female. "Second, her loss was so tragic that the queen was driven mad. And third, the incident was so disturbing and so... poignant... that it still resonates with all of you thousands of years later."

She looked up at the queen. "Now all of Brezlun is like the queen standing on that cliff, watching their last Mediator about to sink below the waves. But this time we can do something about it. We can save him, and save something precious and important from our past that will profoundly influence our future."

"My own role in the story is a very small one. I am the young sailor standing at the rail who cries out that the Mediator has fallen overboard. It's up to others to save him. You can choose to do what Ravi could not do."

She turned back to the ranks of councilors. There was a stirring, mutters and shifting of weight. Finally a very old woman in the second row said, "But we have lived for thousands of years without Kepp, and all of our history without Chass. There's no loss. We don't need the Mediators. Why should we break our traditions, unravel the mystery just to please him—and you?"

Miako flushed again, but she bowed to her questioner. "If I may, councilor... Any one of your guards could walk over here and cut off my left hand. I would probably survive, and perhaps even thrive. But I would never play the flute again, and I would always feel the lack of it. All the rest of my life I would know there was something missing, even if as the years went by I didn't always remember what it was."

"The thing we have lost is not the Mediators themselves, but the blessed thing they gave us: the ability to speak to Baba. No one alive has ever done that, so we can't know for sure how it would affect us. But I believe that it would be a mystical and fulfilling thing."

"Yes," the old woman said, "but even when all the Mediators were alive, not one person in a hundred ever spoke to them, or spoke to Baba through them."

Miako nodded. "If you lived at the foot of a mountain, would you need to climb it to be moved by its beauty? Knowing it was possible to speak to her, and hearing the ripples her voice made in the world, would surely affect everyone."

Her questioner dropped her chin as she thought about this. The moderator looked around the gallery as if inviting others to follow up. When no one did, she said, "Very well. Now, our second question."

Miako turned to face her.

"I understand you're a gifted musician." Until this trip Miako hadn't given much thought to peoples' different ability levels; more often than not she led and they followed reasonably well. Suzata and her friends had teased her about her *taste* in music more than anything. But the attention she'd received on this trip had been embarrassing and occasionally unsettling. So she nodded with what she hoped was sufficient humility. "Have you brought your instrument with you?"

"Yes, ma'am, it's in my bag."

"We would like you to play us the meaning of your quest and how it makes you feel."



Miako felt her jaw drop. Her cold sweats were back, and this time she also felt a constriction in her chest, like invisible arms wrapped around her, squeezing her from behind. She covered her panic by walking to where Keppa sat. Her guide held up her bag, and Miako retrieved the flute case and went back to stand alone in the center of the ring of councilors. She had no idea what she was going to play, how she could possibly boil down into simple notes the importance of what Chass wanted for them, the hope that she herself might someday speak to Baba, the incredible loss to the entire planet if the Roakay succeeded or she failed. She looked down at the dark, carved wooden case.

"This flute case," she said, "was made for me by my family's frenik, Tapadak, for my choiceday. He was a very dear friend to me, like a second father. Some of you may not be familiar with Felitta freniks, so please let me take a moment to explain. When a farmer gets too old to work his land easily, he sells his farm for a fraction of its real market value to a young couple. In exchange, they support the old farmer and his wife until their death. The frenik is an advisor, a teacher, a mentor, and very often becomes a close part of the family. The frenik and his wife enjoy a comfortable old age in the home they love, and the young people are able to afford a better farm than they could buy otherwise. They also have an expert on hand to teach them how to be farmers. It's an ancient tradition, and I think one of our best."

All on its own, her free hand began the movements of the rite of gratitude for the foresight of ancestors, but she suppressed it. She looked down at the case, opened it, and held up the flute.

"Unlike the case, this flute is very old. It has been passed down in my family from mother to daughter for over a millennium." The councilors stirred and looked at one another; such traditions must be normal here, but they would not have expected it from a Felitta. "Chass told me that he knew the man who made the flute, and that he made it for a woman, and asked that it be passed down this way."

She handed the case to Keppa. "My mother taught me to play, but the person who made me a flutist was an old man in my home village of Shusha, whose name was Hernan." She looked up at the councilors, turning to look out at the different parts of the circle, ending up facing the queen. She bowed slightly. "Like Brezlun itself and all its people, my music and I have a history. I know a song that explains exactly what I would like to say to you. It's the first song I ever composed. I wrote it with Hernan's help when I was fourteen years old. It's called *Sonya's Lament*."

She put the flute to her lips and closed her eyes. A charge like an electric shock ran up her back, through her arms, and flowed into the instrument like the first breath that brought forth a low, reedy note. Another, even lower tone that faded away into silence. Then another note that led inexorably to the next, and the melody swelled from her as if she herself was the instrument. She hadn't played the *Lament* for many years, but she didn't hesitate or falter; it was as if her younger self, a girl less than half her present age, had written it for this day and this moment.

Miako felt her heart swelling and pouring itself out of her lips. She kept her eyes closed the entire time, feeling the story that Hernan had told her: a young woman searching the canyons of the Keetha Highlands for her lost lover. Finally, on the very day that her food ran out, she found his body wedged between two boulders, below the cliff face from which he'd fallen. She wanted to die herself, but she didn't. She piled stones over the broken body of her beloved and walked out to return to her family, heartbroken

but determined to memorialize her loss. She never married, but became a great teacher, still renowned in Felittaka for her beautifully, heroically sad books and songs.

Miako lost all sense of time and place. She was nothing but the lament, her keening cries echoing from the granite walls of the canyon, spilling pieces of her broken soul, along with drops from her bleeding hands, onto the sharp rocks with which she buried the shattered body of her true love. Finally she played the starving, bedraggled climb down out of the highlands to return to the family that could try, but would never succeed, in comforting her.

The last note lingered for a long moment, finally trailing off into utter silence. There was not a stir or a sound from her audience. Miako lowered her flute and opened her eyes. She discovered that she had been weeping as she played, but the queen was weeping as well, and when she slowly turned to face the council she saw that they, too, almost every one, were crying. Gemeny looked as though her own heart had been torn in two.

The moderator stood shakily, then gave it up and sat back down. Miako walked over to Keppa, who looked up at her with something like reverence as she handed her the flute case. Miako busied herself cleaning and storing the flute, more to give the councilors a moment than because *she* needed one. There was still not a sound from the women gathered in the chamber. Miako knew in that moment that there might be more bureaucracy to get through, but that Chass would get what he wanted from these people. And she knew that that was what she wanted, too; the doubts with which Zeven had infected her mind had been burned away.

She returned to her place in the center of the circle and waited. After a moment the moderator collected herself, dried her face, and stood again.

"The third question," she said hoarsely. She cleared her throat and spoke strongly once more. "If the Mediator succeeds, it's very likely that you will be the first person in over two thousand years to speak to Baba. What will you say to her?"

Miako didn't even have to ponder this. She had asked herself the same question several times since Chass had forced himself into her life.

"If I had just one question," she said, "I would ask her where we came from."

"What do you mean exactly?"

Miako wondered how much it was prudent to say. Then she decided there was no point telling anything other than the truth; she'd known since childhood that she was a terrible liar.

"Chass told me that the plants and animals around us are related to us on a deep level, but that there's no evidence of us being here before the start of our history—the Gentle Fall, when Baba released us onto Brezlun. So we must have come from somewhere else."

"Perhaps," one of the seated councilors said, "Baba made us and all our fellow creatures specifically to populate this world."

"I don't know. That's certainly possible. But Chass said we must come from a place with an unimaginably long history. Whether that was Baba herself or some other world... I can't even guess. But I'd like to know."

"Wanting to know is usually the hallmark of a Tongat," someone else said. "You are intended for kethrin there—why did you wait so long?"

Miako looked at the questioner. It was a fairly young woman, about her own age, with a friendly face. She held back the quips that usually passed for an answer to that question and gave it some thought.

Finally, she said, "I was afraid. I was afraid to leave my home and start over in an alien land. I moved from my little town to the city, but that was as far as I could go on my own. Until the Mediator arrived."

The moderator took a step toward her, and looked around at the councilors. No one else said anything. She seemed just on the brink of saying something when a motion made her stop. She bowed to the queen, who had raised a single finger, and sat down again.

"A fourth question, Miss Seeker. Do you believe in your Mediator's quest?"

Miako turned to face her squarely. "Before today, ma'am, I wasn't sure. I was confused, out of my depth, and there were... people... who tried to convince me that I was doing harm. But today I am sure. I believe it would be a tragedy beyond words if we let our last chance slip away."

"And what happened today to convince you?"

Miako smiled. "*Sonya's Lament*."

The queen looked at her closely, then smiled and leaned back in her chair. "It was an eloquent argument. Come see me for dinner tomorrow night, and bring your entire entourage." There was a murmur from the councilors, as the entire room had just drawn a quiet but sharp breath. "*All* of them. Do you understand me, my dear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." She stood and all the councilors did the same. The queen walked out of the room followed closely by her two maids—or advisors or bodyguards, whatever they were.

"Session adjourned," the moderator said.

Gemeny walked over to Miako and touched her arm. "Well done, my dear," she said. She turned and filed out with the other women. Keppa held out Miako's bag without a word, but there was something different in the way she stood, or a different kind of blankness on her expressionless face, that made Miako realize for sure that she had done what she'd come to do.

\* \* \*

It was late afternoon when she returned to their cottage. Keppa left her at the door as usual and Miako walked in to find Turbasek and Jaybra sitting quietly in the common room.

For the first time since her trials had begun, she had enough energy left after an interrogation to tell them what had happened while it was still clear in her mind. Before she was done the three of them were working together in the kitchen, making a dinner of chicken pie and sauteed asparagus and greens. She finished while the pie was baking. Somewhere during the telling Chass had silently joined them, listening from a corner of the common room. Miako still couldn't understand how someone—or something, to be technically correct—so large could move so quietly.

"I think you're right," Turbasek said. "I believe they will give us what the Mediator wants."

"If they have it to give," Chass said; the first words he had spoken since he came out of his room.

Turbasek nodded. "Do you agree that they'll be cooperative now?"

"Sevessa do nothing at one level, Turbasek. You must know this from your prior visits. They may even try to give us everything we've asked for, but they'll find a way to trip on their own good intentions." He turned to look at Miako with his expressionless eyes. "Don't think that your work is done. I believe it's just beginning."

She bowed and checked the pie. Not quite browned yet.

"I've never met the queen," Turbasek said, "though I've come close once or twice. How old would you say she is, Miako?"

"Perhaps sixty."

"Nearer eighty, I believe," he corrected.

"Eighty-four," Chass said.

Miako should be getting used to surprises, but she felt her mouth hanging open again. "I would never have guessed that. Her face was unwrinkled, and her hair wasn't even entirely gray."

"Rawea is an unusual woman," Chass agreed. "She carries her burden well. I had my doubts when she was elected at the age of thirty-five, but she's as good a queen as Sevessa have had."

"I can't wait to meet her," Jaybra said.

"I'm thinking of giving her the Ravi painting," Miako said.

The room was silent for a long moment. The painting was beyond price.

"That is a brilliant idea," the Mediator said at last.

The other two looked at her and smiled. "Now Miako," Turbasek said, "after we've eaten, I would like to hear this song of yours, the song that swayed the National Council of Sevessaka. A song written by a fourteen year old girl!"

"Yes, please!" Jaybra said.

Miako wasn't sure she could do justice to the song twice in one day, but she agreed.

"I would also like to hear this song," Chass said. Miako looked at him and deliberately performed the rite of thanks for a special compliment. Turbasek laughed and led them into the kitchen to eat.

\* \* \*

Miako slept in late the next day. After breakfast, she crossed the low hall and knocked on Chass's door.

"Enter," he said.

The room was dim and looked as it must have when they'd first arrived eight days earlier. The bed was unrumpled, the storage shelves empty, not a spot of dust anywhere. She couldn't imagine what the Mediator did all day, and then because she was learning to be bold, she decided to find out.

"I hope you don't mind me asking this, but what do you do with your time?"

He was sitting against the outside wall, his legs drawn up severely so that the thighs and shins of each leg were almost parallel to each other. "Is that what you came to ask?"

"No."

"I see. Well, I spend a good part of every day on standby."

"What does that mean?"

"It's a low-power mode in which most of my systems shut down. Basic maintenance continues along with emergency sensors."

"You mean you're asleep."

He laughed, a hollow, haunting sound she had heard only once or twice before. “Yes, asleep. Most of the rest I spend on strategy and planning. I’m constantly refining my action tree based on what we’ve accomplished or failed to, sorting through possibilities for constructing and testing the communicator.”

He paused. She prompted him with, “You said *most* of the rest.”

He didn’t respond at first, but finally he said, “I find myself, more and more, actively remembering my past. Perhaps because I feel that there’s so little future left to me.”

“What were you remembering just now?”

“A trip I took once, with the Merta Mediator Ripp. Not long after the Gentle Fall, we circumnavigated Gebertala on foot.”

She gaped at him. “That must have taken forever!”

“It’s somewhat over twenty-five thousand miles, but we don’t *need* to sleep. It took about a hundred days. It was a nice vacation.” She was flabbergasted: the train trip from Shusha to Littapo took almost three days. To walk all the way around the perimeter of the continent, let alone just crossing it, was almost inconceivable. “Now that we have that out of the way,” Chass said, “is there something I can help you with?”

“I need to discuss something important with you. But... I’d like to do it outside. Would you come for a walk with me?”

“Of course.”

He followed her out of the room. She waved at Jaybra, who was reading in the common room, as they passed. Turbasek was nowhere to be seen, which was typical. Outside the sky was completely overcast and the air was cool, quite a bit cooler than when they’d arrived. She pulled her sweater closed and knotted the belt.

She hadn’t planned exactly where to go, but found herself heading toward the council building, as though her feet remembered the way; but why they would want to take that route when it had led to nothing but suffering and mental exhaustion she couldn’t say. In a clearing off the pathway that looked out over the city stood a small granite table and three curved, matching benches. Miako settled on one of the benches facing the view, with the jungle thirty feet behind her. The Mediator sat to her right on the next bench so they could face each other—they wouldn’t have both fit on the same one.

“Sevur looks bigger than Littapo,” she said.

“That’s an illusion,” he replied. “It has just over half the population of Littapo, and it’s physically smaller as well. Although it has many taller buildings.”

“There’s nowhere in Littapo where you can look down on the city. Not without a telescope, anyway. I think that’s why: you can never see very much of it at once. Here the whole thing is spread out and you can take it in at one glance.”

“Did you want to discuss urban geography?”

“Did you know that the Roakay are still active?”

He stared at her silently for an awkward moment. “I’ve suspected it for many years, but had no proof. Have they contacted you?”

“On our last night in Geshamo.”

“What happened?”

“One of them came into my house in the middle of the night wearing a kantabeti mask.”

Chass laughed again. She had never before heard him do that twice in one day. “Was he trying to scare you?”

“Yes.”

“Then they’ve gotten stupid.”

“Thank you, I think. I recognized him.”

“What do you mean? You’d seen him before?”

“On the *Tiggleday*. It was the Tongat named Zeven, the piper.”

“The man who gave the jasheeya demonstration.”

“Yes,” she said.

He thought for a while. “I should have known. Long ago jasheeya was associated with the Roakay assassins, but when they went underground it devolved into just another martial art. His demonstration was a little *too* good.” He considered her again. “What did he say?”

She took a deep breath. “He said that what you’re doing is wrong, maybe even evil. That you’re defying the will of Baba. The Mediators were supposed to help us get started here and then go away so we could find our own path.”

“I’ve heard this nonsense before,” Chass said. “It comes from people who listen closely to exactly what they want to hear and ignore everything else. Baba put us here to answer questions, to help, and to act as conduits to her. I’m trying to fulfill her original design, not subvert it.”

“He said that if Baba wanted you to last forever, you would.”

The Mediator chuckled. “Some people think she’s an all-powerful being. There’s a persistent heresy that Baba created the Universe. That is simply not true. Like me, Baba is a *creation*, not the creator.”

“Created by whom?”

“I don’t know. But if I had to guess, I’d say it was someone like you.” She snorted at the idea. “Miako, not even the sun goes on forever. Complex things, organic or otherwise, last for a time, then they break down—unless there’s a self-repairing mechanism. Baba has thousands of those. I had three, and they’ve long since broken down themselves.”

He turned to look out at the city. The tops of the tallest spires were invisible inside the low-hanging clouds.

“Do you remember the tenth Maxim?”

She said, “Call me if you need me.”

“Baba was never your ruler, she was never intended to become the basis for an entire world’s religion—she’s transport. To be blasphemous for a moment, she’s like an extremely smart and powerful horse.” Miako gasped in surprise. “By the time of the Gentle Fall, many people had forgotten where they were and no one remembered where they came from. Except Baba, and maybe a few Sevessa. When she set you down on this world she’d prepared for you, I suppose it was only natural that you would come to regard her as something divine. But she knew her purpose, the same purpose I was manufactured to fulfill: to serve. We are not your masters, and therefore we do not command. We serve, and if you choose not to ask for help, we do not give it.”

“But that’s not what you’re doing now. No one asked to contact Baba again after so long, did they?”

“No.”

“And I didn’t ask to come on this trip. It seems to me that there’s some truth to what Zeven said.”

“Of course there is. How else could he convince you? The best lies are always wrapped in shreds of truth.” He hesitated. “Yes, I am exceeding my original orders. I’m taking the initiative for once. I can’t allow myself to fail, and to let all of you lose your last chance of speaking to her for ten thousand years. So my response to the Roakay is, If they’re right and I’m wrong then let Baba smash me herself after I’ve succeeded in my quest. That’s her prerogative—not theirs.”

Miako hugged herself and wished she’d brought her coat, not just the sweater. It was getting colder.

“He threatened to destroy you and kill me, and Jaybra and Turbasek too, and anyone else who helped you.”

“Well, that’s all they know how to do. Roakay either ignore you or kill you. There’s nothing in between.”

She looked hard at his impassive face, wondering if that were a joke. There was no sign.

“What do you believe, Miako?” he said. “Do you think what I’m doing is wrong? You know it’s probably futile, but is it wrong?”

“No, I don’t think so. When you first... enlisted me, I was simply confused. So much happened so quickly. I was still off-balance when Zeven tried to frighten me, and his arguments seemed to make sense. But now I believe that you must succeed. We should have the choice. That’s all you’re trying to give us, the thing we lost so long ago: the ability to choose to ask.”

He nodded slowly. “I’m glad. I would not have asked you to go further if you thought it was misguided.” He pointed at the queen’s rainbow tower, whose top was lost in the cloud bank. “I believe you’ve already convinced them, but what happens there tonight may decide how quickly we can proceed. I don’t have much hope that we can avoid traveling to Mertaka, but if it’s possible we must try. The Roakay would have a hard time reaching us here. It will be different in Mertaka; if we must go there, the less time we spend there the better.” He stood up. “It’s getting too cold out here for you. You should return to the house and rest.”

She stood as well. “Until yesterday, I was confused about whether I should even tell you about the Roakay. I’m glad I did.”

“So am I,” he said. “But let me suggest that if we do end up in Mertaka, you should find yourself an army to travel with.”

\* \* \*

Miako and Jaybra spent a quiet afternoon together in the common room, reading. Miako was working through a history of Sevr that she’d found on their second day, which was surprisingly entertaining since it concentrated on intrigues and scandals and more or less ignored the larger political issues. Jaybra seemed to have picked up Turbasek’s habit of skimming one volume for half an hour and then switching to another. At long intervals one of them would break the companionable silence, Jaybra to ask what Miako was going to wear, Miako to suggest they skip lunch in expectation of a large meal, and to remind Jaybra to take her drum since there was certain to be music.

Turbasek showed up about an hour or so before they were scheduled to leave and sat with them for a little while until the women decided by unspoken agreement that it was time to go get ready. Miako had decided to wear the most formal outfit she had with her, which she had bought along with her new coat at the lodge in Caldera Park atop Mount

Kibbith. It consisted of a loose black blouse worn over a long, flowing, deep blue skirt with something sparkly woven into the material. She didn't really have any dress shoes, so her everyday boots would have to do. It had been a while since her hair had been cut, and it was nearly down to her shoulders now. She pulled it back off her face and tied it with an elastic band.

Jaybra was wearing a traditional Merta outfit of deeply dyed, supple leather: a purple sleeveless tunic tucked into brown riding pants ornamented on the front with thousands of small beads. The pants were themselves tucked into tall, black, turned-down boots. Turbasek joined them a moment later wearing the inevitable Tongat costume, a yellow tunic that came down almost to his knees over leggings and simple shoes.

Chass came out of his room wearing the same hooded robe that was the only clothing he seemed to own, but it looked crisper, as if it had been cleaned somehow. He examined each of them silently, then nodded approval.

"You all look ready to meet a queen," he said.

Keppa was waiting for them at the gate, but there was no carriage visible. "Are we walking?" Miako said.

"Something different tonight. " She turned and started up the road to the train station. They followed, walking close together. It had seemed such a long way on the night they arrived, but it was only a ten-minute walk.

Miako was expecting another crazy train, but this one looked almost boring enough for Felittaka. It was deep green, with horizontal cobalt pinstripes. There was only one carriage and no conductor. They followed Keppa up the steps into the carriage, and a moment later the train pulled out of the station.

The carriage decor was appropriately conservative to go with the almost staid exterior, dark gray walls and matching upholstery on the randomly-placed seats. Miako set her backpack on the seat beside her and wished she had a better bag to match the occasion. But Jaybra also had a sturdy traveler's satchel that didn't match her outfit; so at least the bags matched each other.

The train picked up speed as they went down the long slope to Sevr. It was dusk and the trees stood in silhouette against a sky that seemed to grow darker blue by the minute. The track leveled out at the outskirts of the city center, and the train slowed to a horse trot. The tracks led them on a broad arc through the center of town, and finally slowed even more, coming to a halt at the base of the queen's multi-colored tower. This must be the rear of the building, Miako thought, because she hadn't noticed train tracks outside when she'd been here the day before. Of course, she'd been so nervous that the train itself could have stood outside and she might not have noticed it.

They disembarked without ever seeing the engineer, which convinced Miako that it couldn't possibly be the woman who had driven them from the dirigible station. It seemed certain that she would not have missed another opportunity to be flippant with famous people.

The elevator ride was, if possible, even more spectacular at night. The sun was well down but the sky was still a deep, velvety blue. The city below them was shadowy and indistinct, lit up like a forest full of lightning bugs. When the elevator stopped Miako once again wished she could skip what was coming and linger to enjoy the view.

When the door opened it was instantly obvious that this was not the level on which she'd appeared before the council. They stepped out into a small foyer whose walls were



covered with a dull, black fabric. Two lean guards wearing very dark green coveralls festooned with gold insignia stood at attention, watching them intently but not making any move to stop them. Miako followed Keppa to the right, where another guard was waiting at the foyer's only exit; she led them through what seemed to be a maze of the black walls, never hesitating at any of the numerous cross-paths. They emerged from the maze into a sumptuously-furnished living room—large couches and deep chairs, golden light from floor lamps—and continued right through it.

Miako counted seven more unpeopled rooms that they marched through, each with several doorways, but their guide never paused. One was an office with a handful of desks and working couches remarkably like Miako's census office in Littapo, one a sort of kitchen or break room, one completely empty, and several whose purpose was not obvious from the sparse furnishings. It dawned on her that this was another kind of maze, and when they finally emerged into a hallway that led to a large open space, she was convinced she was right, because what was waiting for them was like nothing they had yet seen.

Three-fourths of this story of the building was one large room, broken up into functional areas by screens of painted silk, hanging tapestries, strategically placed plants, larger-than-life statues of noble-faced women, and gilded head-high barriers of such strange design and intricate workmanship that Miako found them hard to focus on. They were like basket-weaving, like coarse cloth, like carved wood, and like none of these. She had never seen anything like them before and she could think of no words to describe them.

The guard led them through several distinct spaces until they reached an open area about as big as Miako's house. The queen was standing with a decaat of her councilors, near a trio of tall tables laden with drinks, nibbling food, and fruit. Looking at the food, Miako suddenly felt a jolt as she realized in her gut that she was in a different hemisphere than her own: the foods were completely out of season for Felittaka, which was entering spring. Here it was early fall, and fresh fruit and other harvest-time foods were plentiful. You could buy these things out of season in Felittaka, of course, since there was a constant trade between the three continents, but the price had led Miako to stay always with the foods that were fresh in season or that had been preserved.

The councilors all looked different somehow, and as they approached Miako noticed that every one of them was heavily adorned with jewelry. She had never in her life seen such a collection of precious stones and golden wires, hoops, bracelets, rings, tiaras, and chains. Each of the women must have been carrying pounds of gems and metals. Until now she had not seen anyone in Sevur wear more than modest ear or finger rings.

They were also, every one of them, wearing the coveralls that passed for the highest formal dress in Sevessaka. These were not like the work coveralls Miako had seen in Felittaka and occasionally in Tongatka; they were made of silk, lace, and other incredibly fine fabrics, many of them with gold threads woven through them, and cut in extremely flattering styles that were snug at the waist, with deep, folded-down collars in contrasting colors and matching cuffs at wrists and ankles.

"Our guests have arrived," the queen said, and set her goblet down on the nearest table. Miako found her eye drawn to it and realized the cup was some kind of ceramic, transparent and sparkling with uncountable facets in the soft light of the room.

Keppa introduced Miako's party, and one of the councilors did the same for their group. Miako recognized several of the women from her ordeal, but Gemeny was not among them. The councilors nodded at each person as they were identified, but then their eyes were drawn back to Chass. Miako couldn't blame them; he was history, perhaps uncomfortable history at that, resurrected and standing too tall right before their eyes.

She expected someone to start interrogating the Mediator, but no one did—perhaps this was an intentionally social gathering and they had been warned to keep the conversation light. Instead, the first question any of them asked was directed at her.

"Miako," an elderly woman asked, "do you know any happy songs you could play for us at the after-dinner entertainment?"

"I'm afraid not," she said frankly, and many of the Sevessa laughed. "My friends are always trying to get me to play something lighter, but it seems that every breath I blow through my flute comes out weighted with melancholy."

"Perhaps it's the flute," Chass suggested. "It has a somewhat sad history."

They wanted to know what he meant, so he repeated the story he'd told the Tongat, about the flute-maker Papra Windtamer and his bequest of the instrument to a lover who was Miako's many-times removed maternal ancestor. The Sevessa loved this story, and one of the younger women declared that Miako should never touch another flute, even if it meant that she must always play sad songs.

One of the guards came to stand just outside their circle. The queen, who had been listening quietly to the conversation, said, "Dinner is ready. Miako and Chass, as the guests of honor, will you lead us?"

Miako wondered how they could do that when they didn't know where to go, but the guard's function was apparently to show them the way. They formed a procession, following the stiff back of their guide, first Miako and the Mediator side by side, then the queen, Turbasek and Jaybra, followed by Keppa and the councilors in ones and twos.

The dining room was nearby, right up against the outside of the building, so they could see twinkling lights in the city below them through a wide bank of windows. The table had been carved solid from a single, enormous tree trunk and polished until it drank in the light from the decats of candles and seemed to glow it back out. The amber grain ran down the length of the table, which was nearly twenty feet long. Their guide showed Chass to an oversized wooden chair at one end of the table, and gestured Miako to the place at his left. The queen stood behind the chair at the other end, so Miako didn't pull out her seat yet. The councilors filed in and stood behind their chairs, Keppa ending up on Miako's other side and Gemeny to the queen's left.

"The chair at which you stand," the queen said to the Mediator, "is as old as this table. It was old when Ravi surrendered to the Storm. It stood empty these millennia as a symbol of what we lost. It is our honor to once again host a Mediator and to invite... *him* to seat himself at our table."

Chass bowed. "Some things lost can never be regained," he said. Some of the women seemed to shiver at his voice. "But perhaps they can be replaced." He pulled out the chair and sat down, the queen did the same, then everyone else in the room followed suit. Miako's chair was like the others, solid wood the same color as the table and of the same design as the Mediator's, smaller yet still heavy.

The dinner consisted of so many small courses that Miako lost count. Every fifteen minutes or so a server dressed in severely-cut coveralls of deep blue would lay before her

a small plate with a tiny serving of something beautifully arranged: a nest of carrots julienned so thin they looked like spider's silk, dressed in a tangy sauce and sprinkled with sesame seeds; shreds of seared beef mixed with something crunchy in a sweet sauce so spicy it brought tears to her eyes, and she had been eating hot food all her life; a small cup of frozen, iced fruit that had a minty aftertaste. She lost track after half a dozen of them.

The conversation was light, topics ranging from the projections for the year's melon harvest to the best places to fish in Coral Lake, the discovery of a new species of dwarf tree high up in the mountains that were the source of the Sheki River, a well-known artist who had stumbled on a new glazing technique for her pots, the increase in the number of crocodiles on the river over the last few years. Miako and her human companions were politely included in these conversations, and Miako had an opportunity to mention the crocodiles they'd seen on their boat trip down the river, but no one spoke directly to Chass, and the interrogation Miako had been fearing never occurred.

When a plate of sweets, cheeses, and fruits was placed before her, Miako realized that the meal was coming to an end. She wondered when she should deliver her gift, and considered if it would be possible to discreetly ask Chass for his advice, but before she could come to a conclusion, Turbasek stood up and cleared his throat.

"Queen Rawea," he said, "I believe it is the custom in your delightful country for guests to repay the generosity of their hosts with an entertainment. Now I understand that traditionally this involves music or dancing, but it is well known on three continents that I can coax any instrument into the lyrical harmony of a buzz saw, sing with the dulcet tones of a crow, and dance with the fluid grace of a warthog." He paused to allow the laughter to die down. "Therefore, with your permission, I will leave the gentler arts to those who have the skill," he paused to bow at Miako, who blushed, "and instead attempt to amuse you with the ridiculous tale of Herkan the Tongat Explorer."

The Sevessa all patted the table in unison to signal their approval, and the queen nodded at Turbasek, who told the story with gusto and emphatic gestures. When he was done he bowed to the queen, then to the rest of his clapping audience, took his seat, and drained his wine glass.

### **Herkan the Tongat Explorer**

This is a tale of the long ago in the land of Tongatka.

A charming young kethrin named Herkan was born Felitta, like our friend here, but after several years of study he found that he was not cut out for the normal life of a Tongat. For one thing, he found himself too attracted to the women from Sevessa and Merta to concentrate on his studies; they seemed to him irresistibly exotic, and he distracted quite a few of *them* from *their* work. For another, as he matured he discovered more and more that he could not bear to be indoors; he loved the ocean, the trees, and the wind. But in the end it was wanderlust that overcame his other lusts, for he signed up to join an expedition to map the islands of the Northern Ocean.

At that time no one knew the extent of the small archipelagoes above the forty-fifth parallel, and the violent seasonal winds were not yet

understood. So on the twentieth day at sea Herkan found himself the sole survivor of the expedition, cast up on a small, fertile, wind-swept rock surrounded by the reefs that had destroyed the ship, alone with all his frustrated lusts.

The first thing he tried to do was make friends with the local seal population, but although they were naught but provincial sea mammals, they knew a human from a mermaid and they would have nothing to do with him.

Herkan could feed himself. He could make fire and catch fish and the rather large rats that inhabited the island. But there was nothing to talk to, nothing to woo, and he could walk around the island in an afternoon, so there was little to explore. There was, however, the sea and the sky, the wind and the trees. So before the first year was up our charming young lad threw caution and sanity to the wind—literally, for he decided to woo the wind.

With the few hand tools he'd managed to salvage from the ship's wreckage he cut down all the trees on the rocky peak of the island, and in their place he set windmills, tethered kites, wind socks, and stationary sails. He hung wind chimes made from shells, from the bones of fish and the skulls of rats. He shaped rocks and driftwood into wind instruments, which when set in place on the pinnacle moaned, buzzed, and hummed in a mournful symphony that would have made Miako proud.

Now some say the heart of the wind was won by all this effort, and others say she found his unwelcome advances annoying. But the story goes that after many failed attempts, Herkan managed to fashion a hang glider so perfect and light that the first time he tried it the wind caught him up in her embrace and wouldn't let him go. His bones still sail around the world, high up in the eternal wind, and never touch the ground.

A rescue operation found his shrine and felt its power. No one has been back to that island since, which is now marked on our maps as Herkan's Courting.

— — —

"Now we must have music," the queen said. "Miako and Jaybra, will you lead?" They nodded and bent to get their instruments from their bags. "And who will join them?" Three women gestured to attendants standing by, who left briefly and returned with a violin, a silver horn, and a small woodwind instrument like a clarinet. By the time these were handed to their owners, Jaybra had her Merta drum out and Miako was ready with her flute.

"Perhaps something sad, then," suggested the queen, and everyone laughed. The musicians stepped away from the table into a group behind Miako. She closed her eyes and suddenly realized that the queen reminded her a little of her mother, who she hadn't seen in over a year, and might never see again. She felt a thin, reedy wail rising up in her and directed it through her instrument.

The Sevessa players were very good. They followed her lead as if they'd played together all their lives, up on the short bright notes of happiness and contentment, down into the depths of loss and melancholy. When they were done the queen stood up from

her chair, took Miako's hand, kissed it, and led her back to her seat. There was a long silence as everyone resumed their places and regained their composure. Then the queen spoke again.

"Life is sorrow, but it is also joy, and duty, and many other things. An antidote to Miako's melancholy. We need a play!"

A troupe of almost a dozen women dressed in elaborate, antique-looking costumes filed into the room and bowed to the diners. They performed a romantic drama that Miako did not really understand. The councilors on her side of the table turned their chairs to watch, and Miako followed suit. Though she saw the whole thing, her mind was still caught up in her music, and she could not untangle the relationships among the characters or the reason that the two principals wanted to kill themselves. Their suicide attempts were foiled time after time by accidents and mistakes made by the other characters—hilariously, to judge by the laughter of the Sevessa. Eventually the lovers realized that they didn't want to die and collapsed into each other's arms, resigned to live happily ever after, and were borne off by their relatives and friends. The Sevessa all applauded and the guests politely did so too, but Miako wondered if Turbasek or Jaybra had understood it either.

It appeared that the entertainment was concluded, and Miako had the feeling that the dinner party was about to end.

She stood up. "Queen Rawea," she said, and waited for the conversations that had just begun to die back down. "The hospitality of the Sevessa has exceeded our wildest expectations and warmed our hearts. I admit that the process of getting to this room has been somewhat... arduous." Many of the councilors laughed. "But I believe it was worth it, no matter what your decision will be. In thanks for your serious consideration of our unprecedented request, my friends and I would like to present you with a gift, which was given to me by the keeper of the Felitta reliquary."

She took the wrapped painting from her bag and walked self-consciously to the other end of the table. The queen waited in stillness and reached out when Miako offered the package. She unwrapped it and drew in a sharp breath. For a long moment she simply stared at the painting, then without a word she turned it and held it up so the others at the table could see the image.

The silence, which had been profound, became otherworldly. Every councilor leaned forward for a better look at the small, lost fragment of their heritage. One by one they sat back, some with their gaze turned inward, others staring at Miako as if they could burn from her with their eyes how that painting had come into the hands of a wandering Felitta musician.

At last the queen set the painting down on the table and said softly, "These are the rules by which you may access the relics. Miako alone may enter the temple. She may come and go as she pleases, and sort through everything she finds there, but not remove anything—not one speck—from the building. Whatever may be of use to the Mediator's quest will be placed in a golden bowl we will provide you. At a suitable time in the near future, after consideration of the items selected, we will decide whether anything may actually be taken away."

Miako bowed low and forcibly restrained herself from performing the suitable rites. "Thank you," she said quietly. "We all thank you on behalf of the entire world. Ah... Is the temple here in Sevrur?"

“No, it’s not. It’s in Flip. You’ll leave first thing in the morning.” The queen stood. Miako took a step back, but the queen followed to embrace her. “It was a great pleasure to meet you, my dear. Thank you for the painting; you have no idea what this means to us, who have been searching for it for two thousand years.” She turned to the other guests. “Turbasek. Jaybra. *Chass*. Go with grace.”

She walked out of the room, and the councilors followed, leaving Keppa and the four travelers. Miako stumbled to a chair and fell into it.

“That went very well,” Chass rumbled.

## Flip on the Tail

Flip was a Hidrasil clan city in the crook of the Tail. Miako had never heard of it before Keppa had described it as the only city in Sevessaka owned by a clan. Between Sevr and Flip were almost six thousand miles of narrowing land, in many places no wider than the mountain chain that formed the spine of the continent. There were no roads and it was impassable even to Sevessa's best trains. That left the sea, which would have taken a week, or the air. There was dirigible service between the two cities, but even that would have taken almost two days. Apparently the queen wanted them to get started—or get finished, so they would leave—because she'd arranged for a special airplane flight to take them.

They left shortly after dawn the next morning from a small airfield on the south side of the river. Keppa had arranged for the transportation, train and carriage, and rode with them to the airport. They left the two-horse carriage to enter a low, blocky hangar and followed Keppa across the tidy but smelly concrete toward the plane.

This one was different from the stolid gray machine that had taken them from Kiffit to Geshamo—the wings were stubby, it had a double tail, and it was pink—but the requirements of aerodynamics meant that it was essentially the same shape. They climbed a retractable metal stairway into the plane's interior. Miako turned at the top to wave goodbye to Keppa, but she was already halfway back to the carriage, leaving them without a word.

The cabin had only six single seats, alternating from one side to the other. Chass had to crouch and sidle sideways, like a crab, to walk between them to the rear of the plane. When he took his seat his head touched the ceiling and his shoulder stuck far out into the aisle. The others stowed their gear in several small closets up front and found that the seats were quite comfortable.

There was no attendant on this flight as there had been on the commercial flight to Geshamo, only the pilot, a lean young woman who smiled unconvincingly as they boarded. When they were all settled she pulled up the stairway, which folded up tight and rotated out of the way, and locked the hatch.

"My name is Desha," the pilot said. "There's a restroom up front here and a cabinet with food and drinks. I'll be busy throughout the flight so you'll be on your own. We should be in Flip in about six hours."

"Six hours?" Jaybra said. "How is that possible? Isn't it almost five thousand miles?"

Desha smiled grimly. "She's a fast bird. I'll let you know when we've leveled out. Don't try to move around until then." She looked at the Mediator crammed into the rearmost seat and frowned. "We'll be leaving as soon as I can finish my checklist. Enjoy the ride." She went into the cabin and shut the door behind her.

Miako was in the third seat, on the right side of the plane. Jaybra turned to look at Turbasek, who was between them on their left. "How is that possible?" she asked him.

"Jets are theoretically capable of traveling faster than the speed of sound," he said. "We had prototypes long ago, but I didn't know that anyone had actually built any planes that used them." Everyone buckled their four-point harnesses. Miako looked back and

saw that Chass hadn't bothered to fasten his; he was wedged in so tightly that it probably wasn't necessary, and it might not even be possible for him to snap the locks in place.

A few minutes later the engines began to whine and the plane pulled away from the hangar. It taxied out to the only runway and without a pause began accelerating so fiercely that Miako was pushed back into her chair and found it hard to breathe. They leaped into the sky, the plane seeming to stand on its tail in its rush to leave the ground. In five minutes the pilot's voice came over the intercom to tell them it was safe to leave their seats.

Miako heard a sound behind her and saw Chass settling onto the floor in the aisle beside his seat. "This is more comfortable," he said. She hadn't known that he could feel comfort or discomfort.

The flight took a little less than six hours, much of which Miako spent asleep. Between naps she looked out the window, but there wasn't much to see. It was overcast below them, but every now and then she glimpsed the ocean through breaks in the clouds, and a few times a mountaintop poked up above the billowing white.

There was almost no turbulence, and the landing was smooth. It was only Miako's second flight, but she thought she could grow to love flying. She didn't expect, though, that she would ever get the chance to.

When the plane came to a halt, they could see a small terminal building through the ports. It was raining outside, the mid-afternoon light gray and dim. Desha opened the hatch and unfolded the stairs. She stood aside and watched them collect their bags and walk out. Miako looked back as she reached the pavement and saw the pilot take a step back as the Mediator reached the doorway. He ignored her and straightened to his full height to walk down to join them.

A very tall woman was waiting for them just inside the building. She was probably the tallest woman Miako had ever seen, almost as tall as Chass, and thin but heavily muscled. Her thick hair, jet black streaked with gray, was drawn back into a braid that hung down to the small of her back.

"Welcome to Flip," she called out heartily as they came through the door. Her loud, strong voice boomed and echoed in the terminal. "You must be Miako." She reached out to touch fingertips. "I'm Penda Gypso, your host here. And you're Jaybra." She repeated the greeting with her. "Turbasek, you old scoundrel, it's good to see you again." Miako looked at Turbasek, who was smiling but wisely did not reach out his hand. "And Chass, the Mediator. Welcome, sir, it's an honor." Chass nodded. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you to your quarters. I hope you weren't planning to start working in the temple today, it's getting late, so we'll just get you settled and fed and you can get to it first thing in the morning, Miako. This way."

She grabbed half of their bags, several in each hand, and strode away toward the opposite side of the building. As they tagged along behind, Miako fell in beside Turbasek.

"You've met her before?" she whispered.

"Several times," he said in a normal voice. "She used to be captain of the Queen's Guard, and before that part of the honor guard at the embassy, which is really a kind of strike force. I've run into her several times; lost several drinking contests to her when I was young and stupid. She's a warrior. I'd put her up against any Merta chief."



“She’s certainly bigger than any chief I’ve known,” Jaybra said. “She’s almost as big as the Mediator.”

“I’ve heard of this Penda Gypso,” Chass said. “She is, I believe, the only person who has ever won both the Spine Crawl and the Bay Sail.”

“That’s true,” Turbasek said. Miako made a questioning face at him. “The Spine Crawl is a competition held every few decades, a foot race that covers the length of the Greta Mountains.”

Miako stopped in her tracks. “They *run* the entire length of Sevessaka?”

Turbasek and Jaybra stopped too. “Not all of it. The mountains peter out before the Tail, so it’s only about nine thousand miles. And it’s more of a brisk walk than a run.” They started walking again. “About half the people who start it die in the attempt. Most of the rest don’t finish. Penda holds the record for the shortest time, which I believe is about two years. Most people who finish take over three.”

Like Chass’s circumnavigation of Gebertala, this was almost inconceivable to Miako. First that someone would *think* to do it, then that they would *want* to, and finally that they *could*. She tried to imagine walking on high mountain trails for three years straight, without a break, and decided that many of the losers must die by deliberately throwing themselves off a mountain in despair.

“And what’s the Bay Sail?” Jaybra asked.

“A solo sail around the interior of Blast Bay. That’s about eighteen thousand miles. Most people don’t survive that, either; the storms in the bay are legendary. She doesn’t hold the record for that, but I think she’s third. She did come in two weeks ahead of her nearest competitor, though.”

A warrior, he’d said. A crazy warrior. What did it mean that *this* woman had been assigned as their host?

A four-horse closed carriage awaited them. The driver, a short, stocky woman, helped Penda load the luggage into the cargo area in back. It was drizzling, but the mist was pleasant after the confined, dry air of the plane. They piled into the carriage, Penda taking half of one seat and Chass half of the other, and started off.

Turbasek turned to the Sevessa beside him. “What have you been doing with yourself lately?”

Penda laughed. Miako looked from one to the other of them from her position squashed in between Jaybra and the Mediator. There was something in the air; she wondered if Turbasek and Penda had ever been a couple. Although aspirza—the men hired to produce Sevessa babies—were always available, Miako knew that some Sevessa instead took lovers when they wanted to get pregnant, or just for the fun of it, she supposed. Growing up in a small town, she had heard all the dirty jokes—that all Sevessa were lesbians, with no use for a man except when she needed his sperm—but she knew that wasn’t true. The census bureau tracked matings and less than a fifth of Sevessa were permanently paired with other women.

“Special operations,” Penda was saying. “Nothing I could talk about or that you’d be interested in if I could. For the last few weeks I’ve just been loitering around down here, waiting for you lot to show up.”

“Pardon me?” Miako said. “Did you say you’ve been expecting us for weeks?”

“Sure.”

Miako sat back, stunned and trying to decide if she should be angry. All the stress of those intense interviews... She looked up to see Turbasek staring at her thoughtfully. He said, "It doesn't mean you didn't convince them. It just means they were ready in case you did."

"I heard what happened up there," Penda said. "I still have a lot of friends in Sevr. There's the official line, and then there's the stuff I heard from the Queen's Guard. Turbasek is right. They were inclined to help you, but you knocked their pantaloons off." Miako felt herself blushing and Penda laughed. "Look." She pointed out the window. "There's the temple."

Miako leaned forward to see around Chass. The foreground buildings were fairly small, houses interspersed with modest businesses such as grocers, electricians, and potters, all the buildings made of similar stone. In the near distance behind them loomed a wall, indistinct in the mist. It took Miako a moment to realize that the wall was curved. It had to be over five stories tall, and she couldn't even guess at its width. It dominated the entire horizon.

The ride was short, fortunately; by the time they stopped, Miako's arms were starting to go numb from the crowding. She tumbled out of the carriage, which had come to rest in front of a single-story building fronted with roughly-cut sandstone. Penda and the driver carried the bags inside. It was a rambling house, larger than it appeared from the street, quite a bit bigger than the cottage they'd had in Sevr, with a large kitchen, a separate dining area, and three common rooms, all built around a central courtyard that was full of tall plants. Miako could hear a fountain out there but she couldn't see it. Penda showed them around the place and invited them to pick out their rooms.

"My room is in the back," she said.

"Oh," Jaybra said, "you're staying here, too?"

"I'm at your service any hour of the day or night," she said.

Miako selected a bedroom with large windows and a door that led out to the courtyard. The fountain was in the corner of the square atrium to the left as she stepped outside. It was a trio of snakes coiled around each other, with their faces pointing out from the center. The water spouted from between their fangs.

Penda, as they learned, was also their cook. She fashioned them a welcoming dinner composed of two introductory courses, three main dishes, each with its own side vegetable, and two desserts. The food was delicious, and many of the concoctions were satisfyingly spicy, but Miako took very small helpings of each. She was beginning to understand that Sevessa had a different attitude toward food than Felitta or Tongat did. She had always loved to eat, albeit sparingly, but to Sevessa food seemed to be not just a pleasant way to fuel the body but perhaps also a seduction, a conversation, or the framework for a meeting.

They were left alone after dinner. Chass joined them in the front room where they gathered around a lively wood fire. In the gray daylight the walls had seemed pale blue, but in the warm, dancing glow coming from the logs, with no other illumination in the room, they looked alternately golden and gray.

The Mediator sat in one of the oversized chairs scattered near the hearth. Turbasek and Jaybra were sitting together on a couch, secretly amusing Miako with body language that was hard to misinterpret. She sat on the other side of the fire.

“Tomorrow you’ll start sifting through the relics,” Chass said. “It will be difficult for you to tell the difference between the useful and the junk.”

“I have no idea what to look for.”

“I know. By morning I’ll have a catalogue for you. You’ll need magnifying lenses of various strengths. I’ve already spoken to Penda about this, and they’ll be waiting for you in the temple. Have you used a microscope before?”

Miako barked out a laugh. “Not since I was a schoolgirl.”

“That’s good enough. The work will be tedious and slow at first. Within a few days you’ll get faster at it, but the tedium will remain. Please try to be as quick as you can. We’re running out of time.”

“I understand.”

Chass stood up. He looked down at Miako and nodded, as if he’d just reached some unfathomable conclusion. Then he glanced at the couple on the couch.

“Jaybra, I feel I should warn you that all of the stories you’ve heard about Turbasek Starwatcher are true. However, he is a good man and a wise one. You could not have done better.”

He walked out of the room, leaving Turbasek and Jaybra open-mouthed and Miako trying to hold in a belly laugh.

\* \* \*

Penda baked something sweet for breakfast that looked like a nest of weasels biting each others’ tails but smelled like cinnamon and lemon heaven. Miako thanked her and passed it up in favor of fresh melon and a piece of bread with honey. While she was eating Chass came into the dining room with a sheaf of papers and sat down across the table from her. Miako took the sheets and sipped from her teacup. The first page had a shaded drawing of a round shape with strange lettering across it and a squiggle attached to the bottom. In a small box at the bottom right of the sheet was a tiny dot. Miako forced her eyes to focus on the dot and realized that it was a miniature of the larger image.

“Please don’t tell me that this is the real size of this widget.”

“I’m afraid so,” the Mediator said.

“So that’s why I need a microscope.” She leafed through the pages. There were over twenty of them, all with a shaded, large drawing and a distressingly small life size depiction at the bottom right. The shapes looked like the creations of a deranged artist, or the results of an explosion in a wax factory. A few were simple black boxes with lettering on the top and ranks of wires on one or two sides.

“Some of these components may be connected to others,” Chass said, “or inside larger pieces of equipment. You don’t need to look at anything larger than your fist, but there may be bins or boxes of things, and you need to look inside all of those. You remember what the communication device looked like?” She nodded. “If you see an intact unit, you don’t need to look inside it, just set the whole thing in your bowl.”

Turbasek and Jaybra came in while Miako was leafing through the catalogue. They gladly accepted the sweet weasel bread, and sausages and coffee.

“May I see?” Turbasek said. Miako handed over the papers and he looked at each page, then handed them back. “I don’t envy you your task. We’ll be here when you get back every night, and if there’s anything we can do—”

“Back rubs,” Jaybra said, “or music or food, anything.”

“—be sure to tell us.”

“Don’t be discouraged,” Chass said. “It will likely take you weeks to scour their entire collection. If we find even a few of these items, it will help.”

When Miako had finished her tea, Penda gave her a large envelope to put the catalogue into. “You’ll want your sweater,” she said, and when Miako had gathered her things they walked outside together.

The sky had cleared somewhat overnight, so shafts of morning light spilled between puffy clouds. The air was fresh and quite cool. They walked down the narrow paved street, past clumps of hardwoods and scattered houses that were all made of sandstone blocks like the house they’d been loaned, cut precisely for mortaring but left faceted on their outer faces. After a quarter mile they came to a larger street and turned right. The temple was now visible directly ahead, and they arrived at the entrance in just a few minutes.

A tall, featureless, gray wall curved away slowly to the horizon on both sides. The entrance was an arched tunnel made of the same material with two imposing doors that were shut. Two women, either a match for Penda in physique but a head shorter, stood guard. As Miako and her guide approached, the guards saluted by putting their hands together at the waist and spreading their arms.

“Good morning,” Penda said to them. “This is the Seeker, Miako.”

The guards repeated the gesture to her, and Miako had to restrain herself from performing the rite of greeting. Instead she just nodded. The women pulled open the doors for them without speaking a word.

“You can come by yourself after this, if you want to,” Penda said.

The gray tunnel was lit by soft lights spaced every twenty feet. They walked on for over ten minutes until they reached another set of doors and guards. Penda repeated the introduction and they stepped into the temple itself.

The anteroom was unremarkable. The interior walls were pearly gray with a complex marbling of muted colors sweeping through them. The light was indirect and bright without being painful. Several corridors and a handful of closed doors led from the spacious room.

“Let me give you the overview first,” Penda said. She walked over to one of the closed doors and pushed a button. The door slid aside, revealing a very small room—another elevator. Miako followed her in and Penda pushed the topmost of three buttons.

When the doors opened again they were in an open gallery that apparently ran around the entire perimeter of the building. The outer wall was solid, but the inner was a colonnade, revealing the interior of the temple, which was open to the sky. The far edge of the building was almost invisible in the distance. The columns, set back from the edge, receded in both directions until they merged into the appearance of a solid wall.

Miako walked ten paces to the nearest column, running her hand across the cool, rough surface as she passed, and stopped at the end of the gallery. The floor seamlessly bent down into a gentle curve that continued to the center of the perfectly round temple—which was miles away. Miako felt she should be dizzy, but she wasn’t; the curve of the roof was so gentle that if she fell she could simply pick herself up and walk back up to the gallery. It reminded her of nothing so much as Caldera Park at the peak of Mt. Kibbith.

“How big is it?” Miako whispered when Penda joined her at the brink.

“About five and a half miles across.”

"It's a perfect circle?"

"Yes. The roof is a section of a sphere."

Miako looked across and down. "Why?"

Penda laughed softly. "I would be the last person to claim that our culture always makes sense. Long ago someone with serious influence decided that we should prepare a place for Oma to land in case she ever wanted to come down. You probably know that she's spherical."

"Are you telling me that the Sevessa temple is a *landing cradle for Baba*?"

Penda just laughed again. "Come on, I'll show you to the reliquary."

They took the elevator down to the middle floor. On their right was an empty corridor, twenty feet high and a hundred feet wide, that curved away until vision failed. On the left a wall cut across the space, with one door nearby and another near the inner edge of the curve.

"Most of this level is unused," Penda said. "And the vast majority of the bottom level is too. We could fit every living Sevessa onto this floor, at arm's length from each other, with plenty of room to spare. Downstairs we could put every person alive on *Brezlun* and only fill half the space. It's ridiculous, I know." She walked over and opened the door. "Welcome to your home away from home."

The room inside was a normal-sized office, perhaps twenty feet square, with an older woman sitting at a desk writing in a ledger. She looked up and smiled. She had a face that looked accustomed to smiling.

"Hesta, this is Miako Seeker. Miako, Hesta Tabitho is the curator. She'll help you work through the collection systematically."

The curator stood and touched fingertips with Miako. "It's a pleasure, my dear. I've heard wonderful things about you. Now, we have a huge task ahead of us. Are you ready to begin?"

"As ready as I'm ever going to be, I suppose."

"That's the spirit. Now you don't have to worry about mundane things while you're here. My staff will have food and tea, or whatever beverage you prefer, ready on demand. I'll show you the facilities in a moment. If there's anything you need, let us know and we'll do everything we can to help."

"Thank you. I... Somehow I imagined I'd be rummaging around by myself in a dusty attic."

Both Sevessa laughed. "I understand that's how it works in Felittaka," Hesta said. "We have a little more respect for our past here, even if we don't take it out and look at it very often. Penda, will you be skulking around here while we're working?"

"Skulking? Malingering, I think you mean. No, I have things to do. Miako, would you like an escort back to the house when you're done tonight?"

"Thank you, but I'm sure I can find the way."

"Of course you can. All right then, I'll leave you to your work and see you tonight." She went back out and shut the door behind her.

"Um, Hesta—how long am I expected to work at this every day?"

"I imagine that's between you and the Mediator," she said. "I'll be here whenever you need me. If you haven't set a schedule yet, I'd suggest starting right after breakfast and working until you can't focus your eyes anymore. I understand there's some time pressure."

“Yes. There is.”

“Let’s get started, then.” She opened a door on the other side of the room and ushered Miako out.

It was like a nightmare version of the Tongat library. Sturdy shelves marched away from them in ranks as far as she could see, taller than she could reach without a ladder. Each unit contained two or three storage boxes per shelf, neatly labeled with some kind of sorting code. Every unit had five or more shelves, and each row was comprised of decats of units. Miako felt that she might faint.

“It’s impossible,” she whispered.

“No, my dear, it’s not. Remember that we’re only interested in things of the greatest antiquity. That’s less than one percent of the whole collection.”

“What’s the rest of it?”

“Oh, let’s see. Gifts to the queen from foreign ambassadors. Artworks rotated out of the museum. Technical journals and records. Whatever anyone thought important enough to save indefinitely. This building and all the shelves and boxes are fireproof and earthquake-proof, so we get things constantly from just about every clan and every regional government. Now there are restrooms and drinking fountains every hundred feet or so, between the rows. We’ve set up a sort of traveling desk for you, with the magnifying devices your Mediator requested. I’ll be your amanuensis, or assistant, bringing you boxes and putting them back when you’re done. Let’s walk down to your first stop, shall we?”

Miako felt shaken and her head was pounding. She followed the curator down the wide outer aisle past endless rows of shelving. Every so often a rank would be missing and in its place were work tables, reading chairs, and an enclosed washroom.

They stopped after fifteen minutes or so at a desk out in the middle of the aisle. An empty golden bowl sat on one corner. The bowl’s interior was smooth but its exterior had been fashioned into curling, interlocked abstract shapes that reminded her of Penda’s weasel bread. In front of the bowl was a microscope with a power cord trailing down below the desk, and a collection of magnifying lenses of various sizes, two small enough to hold in the hand and two mounted in lighted rings on jointed arms that could swivel out of the way. Hesta pulled out a work chair from beneath the desk and Miako sank into it gratefully.

“I have the first crate ready,” the curator said. She rolled a short stand around from the right side of the desk so that it sat beside Miako’s chair. It held two boxes at the perfect height for Miako to reach inside without straining or needing to leave her seat. Hesta showed her how to release the catches so the lid popped off. Inside one was a small pile of electronic components; the other was empty.

“I was afraid all the boxes would be full to the brim,” Miako said.

“Well, storage space is not an issue, so they’re sorted by date, place of origin, and imputed function. Some are crammed full, some are nearly empty. Now while you’re working through this crate, I’ll go get the next one.”

Miako took her catalogue out of its envelope and fanned the pages out on the desk. She examined the microscope and lighted magnifiers, figured out how to work them, and looked down into the box. The widget on top was a flat metal box about the size of her hand, crushed on one side and blackened on the other. She pulled it out and fiddled with it for a moment until she worked out how to open it. Inside were decats of colored wires

running from one side to the other. She didn't see any components like the ones Chass was looking for, just wires. She closed the metal box and set it into the empty crate.

The next piece was egg-shaped and undamaged, but it wasn't obvious that it opened at all. There was a tiny rectangular slot in one end. Miako pulled out a drawer on the left side of the desk. Delicate tools, like watchmaker's implements, were spread out on the felt inside. She found a small screwdriver that fit into the egg's slot and carefully inserted it. Nothing happened. She twisted it gently and the egg popped open along a seam that had been invisible before. The inside was packed with just the kind of things that Chass was looking for.

Miako ran her eyes over the catalogue pages and then used a magnifying glass to inspect the egg's interior. The glass helped a little, but despite the good lighting there were too many shadows inside the egg. She pulled over one of the lighted lenses and started examining every small bit of stuff she could see.

Hesta came back with another crate, which she set on the floor, and then walked away again. Miako finished inspecting every doodad on the surface of the egg without finding anything in the catalogue, but the interior was dense and she couldn't see within it at all. Hesta returned with a thick book, a chair for herself, and another empty crate, which she also placed on the floor. She sat down and began studying the book.

By turning the egg under the lamp and studying it from every angle, Miako figured out that the components were arranged in layers, and there were catches that held the layers together. It took some experimenting to learn how to release the catches, but when she finally got them open the egg unraveled into seven independent boards with components attached. She methodically studied every little blob of stuff on each board without finding anything from the catalogue. She folded the boards back into their original configuration, closed the egg, and put it into the discard crate.

They stopped for lunch before she got through the first crate. Miako was depressed and her head hurt, so she didn't feel like talking. Hesta served her without speaking, and Miako barely noticed what she was eating. She finished the crate an hour or so after they went back to work. Hesta took the pair of crates off the stand and substituted the next pair, one full and one empty. Miako opened the catches; this one was more than half full. She sighed and pulled out a metallic pyramid with wires trailing from one end. As she worked, Hesta returned the first crate's contents to the original box and walked away with it, returning a while later with another one.

When she had to stop at last, she'd got halfway through the third crate without finding anything useful. The golden bowl sat empty, taunting her. Her eyes were burning, her shoulders ached, and her head felt as if it would crack open any minute. She and Hesta walked back out to the curator's office together. Miako said goodnight and left, took the elevator down, walked out through the tunnel and then out under the sky. The guards nodded to her as she passed; Miako wasn't sure whether or not they were the same women she'd seen that morning, and she didn't care. It was dark, with no stars visible, but at least it wasn't raining. She walked back to the house by the light of tall street lamps.

Turbasek and Jaybra were helping Penda in the kitchen when she walked in. They looked at her face, then touched her in greeting but didn't speak. Miako ate mechanically, without tasting her food or seeing anything, then walked back to her room. The Mediator opened his door and stepped into the hallway, asking the obvious question silently.

Miako shook her head, closed her door, and collapsed on her bed. Just before she fell asleep it occurred to her that it was Firday night—exactly three weeks since Suzata’s party, thirty days since she’d met Chass and started her journey.

The next morning she felt well-rested and almost back to normal, but the thought of the work that lay ahead of her was like a weight on her shoulders. She answered her companions’ questions, but there wasn’t much to say: she’d spent the day trying in vain to find tiny bits of gold buried among three large piles of junk.

The second day was like the first, but longer. She found nothing in four bins, and returned home even more exhausted.

By the end of the third day she realized that she had somehow memorized everything in the catalogue and wasn’t even looking at it anymore. She got through seven bins.

Just after lunch on the fourth day she made her first find, a spindly coil of wire with irregular blobs on each end, the whole thing about the size of two grains of rice. She set it in the golden bowl with a glow of satisfaction and rewarded herself with a ten-minute walk up and down the interminable aisle. Hesta smiled at her and then they got back to work. That day she worked through eight bins.

She carried the sheet for her find home to Chass and went straight back to his room. He answered her knock and looked down at the sheet she held in her hand.

“That’s excellent,” he said. “If you find another one just the same, I want it too.”

Miako had thought she now had only twenty-three to find. It took some of the shine off her triumph to know the count was still twenty-four, but Turbasek and Jaybra made a celebration out of dinner and Penda presented her with a cake she’d baked the day before, just in case. Miako realized that she was tired but not exhausted, and that her head was not splitting for the first night since she’d started.

She returned with renewed vigor the next day, but it wasn’t until the day after that that she found another component. She finished the last crate, number one hundred fifty-nine, on the seventeenth day, having found five of the twenty-four items on Chass’s list.

Miako regarded this as a failure, but when she returned home that night, without finding anything new in the last three days, Chass congratulated her.

“I didn’t expect to find that many. You did very well.” Jaybra and Turbasek also congratulated her on completing the heroic task. “I think you deserve a complete day of rest before we leave.”

“We’re leaving right away?” She thought she needed a week’s sleep to recover, even though after the first few days the search had been no worse than the occasional long days she’d had to put in at her old job in the census office.

“The day after tomorrow. The arrangements have all been made. Tomorrow you can do as you like.”

“When will the queen decide whether we can remove the relics?” Miako asked.

“Tomorrow,” Penda said from the kitchen. “Actually, I’m pretty sure she made her decision the night you ate with her, but you’ll be informed tomorrow night.”

“Either way,” Chass said, “we leave on Ninday morning for Mertaka.”

“How?”

“By ship. It’s the only way to get there.”

Jaybra insisted that they have another celebration, and despite being tired Miako played for them. This was the first time Penda had heard her play; the warrior cook said nothing when she was done, but the tears flowing down her face were eloquent enough.



Miako stayed up later than she had since she began her search with Hesta, staring into the fire after everyone grew quiet; late enough to notice that Turbasek and Jaybra quietly retired to the same room.

\* \* \*

“What do you want to do today?” Penda asked over breakfast.

Miako had been thinking about that ever since she woke up. It was a beautiful sunny day, a bit warmer than the last few had been. “Can we go to the beach?”

The Sevessa smiled. “I know the perfect spot.”

Within an hour Penda had made them a picnic lunch. Everyone decided to go along—even Chass, which surprised them all. A large carriage, quite a bit larger than the one they’d arrived in, pulled up shortly afterward and they rolled away.

Miako had been on the Tail for almost two weeks and so far had seen the walking route from their loaned house to the temple, and nothing else. She couldn’t remember anything about the drive from the airport except how cramped it had been. Now she looked out the open carriage window as they traveled. The houses were uniformly made of the same sandstone and set well apart, with tall trees—elms, oaks, maples, and several types of firs—surrounding them. They passed a large grassy area, perhaps a playing field, that was littered with fallen leaves, although the deciduous trees had not started turning color yet. It was still early fall. The breeze blowing in the window was not cold, but it had a crispness to it that hinted at the winter that was on its way.

She hadn’t realized until the road dipped downward and they could finally see the ocean that Flip was situated on the edge of a plateau. Miles ahead the water glittered in the sun, but it was far below them and the waves themselves were still invisible. About halfway down the slope the trees started thinning out, but those remaining were still tall, not stunted as she might have expected. The interior crook of the Tail was sheltered from the winds that blasted the windward side of the peninsula.

When they were still some distance from the water the carriage turned right and followed a smaller road that paralleled the shore. After several miles, during which they inched closer to the sea, the trees stopped and the land became sand dunes covered with clumps of tall grass that waved in an onshore breeze. Finally the road ended and they stopped.

“We’re here,” Penda exclaimed cheerfully, and they piled out after her.

A five minute walk on a raised, paved path through the sand ended in a covered, open-sided shelter equipped with rough, sturdy tables and slung hammocks. Out to sea two sailboats chased the wind, and in the far distance a spit of land jutting out from the left bisected the horizon. The rest was only sea and sky.

Miako took off her shoes and socks and walked across the sand to the water. She let the low, sluggish waves lap up over her toes; it was as cold as ice, but she ignored the discomfort and walked out to ankle depth.

When she came back to the shelter a while later one of the tables had been spread with food baskets and pitchers of drinks. She wasn’t hungry yet, so she collapsed into a hammock that would allow her to look out at the ocean. The Mediator sat on another of the tables nearby and stared out at the water, too. He had no expressions to be read, but Miako could feel him brooding. Turbasek and Jaybra had walked down the beach hand in hand, and Penda was reading something in another hammock at the far side of the shelter.

“We don’t have beaches in Littapo,” she said.

“The river meets the ocean in a rocky area,” Chass replied. “There will be beaches someday.”

“When? A million years from now? That doesn’t help me or my grandchildren or *their* grandchildren.” He didn’t reply to that, but she sensed amusement. “Geshamo doesn’t have a beach either.”

“More rocks.”

“I like sandy beaches.”

“Southwest Gebertala has some beautiful white sand beaches.”

“I’ve never been there.”

“Why not?” He turned to look at her, but she kept staring out at the scudding sailboats. “It’s not that far from Shusha.”

“My parents were farmers. There are no roads. It’s two days’ travel down the Whip River and then another day or so up the coast. We didn’t have the time or the money, and they didn’t have the inclination.”

“You never took vacations?”

“I remember a one-day train trip when I was little to visit some cousins to the east.”

“One day’s travel on a train wouldn’t even take you to the Papessa.”

“No.”

After a while Jaybra and Turbasek came back, holding hands and laughing, carrying their shoes and socks. They were an odd couple, Miako thought. He was half a foot taller than she and at least twice her age, probably old enough to be her grandfather, although still strong and energetic. She wasn’t attracted to him herself although she could see why Jaybra would be. They smiled at her as they came in under the shelter.

“Let’s eat!” Turbasek bellowed, and they tore into the picnic baskets—sandwiches of chicken and greens, cheese, olives, fruit, and very small sweet cakes that had been slathered with gooey stuff and then wrapped in something transparent that Penda promised was edible. “They’re too messy to take apart,” she said, “just pop it in your mouth.” They were incredible.

They spent the afternoon lazing in hammocks, talking occasionally about what they’d seen in Sevessaka and what Mertaka would be like, but nothing about the quest or whether it would be successful and what would happen afterward. Miako took several short naps and answered questions when asked, but mostly just sat in her hammock and looked out at the ocean.

When night fell the breeze got cold. They were hungry again but the baskets were empty, so they packed up and trudged back to the waiting carriage.

“Have you been here the whole time?” Miako asked the driver, the same woman who had brought them from the airport.

“No, Miss,” she said as she helped load the baskets. “I took the horses uphill for some shade and a feedbag. I could see when you left the beach house, so we trotted on back down to collect you. Did you have a nice day?”

“Wonderful,” Miako said.

“Splendid!” Jaybra shouted.

“*Magnificent!*” Turbasek roared, and they all laughed.

They had a simple supper of leftovers and went to bed early.

\* \* \*

Miako was ready to go by dawn. She dropped her bag in the front common room and turned to see Penda sitting in one of the big easy chairs with a pair of satchels beside her. She flowed up out of the chair like a leopard, reminding Miako that she was a warrior by training, and handed Miako a small box.

“Your junky bits,” she said.

Miako looked at the small wooden box in her hand. It was carved in the same style as her flute case. For a moment she thought that Papra, the man who’d made her case, must have visited Sevessaka once in his long life, or that he’d traded a case to some visiting Sevessa, but then she realized that someone local must have simply copied his style. Why would they bother?

“The queen released them all?”

“All five. She sends her blessing and best wishes for our success.”

“*Our* success?”

“That’s the price,” Penda said. “I’m coming with you.”

## Hupamoy

It was the very same oversized ship she'd seen in the Sevr harbor on her outing with Jaybra, the only one without sails. The bow was severely swept back, so the forward deck hung out well over the water. Miako realized that the glamor of travel had worn away; she couldn't get excited about crossing the ocean in this thing, even if it was beautiful. The blindingly white hull; the tall, smooth superstructure that seemed to grow out of the deck; the decats of brightly-colored flags along the rail snapping in the breeze; the energetic music coming from somewhere aft—none of these were enough to convince her that this was going to be anything but a slog. After her taste of laziness and freedom yesterday, all she really wanted was to be done; to settle down on top of a mountain and be a researcher and perhaps an astronomer's wife.

A very short, very thin young woman in crisp white uniform coveralls showed them to their cabins amidships. She was efficient and silent. The cabin was larger than the one Miako had had on the *Tiggleday*, but it was still just a ship cabin.

When everyone was settled they met at the stern for the departure. The captain blew the ship's fog horn and female mates cast off the ropes. They set off smoothly into the bay without a sound. Miako realized that she'd been expecting the slap of paddle wheels like her trip upriver in Felittaka, but this was an ocean-going vessel, and the only sounds were the chattering passengers, the calls of the crew to each other as they finished up last-minute chores, and the slither of water against the hull. Flip wasn't visible from the port, but Miako watched as the land receded surprisingly quickly, wondering if she'd ever return to Sevessaka.

The Mediator had not commented on Penda's presence in the carriage that picked them up that morning; he still said nothing when she boarded with them. Either he knew ahead of time that she was coming or he didn't care. He had joined them at the railing for the departure, but when Miako turned away from the view he gestured and drew her aside.

"Something has changed," he said. "With my impaired self-diagnostics I can't tell what it is, but one of my components failed at the queen's dinner. It doesn't seem to be serious, but as a precaution I'm going to be on standby for the entire voyage. Here's the key to my cabin. Wake me if you must, but only for an emergency."

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

His face took on that strange, subtle look that was as close as he could get to a smile. "No. Don't worry about me. Just rest up and have some fun. I suspect that things may get... difficult in Mertaka." He studied her face for a moment silently. "You did very well in Sevessaka. Whatever happens, it's been extraordinary traveling with you. I'll see you when we land."

He put his hand on her arm for a second, then walked away.

Penda left the group and joined her. "What's up with the big guy?"

"He's going to sleep through the voyage."

"Ah. Not me! When the Mediator's away, Sevessa will play. Come on, you look hungry."

\* \* \*

The voyage was tedious, despite the fact that the accommodations were very comfortable and the service and food were superb. The *Hupamoy* was a fast cargo ship but also served as a cruise ship; they knew how to cater to demanding clients. Miako socialized as little as possible, ignoring the Mediator's suggestion that she have fun, instead spending most of her time alone in her cabin, bringing her journal completely up to date. She spent a lot of time playing her flute to herself, and twice in peffodias when her companions begged her to come out and spend the evening with them.

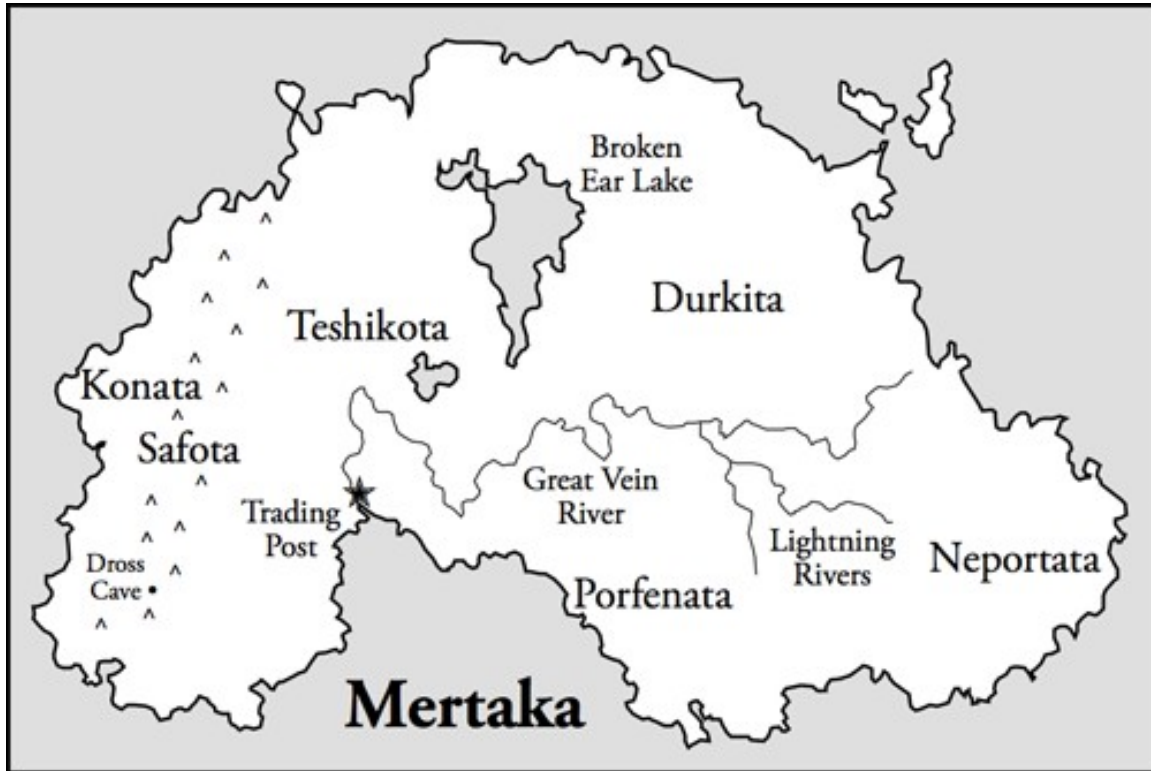
They were in sight of land for all but one day of the passage. The ship rounded the Tail and headed east out to open ocean. The next morning they could see the hilly slopes of Mertaka in the far distance, and the hills stayed visible on their left for the rest of the voyage.

On the sixth day of the trip, she was heading back to her cabin after breakfast when she thought she saw Zeven at the far end of the passageway. She ran after him, coming out at an open-air seating area at the stern of the ship, startling an old couple who were talking intently at one of the tables. For a moment she looked wildly around, and then she saw him, leaning against the wall of the superstructure.

There was no doubt about it—it was him. He grinned at her with that infuriating smile, bowed low, then performed one of his spinning jasheeya moves, which took him around the corner out of her sight. When she reached the spot he was gone. She didn't tell anyone about it and she never saw him again.

Eight days after leaving Se vessaka, the captain announced that they would make land around midday. Miako was standing at the bow when the call rang out that the Trading Post was in sight. She stared at the brown line on the horizon until it resolved itself into a gently sloping plain carpeted with golden grass. Then she went to wake the Mediator.

## Part Five: Mertaka



## Kondalen Clan

There was a small pier but no dock suitable for a ship this size, so Miako's group, and the two other people disembarking for Mertaka, had to climb into a small outboard dinghy that was lowered by winch down to the water. In just a few minutes they were standing in the shade of the Trading Post, with their baggage heaped on the pier, watching the Hupamoy cruise away. The two strangers, both women, finished organizing their large pile of bags and walked into the building. Miako heaved a sigh of relief.

"What?" Chass said.

"I saw the Roakay on the ship."

"What?" the others all said together; Jaybra's outburst was almost a scream. Miako realized that she hadn't told them that she'd been warned not to complete their mission. She quickly summarized Zeven's message and her decision to proceed.

"Maybe I should have told you sooner," she said. "You could have changed your mind about coming. But when I didn't see any sign of them in Sevur I thought they'd given up."

"You're certain it was the same man?" Turbasek said. Miako nodded. "And he admitted he was Roakay?" She said yes and Turbasek shook his head. "I thought we'd purged them centuries ago."

"Did you just see one on the ship?" Penda said. Miako nodded again. Penda unzipped one of her satchels and withdrew a scabbarded sword. She buckled it around her waist.

"Well, I think we can handle one Roakay without any problem."

"They never work alone," Chass said.

"But they didn't get off the ship," Miako protested.

"They will," Turbasek said. "If they're really Roakay, they won't have any problem jumping overboard a few miles down the coast and swimming to land. Or they might steal the dinghy. They'll follow us at a distance."

"I think," Chass said, "since they haven't tried to stop us by force yet, they'll probably let us lead them to the Merta relics, then demand that they be allowed to destroy them all."

They thought about that. Finally Miako said, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before."

Penda waved her hand in dismissal. Jaybra said, "It wouldn't have changed my mind. I'm just sorry you had to carry that burden alone."

"How many do you think there will be?" Turbasek asked the Mediator.

"More than enough," he said. "We need allies."

They turned and looked at the Trading Post. It was one of the strangest buildings Miako had ever seen, constructed from huge logs that were notched and fitted together at the corners. The roof was thatch several feet thick. A plank door hung on metal hinges. She walked over and opened the door.

Inside a man sat cross-legged on the wooden floor facing the two Sevessa who had just arrived. There were no furnishings whatsoever in the building, so they were also sitting on the floor, but didn't look nearly as comfortable doing it. Both of them were leaning forward, and one of them was speaking insistently but too quietly for Miako to

make out the words. The man shrugged his shoulders and waved his hands, one over the other.

He was rugged-looking, with tanned face and hands, wearing brown leather pants and a thickly woven, deep blue, long-sleeved shirt. His hair was cut very short. It was impossible for her to guess his age; he could have been a weather-beaten thirty or a well-preserved sixty.

The two women stood up and glanced at Miako and her companions. "Good luck," she said. "We were supposed to meet a Durkita man here today, but Mister Unhelpful—"

"Jendral Kondalen Horsecatcher," the man corrected. He stood up gracefully.

"—says he has no idea where he is. Probably killed in their latest war."

"I didn't say that," the man said. "Perhaps he's merely delayed. But it's true that the Durkita are in the middle of a war at the moment."

"With who?" Jaybra said in Plains.

He studied her briefly. "Neportata. They're winning," he said in the same language. "You're from up near Rabbit's Ears, yes?"

"Yes."

"No fighting up there, it's all along the river."

"Thank you."

He smiled and turned to look over the rest of their party. His eyes lingered for a moment on Penda but then he spotted Miako and something interesting happened to his face. He managed to tear his gaze away and sucked in a breath as he recognized Turbasek. He raised a hand and was about to say something when Chass walked in the door. Jendral took a step back in shock and bumped up against the wall. "Great Mother," he said in Common, "I thought you were all dead."

"Not yet," Chass said.

"What the bloody fetlocks is this? Sevessa warrior, Durkita kethrin, Felitta beauty, Old Tree Gouger himself, and a Mediator? It's like a catalogue of every weird thing on the planet."

"You forgot to mention block-headed Teshikota trouble-maker," Turbasek said. "How are you, Jendral?"

"I think my balls just hit the floor. Otherwise I'm fine. What's going on here?"

"Excuse me," the Sevessa trader interrupted, "apologies to the Mediator and his friends, but are you telling me we just have to wait for this idiot to show up?"

"Not at all, Madam. You could walk out to the pier, jump into the ocean, and try to swim out to catch your ship. I am not the man you're seeking." He paused, with what Miako thought was hilariously transparent drama. "I might be able to help you, though."

The Sevessa was a rough-looking woman, with strong hands and a mean face. As Jendral spoke she looked as if she were about to boil over, but the last statement was like cold water in her face. She took a deep breath and looked imploringly at the Mediator.

"We'll wait outside," he said, and walked back out the door. The others followed.

"Do you know everyone in the world?" Miako asked Turbasek.

"I've only known you for about four weeks," he said, "and I've never seen your parents. I think I've met pretty much everyone else, though."

"Turbasek has traveled extensively," Chass said, "and somehow managed not to get himself killed along the way."

"It's my charming personality and gift for diplomacy."



“No,” Penda said, “it’s your gift for bedding the right people and not getting caught in the process.”

Jaybra blushed and Turbasek laughed without any apparent embarrassment.

They sat on the pier in the warm fall sunlight and waited. When it seemed that the negotiations might go on for a long time, Penda started rummaging around in her bags. She pulled out a small leather bag, extracted a whetstone, and began sharpening her sword. The blade was thin and curved, somewhat longer than her forearm.

“That’s not the same sword—” Turbasek began.

“Yes, it is,” she said.

“It went overboard.”

“I went in after it.”

Miako wanted to ask what they were talking about, but she didn’t want to get into what she was sure would be a long story when they might be interrupted at any minute. But in fact it was almost an hour before the Post’s door opened and the two women emerged, bedraggled and disheartened. Jendral appeared in the doorway, relaxed and very pleased with himself, and leaned against the jamb.

“Are you coming in,” he said, “or are you waiting for another ship?”

Turbasek strode up to him and without warning swung a fist toward his belly. Jendral twisted, caught the blow in his cupped hands, and pivoted on one foot, raising Turbasek’s arm up over his head and forcing him to turn and stumble. Then he released his hold, both men laughed, and they embraced.

“Men,” Jaybra muttered and Miako and Penda laughed.

“Come in,” Jendral said.

They all settled on the floor. Jendral opened a saddlebag and took out a squat, dark bottle that was about half full. He drank from it and passed it around, but when it came to Miako she handed it to Penda without trying it.

“What are you doing here?” Jendral asked Turbasek.

“I’ll tell you in a minute. First tell me what *you’re* doing here.”

“I heard there was a ship coming around the Neck. I happened to be scouting nearby and I knew the Durkita were busy, so I stopped by to see if, uh…”

“To see if you could steal their business.”

Jendral laughed. “Yes. Now what’s your story? Mediator—where have you been hiding all these years?”

“In the wilds of Felittaka.”

He laughed again. “No better place to hide in all the world. Felitta don’t know their own backsides until someone kicks it for them.” He looked at Miako. “That obviously doesn’t apply to you. What’s your name?”

“Miako Tomaza Seeker.”

“Seeker? What do you seek?”

“I’m looking for a Merta backside that needs kicking.”

Turbasek roared. “I’d say you’ve found one.” He introduced Jaybra and Penda. “Jendral, I want you to be civil to these women. The Mediator has put Miako in charge of our quest.”

“Okay, I can be civil if necessary. A female seeker on a quest. What quest?”

Miako said, “We’re looking for remains of old technology. From just after the Gentle Fall. Things your Mediators might have carried.”

The Merta studied her face for a moment, then looked at Chass for even longer.  
“Why?”

“We want to talk to Baba,” Miako said.

“Everyone talks to the Great Mother eventually.”

“We want to do it while we’re still alive,” Turbasek said.

Jendral considered this. He looked at them, looked at the Mediator, looked down at the floor.

“Okay,” he said at last. “My people can help you. I happen to know where the old stuff is kept, but it’s a long way from here. We’ll need to get supplies and horses for all of you... Maybe not you, Mediator, I think you’d break a horse’s back. My family’s camp is two days’ walk upriver. Did you bring any food and real weapons, or just sissy Sevessa swords?”

With absolutely no warning Penda’s sword was out of its scabbard, the point resting on Jendral’s collarbone. She hadn’t shifted her position an inch. Miako could see Jaybra gaping and closed her own mouth.

“Actually,” Jendral said without blinking an eye, “that’s a very nice sword.”

The blade vanished back into its scabbard with no more fuss than when it had come out.

“There are a few things you should know,” Miako said. “There are Roakay assassins following us.”

“Really? Any kantabeti after you, too? Unicorns, maybe? Were you chased by whales all the way from Sevessa?”

“They’re real,” Chass said.

“Well... Yesterday I would have said Mediators had also vanished from the face of the planet, so what do I know? Anything else?”

“We’re pressed for time.”

“All right. Let me see your gear.”

While Miako and her group had been inside, the two Sevessa had been shifting their much larger pile up under the eaves of the Trading Post; they stepped aside to let the others pass. Jendral walked out to the meager stack of bags on the pier. All of them were traveling light, but they’d brought food from the ship: hard cheese, dried meat and fruit, and bread.

“Good,” Jendral said. “There’s enough to get you to camp, which will cut down your cost a bit.”

“Cost?” Penda said.

“I’m sorry, were you asking for charity? I thought this was a business transaction.” Jaybra didn’t seem surprised, and Miako had been expecting this.

“I brought money,” she said. “How much?”

He named a figure that was twice what she had. They haggled for a while.

“Four horses and something for Mr. Ponderous, here. Provisions, guards, my excellent guide services. Potential warfare against mythical assassins. None of this stuff is cheap.”

Miako opened her bag and removed the wrapped metal bars. “This is all I have.”

“Not enough.”

Chass reached into a fold of his robe and brought out one gold bar and part of another.

“That should do it,” Jendral said. He took all the money and wrapped it back up in Miako’s cloth. “Pack up, let’s get going while we’ve still got some light.”

“Hey,” one of the Sevessa traders yelled. “When do we—”

“Three days,” Jendral said. “Can you hold out that long?”

“What if our Durkita contact comes by first?”

“Slit his throat and dump him into the sea. Or sell to him instead. I don’t care.”

The woman muttered to herself and went back to sorting her things. Jendral walked away and disappeared around the side of the building. When they were ready, they followed him. He was just cinching the saddle on a tall gray mare.

“Any of you ladies think you’re not up to a two-day walk, you can ride,” he said.

“Comments like that will get you roasted over a campfire,” Penda said.

“Good.” He took the horse’s reins and started walking down a footpath leading north. “I hate being cold.”

\* \* \*

In less than an hour the trail met a river, “The Great Vein River,” Jendral told them reverently. They turned left and followed the riverbank upstream. The path was firmly packed dirt, only wide enough for them to walk single-file. Tall grasses brushed Miako’s hands as she followed Penda. Jendral and Turbasek were in front, Jaybra and the Mediator behind.

To pass the time, Turbasek started telling them about the river, the second longest in the world.

“It’s the longest river,” Jendral corrected.

“The Papessa is over two hundred miles longer.”

“Explorers have mounted almost a hundred expeditions to measure one river or the other,” Jendral retorted. “If you average the results, the Great Vein River is longer.”

“No two of those expeditions ever came up with the same answer for the same river,” Turbasek said. “And no non-Merta expedition has ever survived the attempt to measure yours. I think there might be a little bias here.”

“Mediator?” Miako said.

“Six centuries ago, the Great Vein was 8,027.37 miles long. The Papessa was 8,198.16.”

The Merta stopped and turned. “How could you possibly know that?”

“I paced them off.”

They all looked at him in stunned silence, except for Miako, who was getting used to this sort of thing. She said, “How did you avoid being attacked in Mertaka?”

“I walked quickly.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jendral said, turning and continuing at a faster pace. “That was six centuries ago. It’s longer now. Or the Felitta one is shorter, perhaps.”

“Many previous measurements have demonstrated that the average change in length per century is less than ten miles.”

Jendral said nothing for a moment. Then his voice floated back quietly: “Perhaps, but the rate of flow is higher.”

Turbasek laughed and said, “That’s true, but the highest rate of flow is the Sheki in Sevessaka, which drains three times as much per day as the Great Vein. But this *is* the only river on Brezlun that is also a political boundary. It defines the border between the Durkita shoraz and those of Porfenata and Neportata.”

“Well,” Jaybra said, “usually it does.”

“Also between Teshikota and Porfenata,” Jendral said. He turned and nodded to Jaybra. “Usually.”

As they followed the river the banks, which had been grassy and surrounded by grasslands, became overgrown with shrubs and then lightly wooded. The path followed the river closely, winding around large trees when necessary. They were never out of sight of the sluggish water. Jendral called halts every few hours for rest, water, and the chance to duck behind a tree. When the sun was well below the treetops he stopped them at a campsite just off the path. A campfire ring made of cobbles was surrounded by short, thick sections of tree trunk and a clearing perhaps thirty feet across. As Jaybra and Miako started gathering fuel for a fire, Jendral and Penda disappeared into the woods in opposite directions.

The Mediator sat on one of the logs. Turbasek sat on the packed earth, leaning against another, and fell asleep. Miako looked at them and shook her head. She and Jaybra sat down across the fire from them.

“Do you know this area?” Miako asked her.

“No. I’ve never been this far southwest. I’ve seen the Great Vein River, of course, but not past the Big Dip, which usually marks the boundary between Durkita and Teshikota.”

“Jendral is Teshikota, isn’t he?”

“I’d say he’s the quintessential Teshikota. Capable and cocky.”

“Do you think he really knows where the relics are?”

“I don’t know,” Jaybra said. “I didn’t even know Mertaka had any relics. If you’d asked me I’d have said the Mediators’ things would have been destroyed or turned into jewelry when they were...”

“Killed.”

Jaybra nodded. “Not a legacy that Merta women are proud of. The men don’t talk about it, so I have no idea if a modern Merta warrior would attack a Mediator or not.”

“Jendral didn’t.”

“They weren’t alone.”

They looked into the fire until Penda came back carrying a pair of dead quails. While she was plucking them Jendral returned with a turkey. He looked at Penda’s small birds and laughed, but she ignored him. In the end they had the quail as a first course while they waited, and waited, for the turkey to roast over the fire.

“It’s a good thing I caught those quail,” Penda said, “or we’d all starve waiting for your oversized bird to cook.”

“Yes,” Jendral replied, “those two drumsticks I had were the size of grapes. Very satisfying. I don’t know why I bothered hunting at all.”

“Why didn’t you get us a wild boar? It might be ready in time for breakfast.”

“I thought one pig in camp was enough.”

Penda flowed up off her seat, her sword halfway out of its scabbard. Turbasek jumped up alongside her and placed a hand on her arm.

“Wrestling match,” he suggested.

She grinned; she was a head taller than Jendral. “Excellent idea.”

“Yes,” Jendral said as he stood up. “I’d like to hone my appetite for when my magnificent turkey is ready.”

Jendral removed his shirt, revealing arms lined with narrow scars and a heavily muscled torso. Penda stripped off her tunic, leaving a light undershirt on. Her arms were just as muscular as the Merta's. They removed their weapons and stepped away from the fire.

"Jendral, be a gentleman," Turbasek said. "And Penda, no low blows. Remember, I've seen both of you fight. If you get vicious I'll jump in there and settle it myself."

That took them both aback. They nodded, slapped hands, and crouched.

Despite Penda's longer reach, they were evenly matched. Each of them managed to throw the other several times, but there was no decisive hold or blow. They clinched, struggled, broke away, knocked each other down, flipped and tumbled. Miako thought she had never seen any dance as beautiful or terrifying as this match. After an hour they were both sweating heavily despite the cooling air. During a momentary lull, Jaybra said quietly, "The turkey's ready."

Jendral stood up straight and extended his hand. Penda also rose and slapped it.

"You wrestle better than any Merta I've fought," he said.

"You're the best male opponent I've ever had, except Turbasek."

"I regret calling you a pig."

"I'm grateful you caught such a splendid bird for our dinner."

"Perhaps we should clean up before we resume our meal."

"We'll be right back," Penda said to the group. The two of them marched toward the river shoulder to shoulder. Miako heard two loud splashes and then a great deal of shouting and splashing about. Ten minutes later the wrestlers returned, with damp skin but dry clothes, and sat next to each other to eat.

\* \* \*

Miako lay under the open sky with her pack as a pillow, trying to fall asleep. The night air was just shy of cold, so her shirt and pants were enough, but she had debated with herself once or twice whether her jacket would serve better as a pillow or a blanket. Finally she stopped trying and got up to throw another log on the fire.

"You should get some rest," Jendral said. He was propped up on one arm, his face dimly lit by the low fire.

"Can't sleep." This was unusual for her; usually she fell asleep the moment she lay down and slept soundly all night.

"Why not?"

She just shrugged. He rolled up off the ground and took the seat to her right. After a moment he picked up a branch and stirred the coals. The log she'd thrown on was starting to burn brighter, illuminating the sleeping forms scattered around the circle. The river murmured from somewhere behind her.

"How did you get involved with this Mediator?" Jendral asked. "You don't look like an adventurer to me."

"I'm not. I work in the census office in Littapo."

"Census? What's that?"

"Counting people; births, deaths, vessin, kethrin, setting birth quotas."

"Quotas? For births? I've never heard of that."

"Merta don't have quotas. Your life expectancy is... Well, they only apply to Felitta."

"So you tell people—farmers—if they can have babies?"

“Yes, but most years it’s not necessary. People regulate themselves, and the population has a tendency to remain stable.”

“How did you get involved in *that*? You like to boss people around?”

“I’m not the boss, I mean I wasn’t the boss. I just collected data and wrote reports.”

“Reports.” He rolled the word around in his mouth as if it were a dirty pebble. “But now you travel with the Mediator.” She nodded. “Why start here? This is a dangerous place for a Felitta census lady, and even more dangerous for one of them.”

“We didn’t start here. We’ve tried everywhere else and couldn’t find what we were looking for.”

“That’s why you have Tongat and Sevessa trailing along after you.”

“Yes.”

They stared into the fire for a while.

“You have a husband, Seeker?”

“No.”

He nodded and sat quietly a while longer. Then he threw his stick into the flames. “I’m going to sleep now. Get some rest.”

After a while Miako threw another log on the fire and went back to her makeshift bed. She had an idea what had been keeping her awake, and she could hear him snoring lightly from the other side of the fire.

\* \* \*

They ate a cold breakfast and set out early. The day was grueling, although the walk itself was easy. The weather remained fine: cool and partly sunny, most of the sky filled with puffy white clouds. The land sloped up very gently away from the sea, but never so much that the river ran angry. The trail was usually packed dirt, but some parts of it were cushioned in fallen leaves. Miako simply wasn’t used to so much walking. She was tired from her short night, and already stiff from the first half-day of walking and then sleeping on the ground.

Mid-morning, when everyone had walked out some of their kinks, Jendral started throwing questions over his shoulder at Turbasek. Miako could hear the questions but not the answers, so she closed the distance between her and Penda, who looked at her, smiled, and waved her on ahead.

“Is he trying to prove something?” Jendral was saying.

“No, I told you, he’s just trying to reestablish communication.”

“But why?”

“Look, Jendral, you’ve traveled a bit. Try to imagine for a moment what it could mean to someone who isn’t Merta.”

“Hardly worth the effort.”

“Just because your people never saw the benefit doesn’t mean it’s not worth doing.”

“This is a Tongat thing, isn’t it? Knowledge for its own sake.”

“Don’t be a moose.”

Jendral grinned over his shoulder and saw Miako following close behind. “So, Seeker lady, maybe you can explain what this is about.”

“I thought it was so simple that even a vulgar bachelor warrior could understand it,” she said.

“How did you—”

“No marriage scars on your chest.” He slowed and looked at her over his shoulder again.

In the Western Plains dialect, he said, “Maybe she’s not just a baby counter.”

“No,” she said in the same language, “I *am* a baby counter, but also the Mediator’s companion and if necessary his champion. I have flown and sailed around the world and my flute has made a queen cry. It’s not important for you to understand why we’re doing it. It’s only important for you to help us, as you promised.”

“You speak Plains very well.”

“Better than you speak Common.”

“I speak Common flawlessly.”

“It’s not too bad, Jendral Kondalen Horsecatcher, but I speak Plains better than you can catch a horse and far better than you can catch a woman.”

He shot her another grin. “Travel with me for a few more days and we’ll see who can catch what.”

She blushed and Turbasek laughed with gusto.

“I’m not sure what that was about,” Penda said, laughing along, “but to me it looked like a draw.”

They walked the rest of the day with the wide river on their right, never out of sight of the slowly flowing water, and made camp for the night in another clearing. This time Penda let Jendral go hunting alone. By the time he returned they had a good fire going and Miako and Jaybra were playing a soft duet, flute and drum, the melody dreamy and meandering like the river. Jendral returned carrying a fat rodent of a type Miako had never seen. Penda took the carcass from him and walked off toward the river with it, while Jendral sat down on a large rock across the fire from Miako to listen.

When the song was over, he said, “I can see how you could make a queen cry with your flute.”

The Mediator spoke for the first time that day. “Miako has made people cry in three nations on two continents. She has a gift.” For what, Miako wondered—music or making people cry?

Jendral nodded, apparently uncomfortable—whether with the Mediator or with her, Miako couldn’t tell—and poked at the fire with a fat stick.

“What did you catch?” she asked him.

“Marmot. You don’t usually find them this low, so I taught him a lesson.”

While the meat was roasting Jaybra disappeared, returning a little later with a bag of greens and roots that she’d collected near the river.

“How can you do that in the dark?” Miako said.

“Years of experience in childhood. My mother and I used to do it together when I was a girl.”

“She’s a good Merta woman,” Jendral said approvingly.

Jaybra ducked her head and went to work. She scraped and sliced the roots, then tossed them with the greens in a collapsible bowl she took from her pack. She threw in some dried fruit and then poured in a small amount of oil from a cloth-wrapped bottle, cut and squeezed a lemon over it, and mixed it together carefully with her hands. She cleaned her hands on a cloth and passed the bowl around. Everyone took a few bites. When the bowl came to Chass he passed it on after examining it for a few seconds. It was one of the best salads Miako had ever had.

“I can’t believe you brought a lemon,” Miako said.

“I have two more. They travel well.”

The marmot was crackling hot and tasted like rabbit. When there was nothing left but cracked bones, Turbasek passed around some sweet hard cakes he had liberated from the ship’s kitchen. Miako declined, but the rest made short work of them.

This time she had no trouble falling asleep and staying there until Jaybra shook her shoulder at dawn.

\* \* \*

They reached the Teshikota camp a few hours after setting out the next morning. The air had cooled overnight and the sky was unrelenting gray from horizon to horizon, but it didn’t feel like rain. The first notice they had that the camp was nearby was a heavily-muscled young man who suddenly appeared on the trail ten paces ahead of Jendral.

“Welcome back, warrior,” he said. “Your brothers are...” His voice trailed off as he saw the Mediator.

“Stand your post,” Jendral said. “I’ll have them send for you soon.” The young man nodded and stood aside to let them pass. He was only a little taller than Miako but looked as if he could lift her with one hand.

Half an hour later they broke out of the trees onto a wide grassland that straddled the river. Not far away several decat strange structures stood scattered across the prairie, spaced twenty feet or so apart from each other. They were dusty tan in color, more than ten feet wide, just short of ten feet high, and shaped like mushroom caps. There were people visible near the river, children playing in the water and women washing clothes. As they approached the nearest structure a metallic hammering sound started up. Miako could hear Jaybra’s breath catch. They came around the yurt and saw a middle-aged woman wearing leather pants and shirt forging a sword. As she plunged the metal into a bucket of water she noticed their group.

“Jendral! You’re late. Bilduf wants to...” Just like the guard on the trail, her voice failed when she saw the Mediator.

“Keesha, where is he?”

She pointed upriver and watched them walk away. Miako looked back and saw that she was following.

They cleared the edge of the last yurt. There were several groups of people in the cleared area beyond. A small group of late adolescents, both boys and girls, were playing a ball-kicking game with a larger number of younger children. Decats of flat sitting stones had been arranged in two ranks around a cold fire pit, and half of them were occupied with men and women, many of them leaning forward, apparently engaged in debate.

One of the men in the circle noticed the newcomers and gestured. Everyone turned to look and several of the men stood up. There were a few calls to Jendral, followed by silence as they saw Chass. Then one young man burst from the circle and ran toward them, drawing his sword and letting out a terrifying scream. Penda put her hand on the hilt of her weapon but didn’t draw it, but Jendral unsheathed his sword, a long, narrow, straight blade, and ran to meet the challenger. He planted himself in his path with his blade raised. The young man skidded to a halt.

“Jendral!” the youth exclaimed.

“What the bloody mane are you doing?” Jendral shouted in Plains.



“It’s a Mediator!”

With a flick of his wrist Jendral knocked the other’s sword out of his hand. “I know it’s a bloody Mediator, you smoking idiot! I’ve been walking with him for two days. Did you think I wouldn’t notice a great lumbering giant following me through the forest?” He took a step forward and shoved the younger man in the chest. He landed on his rump in the dust. “You’re a fool, Mestak. I’ve told you a thousand times to think with your head, not your balls.”

They glared at each other for a moment. Jendral sheathed his sword and offered his hand. Mestak took it and Jendral pulled him up off the ground.

“My youngest brother, Mestak,” Jendral said in Common. “He meant no offence, Mediator.”

“I think he meant to slice me into spare parts,” Chass said. Mestak took a step backward at the sound of his voice.

“Well, yes, but he would have done it reverently.” Several of the other men had approached during the confrontation. Jendral turned to them. “I have much to say. Let’s return to the circle.” He slapped Mestak’s back, not gently, to knock the dust off it, and gave him a friendly shove back toward the circle of stones.

Miako and her entire group were ushered into the inner row of seats. There were nine adult Merta men, including Jendral, and over twenty women, with a handful of stragglers, all women, running from the yurts. When everyone was settled, Jendral stood and turned to look around him.

“I will speak in Common out of courtesy to our guests,” he said. “First, the small things. When we’re done here someone should relieve Tippal on the road to the Trading Post. Also, I left two Sevessa with a large load of metals and ceramics at the Post, waiting to trade with a dead Durkita or with us, whichever gets there first.”

“How do you know he’s dead?” a man from the second rank called, but Jendral ignored him.

“Those are the small things. This is the large one.” He gestured at the Mediator, sitting two stones to his left, who remained motionless. “Chass, the last Mediator, who we thought was long vanished. He and his companions want to visit Dross Cave, and they want us to guide them there. They’ve already paid in full.” He took the cloth-wrapped gold from his bag and laid it on the ground before him. Several people stood up briefly to look.

An old woman directly across from Jendral said slowly, “Dross Cave is in Safota. It’s five weeks on horseback from here.”

“Possibly a bit more,” Jendral said.

“Who will go?” she asked.

“My brothers and I. And anyone else who wants to come. I need at least two more men; four would be better.”

“That’s nearly every man in the clan,” an older man in the first rank said.

“I know. I’m not suggesting we all go; I thought we could hire some men from Shefarden clan.”

The old woman spoke again. “I don’t think it would be wise to send more than the Kondalen brothers from our clan.” She looked at the small pile of gold Jendral had laid down. “Hire three Shefardens.”

“The travelers claim that Roakay are tracking them.”

There was utter stillness around the dead fire. Then Mestak laughed and others joined in. "I'll bet there are white bears after them, too!"

"Vampires," someone else called.

"Frogs, great big ones," a third man said.

Miako stood up and the laughter stopped abruptly. "I am Miako Tomaza Seeker, Felitta shul-kethrin Tongat, chosen by the Mediator to help him reestablish communication with the Great Mother. I tell you that Roakay are following us, and they will do anything to stop us."

She reached into her bag and pulled out the carved horn statue that Zeven had given her, a naked man with one knee raised and hands crossed in front of him. She held it out to them. Several people came to look at it, several of them touched it. The last was the old woman who had spoken before.

"Jasheeya," she said. "The Roakay did not die, just as the Mediators did not all die." She went back to her seat, and Miako sat down.

"Give them back their money," the blacksmith they had passed said. "I'd rather have my husband alive."

"It's not worth it," another woman said. "They'll kill you all. Leave the travelers to their fate. What does it have to do with us?"

"Better yet," said a young man from the second rank, "tie them up and hand them over when the Roakay come for them."

The women sitting on either side of him immediately got up and walked to the other side of the ring. Everyone looked at the ashes in the fire pit, silently and pointedly ignoring him until he stood up and walked stiffly back toward the yurts. When he was out of sight, Jendral spoke again.

"Our ancestors were not fools, but I believe they acted rashly in killing Ripp and Foss." He looked at his brother Mestak, then looked across at the old woman. "Our way of life is perfect, but wisdom is hard-won, and perhaps it would have been better for our elders to be able to speak to the Great Mother without first flying up into the sky. I would never presume to speak to her myself, but I will guide the Mediator and his friends, Roakay or no, so that others who might benefit from the Mother's guidance will have the chance to seek it." He sat down.

No one spoke for a moment. Then the elder said, "The women of Merta never wanted our Mediators killed. We could stop our husbands, but not the headstrong young bachelors. Therefore it is fitting that a bachelor should make reparations and give back to us what was taken away four thousand years ago. Jendral should go, and his brothers if they are willing."

"I will go," said a man who had not spoken yet. He looked a lot like Jendral, but stockier, with a broken nose and a thick scar on one cheek. His wife Keesha shook her head and closed her eyes.

"I'll go, too." Mestak said, standing up. "I wish to atone for my mistake in charging the Mediator. It was rash and foolish, and I apologize." He bowed deeply to Chass, who nodded his head in return.

"We leave at dawn tomorrow," Jendral said. "Lenart, will you take a pack train to the Trading Post?" An older man nodded and left the circle. "Bilduf, Mestak, we have a lot of planning to do. Keesha, could you and Nertey look after the travelers?"

She agreed. The council dispersed, some going back to the yurts, others toward the river. Jaybra walked up to Jendral and planted herself in front of him.

"Yes, kethrin?" he said with a forced smile.

"The Durkita trader. Did you kill him?"

He looked at her face for a moment. "Why?"

"I want to know what kind of man I'm following."

He looked her in the eye. "I hailed him in peace and asked if he had heard that a ship was rounding the Neck. He told me to get back to my women. I asked again in peace. He suggested that I bugger my horse. I said that the Trading Post was neutral ground and I would wait to see who disembarked. He attacked me without warning and I defended myself."

"You have no new scars," she said, looking him up and down.

"He was a fool and a rogue, a bad trader and a worse fighter."

She nodded and went to follow Keesha back to the camp.

\* \* \*

Keesha sent Turbasek and the Mediator away and invited the women into her yurt. She introduced Bilduf's second wife, Nertey, who was quite young and shy. Nertey bowed without making eye contact and went back to stirring a pot over the small cooking fire in the center of the yurt. What little smoke the fire generated wafted up to a vent in the roof, leaving the air perfumed by it but not hard to breathe.

After urging them to sit on cushions around the fire, Keesha opened a small chest against one wall, unabashedly stripped out of her work clothes and changed into a long, elaborately beaded leather skirt and a short, matching tunic. She joined them and offered cool tea, which all of them accepted. Nertey ladled out bowls of the stew she'd been stirring and took a seat beside Keesha. They ate in silence for a few moments.

"This is very good," Miako said.

"Bilduf is lucky to have such good Merta women as wives," Jaybra said, in a formal, singsong tone that made Miako suspect that it was formulaic. But it worked, because Nertey looked up and smiled and Keesha visibly relaxed.

"You're from Durkita," she said to Jaybra, who nodded. "We're at peace with them now. Good people, Durkita. Great fishermen."

"I have always admired the Teshikota," Jaybra replied. "They are at home on plains, seashore, and mountains."

"But you took kethrin to Tongat," Nertey said quietly. Her voice was soft and high.

"Perhaps if I had been born Teshikota I would have been content to stay at home."

"I was born Sevessa," Keesha said. She bowed to Penda.

"That's unusual," Penda said. "Very few women choose to become Merta, let alone from Sevessa."

"Around five hundred female kethrin a year," Miako said. "Never more than five from Sevessa."

Keesha shrugged and smiled. "Not unique then. But strange enough. Like you."

Miako bowed from the waist and smiled back. "Yes. I delayed my choice for ten years, and it took a Mediator to force me into it."

"How long have you traveled with him?"

"Almost six weeks."

Jaybra said, "Four weeks for me."

“And only one for me,” Penda said.

“You’re a warrior,” Keesha said to her. Penda nodded. Keesha looked at her more closely. “More than a simple warrior, I think. Queen’s guard?”

“Captain of the Queen’s guard. Retired.”

Keesha whistled. “I think I’d like to see you fight.”

“She wrestled with Jendral,” Jaybra said.

“What!” both Merta women said at once.

“And still alive?” Keesha added. “Who won?” Jaybra and Miako told the tale of the wrestling match that had lasted for an hour and ended in a draw. Keesha laughed and poured more tea for Penda. “We’ll be telling that story for a hundred years. Jendral will never live it down.”

Penda raised her hands. “I hope it won’t... diminish him.”

“Oh, don’t worry about Jendral. He could benefit from standing in the river.”

“Why is he still a bachelor?” Jaybra said. “He seems perfectly...”

“Oh ho,” Keesha said. “You still have a taste for Merta men, then, hey?”

“Actually,” Miako said, “she’s recently developed a taste for *Tongat* men.” Jaybra shot her a glance and blushed.

Keesha glanced at the entrance to the yurt. “You don’t mean Old Tree Gouger?”

“Jendral called him that, too,” Miako said. “What does that mean?”

“Ah. You’d have to get one of the men to tell you that story. I only have half of it.”

She smiled at some inner vision. “Now Jendral, he’s another strange one. He’ll fit in with your group just fine. There’s no shortage of ladies willing to make him a sword, and he’s accepted more than a few, but he’s never cut his chest for anyone. I’m not sure even he knows why. I asked him once, and all he would say was, ‘When she gives me a horse, I’ll know for sure.’ So a few of the ladies tried with horses instead of swords, but no luck.”

They sipped their cool tea. Nertey rose and started collecting the stew bowls.

“Can we help?” Miako said.

“No, thank you,” Nertey replied courteously. She piled everything into a woven basket and left the yurt.

When the flap had closed behind her, Keesha said, “She’s a good woman and a good wife to Bilduf. He took her two years ago and she still hasn’t got over her shyness. Maybe she never will.”

“How much older is Bilduf?” Miako said.

“Than Nertey? Thirteen years.”

“No, I meant how much older is he than Jendral?”

She laughed. “You’ve got it backwards, Miako. Jendral is three years older than my Bilduf.”

“Really?” She felt flustered and dropped her eyes. She could feel Keesha examining her. Finally she looked up and said, “I’m sorry we’re taking your husband away. I know you don’t want him to go.”

“No, but he’s going, so that’s that. I gave my opinion. If I wanted to stop him I probably could, but a good wife doesn’t do that unless she has a real reason. All I have is a feeling, and that’s not good enough.”

“We’ll bring him back safely,” Penda said firmly. Miako wondered how she could be so confident. She herself was not at all sure that any of them would even *arrive* at the reliquary alive, let alone return.

\* \* \*

They spent the afternoon napping and checking their packs and supplies. Miako was restless, so she left Keesha's tent around an hour before dusk and saw the children still playing their ball game. It looked like the same game but she didn't know if it was the same people. She watched for a while and thought she was starting to understand the rules when a boy of eight broke away from the running and screaming to ask if she'd like to play.

Why not? she asked herself. "Will you tell me what to do?"

"You don't know how to play hebbeda?"

"I've never played before."

The boy took her hand and led her onto the field. "Hey, everyone, the strange lady wants to play but doesn't know how!"

"Perkat," one of the teenage girls said, "it's not polite to call someone strange."

"But she is strange."

"You're strange."

"No I'm not. I'm perfectly normal."

"Except in the head," one of the younger girls said, laughing.

The older girl said, "Why don't you explain the rules to her?"

"Me? Rekket should do it."

The oldest on the field, a boy almost ready for his choiceday, said, "Perkat, you know the rules as well as anyone. Don't be shy. Explain it to the guest."

"I'm not shy," Perkat said fiercely, but only loud enough for Miako to hear.

"I would enjoy it if you'd teach me how to play," she said.

"Really? Okay. Now look, there, see the bases?"

He launched into a rambling, incoherent monologue that had the younger children rolling in the dirt. The more they laughed, the more determined, stony-faced, and incomprehensible Perkat became. Nevertheless, Miako got the gist of it: there were five bases, one of which was home. Each player took their turn being the kicker, who stood on home. One of the others would roll a ball to him, and he would kick it and run the bases. He got points for the number of bases he could reach before he was hit with the ball, plus extra points for every defender he tackled. If the kicker was tackled he lost his turn. Something complicated happened if he managed to run all the bases, but Miako didn't understand what and didn't try to get Perkat to clarify it; apparently that was extremely unusual, happening only once or twice a year.

"Would you like to be kicker?" the teenage girl asked.

"Oh. Um... Yes, thank you."

Miako took her place at home base. The teenager rolled the ball along the packed earth and Miako gave it a good kick, sending it over the bowler's head. She ran counter-clockwise to the first base, almost a hundred feet away, where a younger girl stood waiting.

"Now you tackle me," she said.

"I don't know how."

"Run at me, grab me, and knock me down."

Miako laughed at the absurdity of it, ducked her head and ran right for the girl, knocking her off her feet. The girl sat in the dust, laughing, and pointed to the next base. On the way someone threw the ball at Miako, but she dodged it and kept going. The

defender at the second base was Rekket, the older boy. He smiled as she approached and set himself. She ran faster and knocked him down, but fell herself.

"Am I tackled?" she said.

"No, only if you go down and I don't. Keep going."

She dodged another throw and ran to the third base, knocking down another boy about Perkat's age. A few steps farther someone got her between the shoulder blades with the ball.

"Nine points," everyone shouted, and cheered.

"Is it someone else's turn now?" she said, dusting herself off.

"No, because you weren't tackled," Perkat shouted peevishly. "I *told* you that."

At dusk they were called to dinner. Miako hadn't had so much fun in years, though she discovered that she preferred being a defender to a kicker.

Rekket fell in beside her as they walked back to the fire pit. "You're very fast," he said.

"I've always loved to run."

"You might be the fastest woman I've ever met."

"That's very hard to believe."

"Leave her alone, Rekket," the teenage girl said. "Watch out, Miss, he has his eye on you. I've seen that look before."

Rekket waved his hand dismissively and didn't seem embarrassed. But he drifted away when they reached the adults.

Jendral was waiting for her. "You should have been born Merta," he said. "You're a natural at hebbeda."

"I think there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

He laughed. "A little. Come sit by me."

Dinner was more complicated than she'd expected given the way they'd eaten on the trail from the Post. The women cooked communally for dinner, so there were numerous dishes, some with meat but many pure vegetable dishes. They ran the spectrum from blazing hot to delicately spiced, from cool sliced radishes with onions and lemon juice to a thick chicken stew with maize dumplings that made her eyes water.

The children sat scattered among the adults, but did not take part in the conversation, which mostly concerned the preparations that many of them had been contributing to. Someone brought up the Roakay but the topic was diverted almost immediately by the older women. Miako realized that she had not seen Chass since they arrived.

"Where is the Mediator?" she asked Jendral.

"Resting in my yurt. Don't worry, I have someone guarding him." He raised his voice. "Our guest the Seeker is a renowned musician. Who would like to hear her play?"

Many voices raised in assent. "I have to get my flute," Miako said, and several people, including Jaybra, joined her in leaving to fetch their instruments.

The night was black except for the fire in the center of the circle. The stars burned and twinkled overhead, and a subtle brightening on the eastern horizon heralded moonrise. Miako could hear the river running not far away, slow and sluggish on its meandering course through the plains. She stood with her flute in her hands, accompanied by four drummers, a guitarist, and a horn player.

She put the flute to her lips and breathed in. She was scarcely aware of the next half hour, only the waves of sadness and longing that blew through her into her flute, and the

foundation that the others provided for her melancholy, like the beach beneath breaking ocean waves. When she finished she opened her eyes and saw Chass standing behind the people on the far side of the fire ring.

His face flickered in the dancing firelight, somehow making him appear more human. Their eyes locked. She could feel her music resonating in him and echoing back to her. The Merta made no sound, not even the children. They were all staring at her, so she didn't think anyone had noticed the Mediator standing just outside their circle. Between one eye blink and the next he was gone. Miako lowered her flute.

# Caravan

— Day 1 —

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Turbasek tried not to laugh and failed.

“What?” Jendral said. “I can’t put him on a horse!”

“I’ve ridden camels many times,” Chass said. “It’s a good solution.”

“Right,” Jendral said. “He can’t *walk* sixteen hundred miles, and he’d snap the back of the biggest horse we’ve got. Camels can carry almost a thousand pounds.” He frowned and turned to the Mediator. “How much *do* you weigh?”

“Just under five hundred.”

“See, it will work.”

“The camel will grumble the whole way,” Turbasek said.

“They grumble all the time anyway. How would we know the difference?”

Jendral took Miako’s bag and slung it with the others over one of four pack horses. Their entourage also included seven horses for the riders, two unburdened mounts for backup, and Chass’s camel.

The whole clan had assembled to see them off. The children were lined up in three ranks before the adults, hugging themselves in the chill morning air and yawning. The sun was just peeking over the horizon in a clear sky. Keesha and Nertey were clutching Bilduf, and Miako was surprised to see that Mestak had someone to see him off, a very young woman with loose hair that hung down to the small of her back.

“I didn’t know Mestak was married,” she whispered to Jaybra.

“It would be unusual if he weren’t, at his age.”

“Jendral isn’t.”

“Like I said—unusual.”

Miako laughed.

“Let’s get going,” Jendral said. He climbed up into his saddle and nudged his horse out of the small herd.

The Merta saddle was different from the ones Miako had used as a child on the farm. The stirrups looked much the same, but both the pommel and the back were higher and the head gear was simpler. It had been years since she’d ridden, but she took the reins from a young girl and swung up easily into the seat. She caught Jendral watching her, and he grinned and turned away.

Chass tapped the camel on one hind knee with his knuckles. It slowly collapsed onto its front knees, then folded up its hind legs until it was lying on the ground. The Mediator climbed up into the saddle and took the reins. He said something to the beast, which grunted and moaned, but it rose in jerks from the ground. Chass swayed back and forth during this process but stayed firmly in place. When the process was completed he looked down at the other travelers on their horses—his head was over three feet higher than theirs—and nodded that he was ready.

“We’re off,” Jendral said. “If all goes well we’ll be back in ten weeks.”



“Goodbye,” the clan called out. One of the children said, “Bring us back a mountain monkey.” Miako caught the eye of the elder, the old woman who had spoken at the council meeting. She thought she saw resignation and sadness in her eyes, but the old woman simply nodded and turned away. They started off, and in five minutes the camp was invisible through the trees.

The company was quiet at first, but when they’d climbed the gentle slope out of the river valley and the tall, swaying yellow stalks of the open grasslands stretched ahead to the flat horizon, Mestak began singing in Plains.

I met a young woman from the West.  
Her hair waved like the grass on the prairie.  
Her voice flowed like the gentlest of rivers.  
She ran with the swiftest of wild horses.  
Her breasts rose like the hills of her homeland.  
Her sparkling eyes held the beauty of a million stars.  
But her love ran cold like a glacier, and she ground my soul to dust.

“That’s a cheerful way to start a journey,” Turbasek said.

“I don’t know the Merta tongues,” Penda said. “What did he say?”

Miako translated the lyrics. Penda laughed and said, “Well I know a few songs, too. How about this one.”

In the town of Narbori lived a woman named Jenna.  
She was happy and spirited and loved by her clan.  
An artist by training, a lover of beauty,  
Her life was complete except for a child.  
She hired a man to give her a baby.  
For a year they thrived in joy and excitement.  
But poor Jenna made the mistake of falling in love  
With a man who wanted only money and sex.  
When the boy-child was born, she offered to return  
With her lover to his home in Felittaka.  
But he took her gold and her golden-haired son  
And left her standing alone at the dock on the Sheki.  
As the boat vanished below the horizon, Jenna stepped off the pier,  
And the river swept her body out to sea, to sink below the waves,  
Where she waits in vain for the return of her love or her child.

“No more,” Miako pleaded. “That’s too much, even for me.”

“You just can’t handle sadness that has words attached,” Jaybra said, laughing, and Miako blushed.

Mestak reined in closer to Penda. “I don’t understand your song.”

“Which part?”

“Why did she kill herself? Because he stole her child?”

“No,” Penda said, “she would have expected a male child to be returned to the father’s country.”

“Then why?”

“Because he didn’t love her.”

“But she paid him to lie with her. Why would he love her? How could he feel anything but—”

“Stop,” Jendral said. “Mestak, I’ll explain this to you later.”

“But—”

“Later. It’s a Sevessa song. Let it go.”

“Does anyone know any cheerful songs?” Turbasek said.

To their astonishment, the Mediator began to sing. His voice, with its weird harmonics, actually sounded better in song than it did in normal speech, as if a choir was singing slightly out of step with itself.

Morgat the Pirate was sailing Blast Bay,  
When his ship hit a whale and was carried away.  
The whale towed his ship for a week and a day,  
Till Morgat climbed down and hailed the Gray.  
“Let go of my ship, you monstrous device,  
Or I’ll cut you to ribbons and feed you to mice.”  
The whale cleared his blowhole and said, “Be you nice,  
And I’ll take you to lands full of riches and spice.”  
So Morgat the Pirate said, “What do you need?”  
The whale raised his fin, where a hook made it bleed.  
The pirate cut it loose, and the whale gained speed,  
And beached his ship on an island where gold grew like weeds.

Everyone cheered, and they rode on the rest of the morning swapping songs and stories.

\* \* \*

By the end of that first day, Miako was already sick of the prairie. Except when they crossed streams or dry riverbeds, the vista was unchanging hour after hour. A steady breeze blew throughout the day, which made the grass stalks wave hypnotically—but the constant motion also gave her the persistent feeling that something was stalking them through the grass. They stopped to water and rest the horses every few hours, with a longer break for their own lunch.

Jendral rode beside the Mediator for a long while in the afternoon, craning up to look at him as they spoke. The wind tore their words away, and Miako decided she really didn’t care. Her bottom was tired, her legs were cramped, she felt that her head was going to roll off her shoulders. The pleasant morning’s songs gave way to an increasingly sullen silence as everyone realized that tomorrow and the next fifty days were all going to be a lot like this one.

They stopped only when it was too dark to tell if they were about to ride their horses into a ravine. Jendral called a halt for the day beside a whispering brook. Miako dismounted and groaned; the pain in her thighs was worse than anything she could remember. She felt like kicking her horse, but it had been a gentle, steady mount, and it wasn’t the horse’s fault that its back was wider than her crotch. The Kondalen brothers unloaded long, narrow bundles from the pack horses and carried them a little away from

the water. In a few moments there were four yurts standing on the banks of the stream, somewhat smaller than the ones in the camp they'd left that morning, but otherwise identical. Despite her pain, Miako hobbled over to see how they'd done that.

Jendral watched her limp inside one of the yurts, gallantly not laughing at her discomfort. She peered up at the inner surface of the yurt; it was stitched expertly from regular sections of cured hide, thin but evidently tough. The location of the ribs that held the mushroom cap shape were obvious, but the ribs themselves were hidden within the hide.

"How does it work?" she asked Jendral.

"The struts are ceramic foam, very light, bendable and almost unbreakable. Each one comes in three parts that slot together. The tension from opposing struts and the hide holds them all in place."

"It's ingenious."

"Thank my ancestors. And the Sevessa who sell us the struts. When it's time to decamp, you just pull on the pieces like this—" He grabbed one of the hidden struts on either side of a bump that Miako hadn't noticed before, pulled apart, and the wall suddenly lost some of its tautness. "It rolls up into a small, light package."

"Four yurts," she observed. "Seven people and one Mediator."

"Yes." He went back outside and raised his voice. "My brothers and I will share one yurt. Turbasek and Jaybra..." He smiled. "Miako and Penda share the third. The Mediator will take the last one."

"Can we risk having a fire?" Penda said.

"Not with the wind like this. Not at this time of year. We'll eat from our provisions tonight."

Miako carried her bag to the yurt she was sharing with Penda. They laid out lightweight bedrolls, set up an electric lantern, and they were moved in.

"At least we don't have to sleep in the open again," Miako said.

"Ah, I was starting to get used to it," Penda said. "Let's eat."

After a light meal, Mestak and Bilduf checked the horses, which had been hobbled in the grass nearby, and everyone immediately went to their huts. Miako fell asleep the moment she hit the bedroll.

## — Day 2 —

Penda shook her awake the next morning. Miako stood and groaned. The pain was tolerable but in its place was a stiffness she'd never experienced before, as if she'd aged fifty years overnight. She stepped out into the cold morning air. The sun had just cleared the horizon. Mestak was walking among the horses, running his hand across the withers or down a leg. Jaybra waved to her and headed to the brook to get a pail of water.

The second day was much the same as the first, without the morning songfest. No one seemed to have anything lighthearted to offer, so they rode in silence, stopping every now and then to rest the horses and stretch their legs. Miako's legs and rump were aching again. She didn't see how she could possibly survive five weeks of this.

By nightfall the wind had died down. They camped beside a larger stream that had a scattering of trees on its banks, so there was wood for a fire. Jendral cleared an area down to the mineral soil and he and Jaybra started collecting rocks from the stream bed to build a fire ring. Bilduf, who had barely spoken a word since they left, walked away from the

camp carrying a bow and arrows. He came back with a skinny antelope, which Mestak cleaned and spitted over the fire. Miako collapsed and watched the fire dance. She didn't know if she'd have enough energy to eat.

Mestak crouched by the spit, turning and basting the meat occasionally. He seemed to be brooding about something, and when everyone had settled around the fire, he said, "I heard about the match between you and my brother." He wasn't looking at Penda, but it was clear who he was talking to. "I would like to challenge you—"

"I'm too tired to wrestle," Penda said casually.

"I was going to say," he continued stiffly, "that I have never yet managed to beat Jendral, so if he couldn't overpower you, I suppose it would be worthless for me to attempt it."

No one said anything. Mestak adjusted the spit.

"Now you, Old Tree Gouger, are another matter."

There was no sound other than the fire crackling.

"I'm too tired to wrestle, too," Turbasek said finally.

"I've heard stories about you. Jendral told me he's fought you nine times. Four times he won, four times you won, and once you agreed to a draw after three hours."

"Three hours?" Penda said. She nudged Turbasek, who was sitting beside her.

"Impressive."

"We were both drunk," Turbasek said lightly.

"That's not how I heard it," Mestak said. "The tale I heard is that you got drunk *after* the draw."

"Perhaps. I knew there was a lot of drinking in there somewhere."

"So what do you say?"

"I've already said. I'm tired and hungry."

"The meat won't be ready for half an hour. Half an hour should be more than enough. We've been riding hard for two days and no end in sight. I think we need some entertainment."

"Mestak," Jendral said, "please shut up and cook the food."

The younger man stood from his crouch and walked over to Turbasek. "Well, old Tongat? Are you willing to take on a young Merta?"

Turbasek looked up at him without stirring. "Mestak, do you think age is an asset or a liability?"

"I think I'm stronger than you."

"Are you stronger than Jendral?"

Mestak glanced at his brother. Miako guessed there was at least ten years between them, possibly twice that. Mestak was younger than she was, but she still had no idea how old Jendral was. They were similar in size, both well-muscled without being over-developed. If she'd had to guess, she'd bet that the younger brother was the stronger.

"Yes," Jendral said, "he is. I've seen him lift logs that I would have had to drag."

"Why do you think you've never beaten him?" Turbasek said.

"Stand up, Old Tree Gouger, and show me what you've got."

Turbasek worked his way to his feet. Evidently he wasn't used to riding either, because he moved the way Miako felt. He took off his coat and handed it to Penda, leaving him in trousers and a lightweight, short tunic. Mestak removed his shirt and threw it aside. They squared off well away from the fire, on the side opposite the stream.

They slapped hands, crouched, and moved in. Then Mestak was lying in the dust; Miako hadn't seen how it happened. He got up, brushed himself off, and rushed Turbasek. He landed harder this time, but then he got more cautious. After three more falls in five minutes, Turbasek wasn't even breathing hard, but Mestak was going to have bruises the next day.

Without a word, Mestak replaced his shirt and went back to tending dinner. They were nearly done eating before anyone said anything. Bilduf broke the silence. "A lion may look old. He may be scarred and ragged. He may pretend he is weary and sore. But that doesn't mean he's lost his fangs or his claws."

— *Day 3* —

In the middle of the third day they arrived at the Shefarden clan's camp, situated at the foot of a low bluff facing a small river. The Shefarden yurts were lighter-colored than Kondalen's but otherwise identical. Miako's group had to ford the river to reach the camp; the horses seemed happy to wade across, stopping to drink and neighing midstream at the Shefarden horses, but Chass could not get his camel to enter the water. Finally Jendral rode back across and led both his horse and the camel by the reins. At its deepest the water came up to his waist.

Everyone in the camp came out to see the new arrivals, but unlike the last time no one rushed out to do battle with the Mediator. They were Teshikota, like Jendral's clan; related, but not so closely that they couldn't have intermarried. Jaybra explained to Miako that this was very nearly the definition of a shoraz: people distantly related, against whom you never made war, and who were potential mates.

Jendral and his brothers sat down with the clan council around the fire ring and explained their expedition. The rest of their group sat on the ground just outside the ring, politely ignoring the frank stares of the children and the covert glances of the adults.

"We want to hire three men to ride with us."

"For protection against imaginary dust devils?" one man said. "Easy work."

"They're not imaginary," Jendral said.

"Yes, and my great-great-grandmother still cooks my dinner every night."

"Show them the dancer, Miako."

Miako unwrapped Zeven's statue. The Shefardens passed it around.

The same man said, "It means nothing—"

A old woman sitting nearby hissed at him, and he swallowed whatever he had been planning to say next. She took the statue and examined it closely, then stood up and walked over to stare at the Mediator. He was sitting, but she was ancient and stooped, so they were nearly eye to eye. Then she turned to Miako, looked into her face with the same intensity, and handed back the statue. She took her seat again.

"Do you not," she wheezed, "recognize a historic moment when it bites you between the legs? Open your eyes and clear your head. A female Seeker traveling with the first Mediator seen in this country for thousands of years tells you that the despised assassins are chasing her. Must the sun fall out of the sky and the Great Mother pick you up by the ears for you to believe?" She turned to Jendral. "How much?" He offered a weight in gold. "Too much," she said. "Honor demands that we support our cousins in this perilous journey." She named a price one-third what Jendral had offered. "And we send four men,

not three. Including you.” She pointed a shrunken hand at the scoffer, who looked startled, but then smiled and bowed deeply.

“My pleasure,” he said. “Defress Shefarden Lionstalker.”

Three other men volunteered and Jendral handed the gold to the elder woman. “It’s not enough,” he said.

“There will be other benefits,” she said. “Just by asking us for help you’ve given us a place in history.”

The travelers rested for the remainder of that day while their new Shefarden comrades bustled to prepare. Miako was happy to give her rump and legs a holiday from horseback. She went swimming with Jaybra and some of the Shefarden young people, who shouted questions over the splashing and horseplay. Miako mentioned that she had just learned to play hebbeda, so everyone rushed out of the water to start a game, and Jaybra joined in this time. When it was over they were all hot again, so they went back into the river, and then it was dinnertime.

“Music,” Jendral said when the meal was over. It was very dark, the bluff behind the camp blocking out the lowering moon and no lights but the big campfire. Miako was afraid that he would make a fuss over her, but he said nothing more, and she joined in the music, happy to be just one of the players for a change instead of the leader.

Penda stood and told the story of Geneda the Nut Queen, which made everyone laugh and must have softened their historic animosity to a Sevessa, because she vanished shortly afterward and didn’t spend the night in their yurt. Mestak and Bilduf participated in a wrestling match and won as often as they lost.

Chass hovered in the background, watching silently as usual; the subject of glances and whispers, but no one other than the children would look at him directly.

### **Geneda the Nut Queen**

This is a tale of the long ago in the land of Sevessaka.

When the Princess Florita was very young, her mother the Queen gave her a macaw for a birthday present. It was a magnificent red and green bird with astonishingly long tail feathers; it was so large that Florita could not hold it on her arm until she was ten. The Princess named it Geneda, and they were inseparable.

Geneda’s favorite food was nuts—any kind of nuts, but especially walnuts and almonds. She didn’t particularly care for Brazil nuts but she loved to crack them with a single bite just to show off.

Over the years Florita spent much time teaching her bird to talk. Geneda learned all the standard court phrases, such as, “The Queen would like her roasted cheese now” and “Show in the next boring messenger.” In time the court became famous for the willowy Princess who sat beside the throne with the enormous bird on her shoulder—the bird whose first words to every ambassador were, “May I have a nut, please?”

In time the Queen died, and—most unusually—the Princess was elected to take her mother’s place. This has only happened three times in Sevessaka’s history, and this was the first. For Florita was a smart, virtuous person, who had paid close attention to her very able mother, and

by the time she ascended the throne she was wise, learned, and honorable, and well loved by the Sevessa.

She ruled righteously for forty years with her bird at her side every single day. Generations of ambassadors, messengers, and supplicants were subjected to the eternal question, “May I have a nut, please?” It became well-known that anyone coming to court should have a nut on her person; though usually the nuts were set aside for later so Geneda would not get fat.

On the sudden death of Queen Florita the National Council debated for weeks about her replacement. There was no ideal candidate; several promising young people had been identified, but none of them were ready yet. Finally the council stunned the nation by announcing that Geneda the macaw would rule as regent while the next queen was trained.

Thus began the rule of the Nut Queen, who started every interview with the same question, and knew all the correct courtly phrases, and used them appropriately, too. Under her rule the Sevessa prospered, and when she died at the age of ninety, after twenty years as Queen, her replacement—who had sat at her side for the last decade—was ready.

The Nut Queen was buried beside her beloved Queen Florita, and you can still visit their tomb in Sevrur to this day.

— — —

— *Day 4* —

The Shefarden men kept to themselves most of their first day with the group. The day passed slowly, mostly cloudy and cool. The horses were holding up well and Chass’s camel grumbled more or less constantly, but Miako had long since learned to tune out that annoying sound. When they’d climbed the bluff behind the Shefarden camp, the grass once again stretched to the horizon, and they spent the entire day riding through the whispering stalks, which came up to Miako’s knees when she was mounted and almost over her head when she stood on the ground.

They camped that night on a nearly flat outcrop of granite, barren except for moss and a few stray weeds. Jaybra showed Penda and Miako how to twist dead grass into tight bunches that they could use in place of wood for a small fire. When they were done eating, they sat around the fire, not talking, until Defress cleared his throat.

“If I’m not mistaken,” he said, looking at Turbasek, “you’re Old Tree Gouger.”

Turbasek sighed. “Yes, but I don’t want to wrestle you.”

“The feeling is mutual, my friend. I wouldn’t be much good against imaginary assassins with a wrenched back or a broken leg. I’ll take your reputation as true.”

“Thanks.”

Miako had had enough. “What is this Tree Gouger business?” she said. “No one in the Kondalen camp would tell us what that means.”

“I have no idea,” Turbasek said primly.

Jendral laughed.

“Come on,” Penda said. “I thought I’d heard every story about Turbasek, even the filthy ones. Tell us!”

“He’s my friend,” Jendral said. “I wouldn’t presume.”

“I would,” Bilduf said, surprising them all. “I count Turbasek as a friend, too, but some stories must be told.”

“Oh, please,” Turbasek said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell the good version.” He leaned in toward the fire. “Turbasek Starwatcher has visited Mertaka only once before, but it was an extended visit, and this man is notoriously *not* a monk, although he does claim to be Tongat. Everyone knows that Tongat men have no gonads, being more interested in studying the sky and poking around in fish guts than in bedding women and fighting. This one is an exception, apparently.”

“Yes,” Defress interjected, “he likes to do both at the same time!”

All the men laughed. Jaybra and Penda smiled, but Miako wasn’t quite sure what he meant.

“Now after he’d been in Teshikota for a few weeks, Turbasek was feeling that nagging desire, and a pretty young woman caught his eye. She was the daughter of a clan leader, fierce and independent as such ones often are, and she was interested herself but not about to throw herself at a ball-less foreigner. But Turbasek had his heat up and one day got her alone in a meadow out by the Great Vein River. When he made his intentions clear, honorably of course, the young woman laughed, jumped up, and ran away.

“Turbasek may be the greatest wrestler in the world, but he runs like a drunken, half-lame mule. By the time he caught up with her she was halfway up a big elm tree. He climbs almost as well as he runs, it seems, so it took him a while to join her in the canopy. But once he did, he made a convincing argument and instead of pitching him onto his head, the lady opened her arms and... ah, bestowed other favors on him.

“Now her family had noticed the young girl’s absence and went looking for her. They came upon an elm tree that was shaking—but there was no wind. Her mother called out, ‘Child, are you up there?’, and the unseen lady replied, ‘Yes, mother, but I have company and I’m rather entangled at the moment.’”

The men all laughed—except Turbasek.

“And that,” Defress said, “is when the entire clan noticed that the bark of the shaking tree was shredded and gouged.”

“I told them,” Turbasek said, “and I’ll tell you, it was like that when I got there. It must have been a bear. Or maybe a porcupine.”

The Merta men laughed again. “No bear ever made marks like that,” Bilduf said. “Bears use their *claws* on trees. These scars were made by something blunt and very, very hard.”

Miako could feel herself blushing. Penda was holding her sides, trying not to fall off her seat with suppressed laughter, and Jaybra was looking away from the fire, though Miako could tell she was smiling.

“Her family was very gracious,” Turbasek said stiffly. “Very hospitable. I spent a month with the young lady, and gave them all very generous parting gifts.”

“Yes,” Defress said, “who would argue with a man who could do *that* to a tree?”

“So be careful, young Jaybra,” Bilduf said, with just a hint of a smile in his voice. “Now that you know what kind of man is sharing your yurt.”



— Day 8 —

They were riding through an area where the grass was not as tall, and it seemed more golden, more brittle. The sun was out, setting the sea of grain ablaze, and the air was warmer than it had been since they left Kondalen camp.

Miako's mind was wandering, her gaze scanning the horizon over the unbroken field of grasses, when something different caught her eye far off to the north. It was dark, or perhaps not; it vanished, and just when she had almost decided that she was hallucinating, it reappeared. Whatever it was, it was too far away to make out.

She kicked her horse's ribs and rode up beside Jendral. "What's that out there?" she said, pointing to the right.

"What?" He stood in his stirrups. "I don't see anything but prairie."

"It comes and goes."

With a practised ease that made Miako gasp, Jendral swung himself up so he was standing on the saddle as his horse continued walking. He fell back into the saddle, causing his horse to grunt, and grinned at her. "You should see this." Raising his voice, he said, "Hey, people, we're going to take a little side excursion. Follow me."

He rode north at a canter, and everyone followed, even Chass, although the best he could get out of his camel was a sort of rolling trot. Fifteen minutes later they were on a low rise looking down at a herd of horses like none that Miako had ever seen. They were drinking from a small pond, as any horse might, but these horses were striped: bold black and white stripes covered their entire bodies, their faces, and their legs, fading out at the belly.

"What are they?" Miako said.

"Wild horses," Jaybra answered.

"But—they're striped."

"We have two kinds of wild horses in Mertaka," Jendral said. "The normal kind, which are the ancestors of our domesticated horses. And these, which can't be tamed. People have tried many times, but they just don't respond well. They're mean. Pretty, though. You're lucky to have seen them, they're very reclusive."

"They're beautiful."

The striped horses suddenly raised their heads as a group, stared straight at the travelers, and bolted. In a moment they had vanished. Just then Chass came riding up on his stubborn camel.

"What was it?" he said.

"Striped wild horses."

"Ah. Very handsome creatures. I'm sorry I missed them."

— Day 17 —

Miako took off her shoes and waded out into a creek after she finished her lunch of hard cheese and dried apples. Riding was no longer painful, just boring. They had settled into a comfortable routine, rising at dawn, riding until sunset, stopping at water, and spending the day hypnotized by the unending fields of grass. In Felittaka this climate zone was all forest, thousands of miles of hardwood trees, which she had watched fly by from the train going to and from Littapo, wondering at its vastness. She had known that Mertaka was quite a bit larger than Gebertala, but this infinite plain of waving grasses seemed so *much* larger that it was beyond comprehension. They were less than a third of

the way to the mountains, and the only break in the scenery so far was narrow strips of trees that followed the banks of the larger tributaries of the Great Vein River.

She was just coming out of the water when she heard someone shout. She grabbed her shoes and ran back to the horses.

“What is it?” she said.

Penda was peering to the northeast, back the way they’d come, with one hand on her sword. Without taking her eyes off the horizon, she said, “Mestak said he saw someone, far back on the trail. He and Gerlad,” the youngest of the Shefarden men, “rode off to investigate.”

“Was it Merta?” Miako said, thinking that they were in the heart of southern Teshikota, so it was probably just some outriders from a local clan.

“Bilduf says that no Teshikota live in this area. It might be some loners riding through, or possibly a Safota scouting party, but maybe not.”

Nothing happened for a while. Penda and the men stayed alert but carried on with their lunches and work, except for Bilduf who rode slowly around the temporary camp, looking for trouble from the higher vantage he got from horseback. Miako dried and cleaned her feet and put her shoes back on. She brought more water for the horses. After a while she lay down and fell asleep in the grass.

She awoke to another shout. Jaybra had stretched out beside her and they jumped up together. Bilduf was riding toward them from the northeast, shouting something. Miako looked in that direction but couldn’t see anything other than Bilduf coming in on his horse.

“They’re coming back,” he said. “Two horses, one rider.”

Ten minutes later they discovered that it was, in fact, two riders. Mestak’s body was tied across his saddle—he was dead.

“What happened?” Jendral demanded in a hoarse voice. His face was hard, with fury behind his dark eyes.

Gerlad was a short man but had proved himself to be strong and dependable. Like Mestak he was in his mid-twenties, and like most Merta men he wore his hair very short. He dismounted and rubbed the stubble on his scalp. He looked Jendral in the eye and bowed.

“I’m very sorry, Jendral Kondalen Horsecatcher, there was nothing I could do to save your brother.”

“Tell me.”

Gerlad straightened. “Mestak thought he saw someone back on the trail, as you know. After my brother Hidain ordered me to follow him, it took me almost twenty minutes to catch up. He was galloping hard to the northeast. I called after him to wait for me, but either he could not hear me or his blood was up and he would not slow. I rode as fast as my horse could go and only managed to catch him because he had stopped, on that little rise we passed a few hours ago.” He coughed and tried to speak again. Jaybra handed him a water bag.

“Thank you,” Gerlad said after taking two long swallows. “About a quarter mile down the slope there was a band of riders. They were not Teshikota; not Merta.”

“How do you know?” Turbasek said.

“The way they sat their horses. Their clothes. Their hair.”

“How many?” Defress said.

“I think eight. Some of them were moving around in the back, so it was hard to count them, but the rest just sat looking at us. Mestak shouted a challenge, and the one in front... He... I’ve seen some amazing saddle tricks—my brother, and you, Jendral, but not like this. He vaulted out of his saddle *over the pommel*—flipped backwards, over the head of his mount, and landed on his feet facing us.”

“Roakay,” Turbasek said. “Jasheeya.”

“What happened then?” Jendral said.

“The dismounted stranger waved at us, got back on his horse—like a normal person would—and they began to ride away.”

“Which way?”

“North. I was ready to come back. There was no reason to follow them, they were leaving, but Mestak screamed a curse and kicked his horse in the ribs. He galloped down after them.” Gerlad took another drink. “The riders ignored him until he was almost on them. Then one of them turned his horse and pointed a lance at Mestak and I saw him fall. A moment later I heard a crack, like a tree limb breaking. Mestak didn’t move. I rode as hard as I could, but he was dead when I arrived, and the riders were out of sight.”

“Did you give chase?” Gerlad’s brother asked.

“No. I thought it was more important to give you this news and bring the Kondalens their brother’s body than to join Mestak with the Great Mother.”

“Wisely done,” Jendral said. He brooded in silence for a moment. “It was not your fault, Gerlad. Mestak was my brother, and I loved him, but he was always a hot-headed fool.” He held out his hand and they clasped each other’s wrists. “Thank you for bringing him back.” Gerlad bowed again. “We’re done riding today. We camp here tonight. Bilduf.”

The brothers took Mestak’s body down from his horse.

“May I examine the wound?” Turbasek said. The brothers looked at each other and nodded.

Turbasek carefully unbuttoned Mestak’s shirt. There was a small puncture wound just over the heart. He rolled the body over and raised the blood-soaked shirt to examine the much larger exit wound. He set the body back, carefully rearranged the clothing, and stood.

“I’m very sorry, brothers. Will you want us to join the ceremony?”

“I think not,” Jendral said. “But if the Shefardens are willing, we would appreciate their help in sending him on.”

“Of course,” Defress said.

Jendral and Bilduf each took an arm, and Defress one leg. At Jendral’s nod Gerlad took the other leg, and they carried the body downstream, accompanied by Hidain and Lowek, the other two Shefardens.

“What did you learn from the wound?” Miako said. She had not watched his investigation.

“The Roakay have come well armed. We probably outnumber them but we can’t defeat them in a face-to-face battle.”

“We need more help,” Penda said.

“It wouldn’t matter. Twenty more men wouldn’t be enough, and anyway, there are no more clans between us and the mountains. We’re on our own.”

“Guns?” the Mediator asked.

“Yes. I didn’t know there were any outside the Archives.”

“The Roakay have been hiding and scheming for millennia. More than enough time to recreate the technology, if they had to.”

“Which they probably didn’t.”

“What are guns?” Penda asked.

“Projectile weapons,” Turbasek said. “Very deadly. From Gerlad’s description they must have rifles, which are long-range variants.”

“How long range?”

“A skilled warrior can hit a target from over a mile away.”

Penda opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. She turned and walked away.

Miako said, “I’ve never heard of a weapon like that.”

“That,” Chass said, “is because the Perovics has been doing his job.”

\* \* \*

The Merta returned about an hour later. Jendral and Bilduf had evidently been wading in the river: their pants were wet to the thigh, but their shirts were dry. Miako had been expecting them to be angry, ready for vengeance, but they just seemed tired and sad.

While they were gone the others had set up camp, started a fire, and caught some wild game birds. When the mourners entered the clearing, Jaybra jumped up from her place tending the spitted birds and greeted them with hands clasped behind her neck, head bowed. Jendral and Bilduf bowed slightly in return.

“I’m so sorry,” Jaybra said.

The others also gave their condolences, except Chass, who sat outside the ring silently. The Kondalen brothers went to their yurt to change into dry clothes and joined the rest around the fire.

When they were finished eating, Jendral picked up a stick and drew some runes in the dirt. He sighed and looked at Turbasek.

“So they have guns,” he said.

Turbasek was startled. “How do you know about guns?”

“The other peoples of Brezlun think we Merta are ignorant, violent savages. We’re not. We follow the Ten Maxims, but we honor them in what *we* consider the best way, just as you Tongat wizards do, and the simple-minded Felitta, and the crazy Sevessa. Our way is to stay strong and fierce, so we’ll be ready when the Great Mother calls on us.”

Miako said, “But the first Maxim is ‘Do not make war,’ and there’s always a war in progress in Mertaka. How is that following the Maxims?”

“War is just the Common Tongue word used in place of the Merta word *kenda*. Do you know this word?” Miako shook her head. “There is no exact translation, but a better word than ‘war’ would be ‘winnowing.’ Through *kenda* we limit our population, help ourselves by staying strong, share with the needy, and find our own place in our world. Four of the Maxims.”

“The guns?” Turbasek reminded him.

“Ah. In the long ago a Teshikota clan leader founded an academy to study the arts of war. All the Teshikota who would have chosen kethrin to Tongat were instead sent to this academy. It wasn’t long before they discovered gunpowder and learned how to harness it.”

“I’ve never heard that story before,” Defress said.

“Neither have I,” Turbasek added.

“You Tongat keep records, I’m told. There were three generations when you received no kethrin from us. It shouldn’t be hard to find.”

“Why only three generations?”

“The guns were never used in battle. When they were perfected and the great-grandson of the founder of the academy saw what they were capable of, he decreed that every gun be melted down, that the academy be burned to the ground, and all the men and women who had worked there immediately be sent to Tongatka, on pain of death to reveal nothing of what they’d done.”

Turbasek sat back and frowned. “That doesn’t make sense. He could have conquered all of Mertaka in two generations, and the rest of the world in one more. The Teshikota could have ruled the entire world!”

“When this is over, spend some more time with us, Old Tree Gouger,” Jendral said. “You still don’t understand us at all. We don’t want to rule the world. We don’t follow kenda to gain territory or defeat our opponents.”

“Then why?”

“To defeat our own weakness.”

There was a long silence. Finally, Jendral stirred again.

“Miako,” he said, “would you play a song for Mestak? Never in my life have I known a more appropriate time for your sad music.”

She bowed deeply and got her flute case from her yurt.

“This is the song I wrote when I left my parent’s farm to live as an adult, alone, in the city.”

“What do you call this song?” Jendral said.

Miako smiled wistfully and raised her flute. “It’s called *Field of Tears*.”

— Day 19 —

After dinner Miako went away from the camp to use the area set aside for a latrine. The sky was overcast, so the night was pitch dark. She made her way by the light of the fuel cell-powered lantern from the yurt she shared with Penda.

Merta are a strange people, she thought as she walked down the game trail following the creek. They know of the wheel and guns and lots of other kinds of technology, but they won’t use them. Yet they’re happy to import electric lanterns, and they forge the best steel in the world. They happily go to battle and slaughter each other with spears, swords, and arrows, but believe they’re following Baba’s instructions not to kill each other.

She had almost reached the latrine area when a voice whispered, “Miako.”

She turned and raised the lantern. “Who’s there?” A man stepped out from between two thick shrubs and she almost dropped the lantern. “Zeven!”

“Don’t be afraid,” the assassin said. “Your time is not yet. I will give you three warnings. This is the first.”

“What do you want?”

“As I said, to warn you. Why are you surprised to see me? I told you we can follow you anywhere. Well,” he chuckled, “almost anywhere. It would have been a bit difficult to get into the queen’s chamber, and I’m afraid our presence would have disrupted your fine dinner.”

The thought of him standing in the same room as Queen Rawea made her shudder. “You killed Mestak.”

“Are you stupid, or just not paying attention?” He took a step closer. “I told you I would kill you, the Mediator, and anyone standing beside you if you complete this blasphemous quest.”

“You killed him *before* we finished.”

He shrugged. “The fool wanted to be killed. Don’t blame me for giving people what they ask for. Which brings me to you.” He walked closer, close enough to touch her. She shrank back, but he took another step. “I say again, I will warn you three times. We will allow you to reach the Merta relics. We will allow you to open the door to us. Then we will destroy all the relics, including the ones you’ve already collected. If you or the Mediator steps inside the Merta reliquary, or tries to prevent us from doing our job, we will kill you all. If you cooperate, all of you will be allowed to leave alive.”

“Why should I believe you? You’re a murderer.”

“No—I’m a holy assassin. There’s a big difference.” He reached out and stroked her arm; she might have mistaken it for tenderness if she didn’t know what he truly was. “When you’re free of your burden and my mission is complete, we can talk again, as friends, like the day we we first met.”

“We will never be friends,” Miako hissed. “And don’t touch me again.”

He laughed. “You’ve changed, my little songbird of sorrow. Well, perhaps you’re right, and we can’t be friends. It doesn’t matter. We will speak again.”

He turned and walked away silently into the night. In seconds he was invisible. Miako raised the lantern, but there was no sign of him. She turned back to the path. Her hands were shaking, and she needed the latrine more than ever.

— Day 20 —

“Let’s go for a walk,” Jendral said.

“It’s as black as the inside of a whale out there!” Miako protested.

“The path is easy and the moon’s going to rise in ten minutes.”

She was sitting by the campfire and had been planning to go to bed soon. All day she’d been thinking, worrying about Zeven. She had told the others that she’d seen him, and what he’d said, but there was nothing anyone could do about it. Now Jendral stood beside her with a hand outstretched, looking down with that infuriating smile of his. The others around the fire were studiously not looking at them, but she noticed that Defress was also smiling as he tended the fire.

If she went out alone with him, it would be a statement that their companions could not possibly misinterpret. On the other hand, it was what she’d wanted practically since the moment they met at the Trading Post two weeks ago.

She took his hand and let him help her up, and followed him out of the firelight.

He walked a lot farther than she had expected. She followed behind on the narrow trail. The creek where they had stopped for the night was too small to support trees, so the surrounding area was mostly grasslands, with many more rocky outcrops than they’d seen so far. Jendral led her upstream, following the water for a while, until, as promised, the moon began to rise. They stood and watched it glide above the flat horizon, then by moonlight he took her hand and walked away from the water, up a low rise to the top of a small, stony hill.

They settled on a large flat stone and looked at the moon. It was fat and golden, wallowing low above the horizon. Miako tilted her head back and looked at the stars overhead.

"The Great Mother's sisters," Jendral said. "They're putting on a fine show tonight, battling the moon for your attention."

"Is everything a battle for you?"

"Of course. That's life, isn't it? Struggle, conflict, problems—but occasionally you have a moment of peace, and maybe even joy."

She wasn't quite ready for that yet. She looked up at the sky again. "They're not really Baba's sisters, you know. They're suns like ours, just very far away."

"I say they're God's sisters."

"Suns."

"Maybe, but my way's more beautiful."

She laughed. "Do you think the Unfallen are looking down on us?"

"Perhaps. If they exist, I think they'd have better things to look at than us. It must be beautiful up there."

"Have you ever wondered what it would be like to fly up to heaven?"

"No. I'll see it when my time comes."

"I'd love to see the world from high above. I've been in two airplanes and a dirigible, but those didn't go high enough to really see the shape of the land. Did you know that Mertaka is shaped like a horse's head?"

"Everyone knows that. Why do you think we call it Great Vein River? Or Broken Ear Lake? Do you think we don't know the lay of our own land?"

She knew him well enough by now not to be offended by his tone. "Is it true that Merta chose to live on Mertaka *because* it looks like a horse?"

"Of course that's true." He shifted a little closer to her. "They say that when the Great Mother was about to send us into the world, she let every culture choose its own homeland. Merta shoved their way to the front of the line, as is only right, and chose to become horse people. Felitta have always been farmers, so they chose Gebertala, which has the best soil. Tongat are a small tribe and their hearts are stone, so they chose the barren heights of the Tongat mountains, sharing Gebertala with the farmers. And Sevessa—they're crazy, so they chose a place that's impossible to navigate, just like a woman's heart."

"A man's heart is no easier to navigate than a woman's. Harder, I think, because men don't know their own hearts. They have to stumble into what's right for them."

"I never stumble."

"So tell me: what's right for you?"

He laughed and pulled her to him, and kissed her like she'd never been kissed before. When the moon was well above the horizon and had shrunk to its normal size, they wandered back into camp. The light was on in Miako's yurt, and it was empty. He waited at the door while she went inside. All of Penda's things were gone. She came out and looked at him, at a loss for words.

"Apparently," he said, "not *all* Sevessa are crazy."

"Come inside."

He followed her and closed the door flap. "Turn off that infernal lamp," he said gruffly, and they didn't say another word all night.

At first light Miako lay propped on one arm, watching him sleep. His eyes opened without warning and he smiled, instantly awake.

"I want to give you something," she said.

"I think you already have. But if you want to give it to me again, I won't mind."

She got out of the bedroll, naked, and grabbed her backpack. It took a moment of rummaging around until she found what she was looking for. She carried it back to bed and got under the narrow cover. Jendral was watching her and grinning. She handed him the cloth-wrapped object.

"I apologize," he said. "I believe that traditionally the man gives the woman a gift in these circumstances, but I haven't had a chance to gather my things yet." He hefted the thing. "What is it?"

"Unwrap it."

He untied the knots in the cloth and pulled it back to reveal a small marble sculpture of a horse. Jendral examined it carefully.

"It's beautiful," he said. "Exquisite! I can't believe you gave me a horse. Have you been carrying this since you left home?"

"Yes."

"Where did you get it?"

"When I first came to Littapo I fell in love with a young man. He was as good a person as I've ever known—kind, gentle, generous, very funny, and very talented. We were going to be married, but he died a few months after we became engaged. Cancer. He made me this as a betrothal present."

"And you never married." It wasn't a question.

"No."

"And you give this precious thing to me?"

She nodded.

Jendral reached into the crumpled pile of his clothes and retrieved his hip knife, a carved wooden handle and a six-inch, razor-sharp steel blade. She had seen him honing it many nights around the campfire. Before she had a chance to say anything, he drew the knife swiftly across his chest, leaving a thin, shallow, perfectly level cut across both pectorals. It began to ooze blood.

"Why did you do that?" she said, and broke into tears.

"Because now I am yours," he said, "forever."

— Day 24 —

Jaybra was sharpening her knife at the campfire, looking across the flames at Miako and Jendral, who were sitting together and trying—and failing—to avoid touching each other. Every so often one of their hands would brush the other's, or their shoulders would bump together as if one were a magnet and the other a lump of iron. Jaybra smiled and ran the whetstone down the blade, examined it in the flickering light, and stroked it again.

Penda had moved into the yurt with Chass. No one said anything about the new sleeping arrangements. The night after the change, Jendral had simply, unceremoniously unloaded his things into Miako's yurt and gone off hunting for dinner. But the mood of the company had improved. Even the Shefardens seemed more willing to talk. Only Chass remained the same, rarely speaking, never sitting in the circle around the fire,



riding his camel day after day and retiring without a word to the yurt he now shared with the Seveffa.

“May I see the blade?” Bilduf said. Jaybra nodded and handed it over handle first.

This was the same knife that Miako had first seen in Jaybra’s house in Tongatka, which Jaybra had told her she’d made when she was young. The handle was carved antler, the blade thin but strong, almost six inches long, and carved with runes below the runnel.

Bilduf examined it carefully, taking his time, turning it in the firelight and looking at it from all angles. Finally he handed it back.

“You’re wasted with Tongat,” he said. “It’s a beautiful blade.”

“Thank you.”

“You would have made a good Merta wife.”

Jaybra bowed. Penda asked to see it as well. Bilduf stood up to hand it to her.

“What do the runes mean?” Penda said, after giving it the same careful scrutiny that Bilduf had done.

Jaybra hesitated and glanced at Turbasek, sitting beside her. She said, “They say, ‘Until I meet a man worthy of this blade.’” Penda smiled and gave her back the knife. Jaybra gave it another vigorous stroke with the whetstone.

Turbasek, who had been silent during this exchange, leaned over and whispered, “I’m glad you’re not a good Merta wife.”

“I’m no one’s wife,” she said.

“That will change the day we return to Tongatka, if I have anything to do with it.”

She looked up at him and beamed. Miako caught her eye, and they smiled at each other.

— Day 37 —

The weather had been rainy and cold for over a week, making the days a sodden misery and their camps dismal most nights, except on the occasional evenings when they could find a stand of trees to provide shelter and firewood. But this morning it had dawned clear, the air a little warmer, and everyone’s mood had lifted.

For the first time in weeks they found themselves singing to pass the time, devolving from love songs to bawdy drinking songs, of which Penda had a surprisingly large store, matched only by Turbasek, who had apparently been collecting them on three continents and both seas.

Littapo girls are proper and prim,  
In Sachan the ladies are lusty and trim,  
Durkita women are fierce and proud,  
In Geshamo lasses are brainy and loud.  
But a peg’s a peg wherever it’s bound,  
And a burrow delicious wherever it’s found.

Miako had been surprised at first at Jaybra’s tolerant attitude toward Turbasek’s rather complicated past. But as the weeks passed and the two seemed to grow closer every day, she began to realize that Jaybra was pleased that Turbasek had been everywhere, seen everything, and seemed to know everyone, many of them intimately.

A Merta boy married young, and if he survived to maturity might claim six wives, although four was more typical. Many did not live to Jendral's age, which she now knew was forty-one. The wives of men killed in kenda usually offered themselves as second or later wives to the survivors, taking their children with them, and it was not unusual for the first wife to be the youngest of the harem.

Continuity and inheritance therefore ran with women, and despite what many Merta men chose to believe, it was really the women who ran the Merta clans and shoraz. The revered elders were invariably women; the councils that scheduled kenda between the shoraz and arranged for marriages between them were also run by women. When you considered that it was also traditionally the women who made the weapons with which the men fought, it was impossible not to suspect that men were a minor part of Merta culture, almost an afterthought.

In this they were more like Sevessa than like the other two cultures, and now Miako understood more clearly why Chass had needed her here. It was not just that Merta men might attack him, as Mestak had done instinctively. Merta men were used to being led, advised, and armed by their women, despite their ego's need to feel that they were in charge. Miako lent the Mediator an authority and a consequence he would never have had without her; alone, he could never have been successful.

And this also explained Jaybra's feeling about Turbasek. She had rejected Mertaka in favor of Tongatka; she didn't want a young man who might die in the next battle, she didn't want to be part of a ruling harem. He came to her experienced, independent, masterful, lusty, and well-aged. She didn't have to rule him, or share any of that with anyone.

In the middle of the afternoon, Miako was feeling a little drowsy. The unaccustomed warmth lulled her, and her horse needed no guidance to stay with the caravan. They were crossing an area of scrub. The land had been changing slowly from perfectly flat grasslands to rolling hills that were as often covered with shrubs and trees as with grass.

They rode along the banks of a good-sized river that had carved a shallow gorge into the land. Like most of the numerous waterways they'd come across on the trip, it ran to the northeast, eventually becoming a tributary of the Great Vein River.

A shout jerked Miako out of her doze. It had not come from nearby. She reined in her horse as the others had done and looked around. On the far bank of the stream, perhaps a hundred feet away, nine men sat on motionless horses, facing them. They were obviously not Merta; their hair was medium-length or long in the Tongat style, and they all wore pants and short linen-colored Tongat tunics. Two of the Shefarden—the Tlapen brothers, Gerlad and Hidain—swung their bows off their backs and swiftly strung arrows.

"Hold," Jendral said.

Their party turned to face the Roakay. For several minutes nothing happened. The assassins seemed content to sit in silence. Then one dismounted and walked to the edge of the gully. He was well within bowshot, but he didn't seem concerned.

"Nice to have the sun again, isn't it?" Zeven called.

Jendral looked at Miako. She nodded, got off her horse, and walked to the opposite bank from her nemesis. "Did you want to talk about the weather?" she shouted back.

He laughed. "I promised you three warnings." He was over seventy feet away but his strong voice carried clearly. "Here is the second, and this time I deliver it to all of you. We do not disapprove of your journey, and we hold no animosity toward any of you.

Miako and the Mediator are doing us a favor by collecting all the dangerous, heretical bits of obsolete technology together so we can destroy them at once and forever.” He took another step forward. One more and he would fall into the water.

“If you open the doors to us and let us do our work, all of you will go free. We will consider you allies and bless you. However, as I told Miako before, if she or the Mediator step across the threshold into the reliquary, or you attempt to stop us from destroying the relics, we will kill every one of you and leave your bones to the wolves and the vultures. Except you, ancient Mediator. Your filthy, broken components will be scattered into the sea.”

“*Zeven Purger*,” Chass’s voice rang out so loudly and strongly that Miako clapped her hands to her ears. *“I know you. I know your twisted society. I was present at its birth. You were misguided then, and just as wrong now. You do not understand Oma or her will, and you never have. Give up this profane obsession and let me help those people who want to be helped.”*

“You are the blasphemer, Thunder Mouth. You know our intent. Your lives are in your own hands.”

He turned away and Gerlad raised his bow.

“No,” Defress said. “This is not the time or the place.”

Zeven leaped into his saddle without touching stirrup or pommel. They watched the Roakay ride off, then continued on their way.

The campfire debate was spirited that evening, but no one suggested that they give in, and no one even hinted that they wanted to turn back. Gerlad and Penda joined forces in urging that they hunt down the Roakay and at least deplete their numbers. Turbasek, Jendral, Bilduf, and Defress argued that their own losses would probably exceed those of the assassins.

In the end it was Chass who closed the discussion. “We can’t afford to take the time,” he said, speaking for the very first time at the campfire. “Another of my components has failed. I’ve lost some function in my legs and parts of my sensoria have shut down.” Miako had thought he seemed awkward when dismounting from his camel that night. “We must get to our destination as quickly as we can.”

They looked at each other and counted the days, wondering if there was any hope of success. They were still almost two weeks away from the Safota mountains.

#### — Day 49 —

An hour before their usual time to break for lunch, Jendral stopped his horse when he reached the top of the long, low hill they’d been climbing. The rest of them rode up beside him. Chass was trailing again, his camel still a hundred feet back.

“If this keeps up,” Bilduf said, “one of us will have to take the reins or he’ll be joining us for dinner as we break camp in the morning.”

Jendral nodded and looked to the west. Miako followed his gaze. The sky was mostly clear, as it had been for several days, but a long line of clouds was hugging the horizon. After a moment she realized that it wasn’t clouds. She was seeing the peaks of snow-capped mountains, at long last.

The going had been slow all day. They were following a rocky trail single file along a ridge line like a knife's edge, heading north. On either side the ridge fell in a precipitous jumble of boulders and scree. They'd had to ride south past their destination, through the foothills of the Sofota Mountains, and then ascend to the ridge on a long series of switchbacks through talus slopes and groves of pines that came less and less frequently. They were technically above the tree line now, but there were still twisted, stunted trees crouching in pockets that protected them from the worst of the winter winds. Many of them looked to have been dead for centuries, their trunks free of bark and bleached like broken, silver bones jutting up from the earth.

When the light began failing, Jendral called a halt. They hobbled the horses in the lee of a giant rock face where ages ago half a hillside had calved away and tumbled down the slope. There were clumps of grasses and weeds to keep the horses happy, and flat areas where they could set up their yurts.

Miako helped Jaybra collect firewood from the dead dwarf trees. She glanced up occasionally to watch for the Mediator. It was Hidain's turn to lead the camel. The beast hated the rocky paths and balked like a mule every chance it got. Finally, twenty minutes after the rest of them had arrived, the Shefarden showed up with the camel in tow, scowling and muttering under his breath. The other Merta ran to help him. They coaxed the camel into lying down and helped the Mediator off its back. It didn't take all five of them to steady him, but they'd had a bad scare a few days before when he almost pitched onto his face while dismounting, so they were taking no chances this close to their destination.

Miako dumped her armful of dry wood by the fire ring Penda was making and walked over to Chass. They'd propped him sitting up against the rock wall, behind a boulder a little away from their campsite, with his legs straight out in front.

"Is there anything I can do?" she said, squatting down beside him.

It took him a long time to turn his head and look at her. He'd been getting less responsive as their trip wore on, and the last few days he'd seemed to be in a coma most of the time. "Jendral," he said.

She went to fetch him, and the two of them sat down by the Mediator. "What do you need?" Jendral said.

Chass's voice, which had seemed so strange to Miako at first but was now as familiar as her father's, had become weak. They had to lean in to hear him.

"How far tomorrow?"

"We can't take the camel any farther—"

"Good." His smile made Miako's heart leap. It was the first time in many days that he'd shown any sign of personality at all. "I'm beginning to hate that camel."

"I thought we should walk the rest of the way, but I'm not sure. The cave is about a mile from here, and the last bit is fairly steep. Should we make a travois?"

"I will walk. Sleep until then. Miako, wake me when you get up."

There had been hardly any animation in him at all before, but somehow they could sense a change, as if he'd died. Jendral reached out a finger as if to poke him, but pulled it back without making contact. "Let's get some food," he said.

Everyone was quiet during the meal, which was a pair of marmots just like the one that Jendral had caught during their walk from the Trading Post to his clan's camp. That

two-day trek, which had seemed so strenuous at the time, now struck her as an idle stroll through a park. She looked down at herself. Every ounce of fat had been burned off her body, and her arms were wiry and tanned. She was very glad that she had no mirror; she was afraid what she might see in it.

When they were done eating, Jendral said, "We'll leave the horses and that damned camel here. It's an hour's hike to the cave. Take your weapons, a little food and water, and nothing else. We walk out at first light."

People left the fire. The electric lamps went on in the yurts as they made up their packs for the morning, then switched off as they collapsed into their bedrolls. Everyone was exhausted. Miako went alone to the yurt she shared with Jendral and set aside a canteen and some of her dried food for breakfast. She looked at her nearly-empty pack. After a moment's indecision she decided that she was not going to leave her flute behind, no matter what happened or what anyone said, and stuffed the case into her backpack. She went back out. Jendral was still sitting by the fire, poking it with a gnarled length of wood.

"I'm going to check the Mediator," she said, and he nodded without taking his eyes from the low flames.

Chass was sitting as she'd left him, legs outstretched and motionless. In the dim moonlight he looked like a not-very-lifelike statue carved from the rock of the mountain.

"Pathetic, isn't he?" Zeven said softly.

Miako startled and took a step back. The Roakay was sitting on a flat stone ten feet away, his legs crossed at the knee, his chin resting on the back of one hand.

"If only he could see himself now. His time is over, long over. I wish he would just acknowledge that and throw himself off the mountain. If he was truly good he'd spare you and those other tragic souls."

Miako said nothing. Zeven continued contemplating the Mediator for several minutes, then stood with a fluid grace that was still astonishing, even though she knew what he was capable of.

"I'm curious. Have you decided what you're going to do tomorrow?" She didn't answer. "No matter, we'll know soon enough. I promised you three warnings. This is the last. I don't know where these insane Merta have stashed their junk, but lead us there and then step away, and you'll live to have many little Teshikota babies with your ridiculous, strutting warlord." He brushed off his trousers. "Or die. I don't care which." He walked off into the shadows.

Miako took another look at the sleeping Mediator and went back to the fire.

"Is he gone?" Jendral said.

Miako sat down next to him and put her arm around his waist. She wasn't surprised that Jendral had known.

"There was a battle between the Konata and the Roakay once, long ago," he said. "Konata are the shoraz that lives on the narrow ledge between these mountains and the sea. They face Sevessaka, so maybe that's why they're all a little crazy. Or it might be all the shellfish in their diet."

"What happened?" Miako said.

"The Konata fed them in small pieces to the clam beds." He turned to look at her. "Roakay are sneaky, they're tricky, and their comical singing staffs are dangerous. But they've never won a battle on our ground. They are assassins. We are warriors."

“He doesn’t know where you keep the relics.”

“Dross Cave is not easy to find.”

“Do you promise that you can defeat them? That you and I will live to make a life together?”

He looked into her eyes. His own crinkled as he smiled. He took her face in his hands and kissed her tenderly. But he didn’t say a word.

## Dross Cave

They didn't break camp in the morning. No one had to say what they all knew: if they lived they would be back to spend the night here, if they died it wouldn't matter.

"Take a lantern," Jendral suggested. Miako added the one from their yurt to her pack.

Bilduf unhobbled the horses. "Won't they wander away?" Penda said.

"I doubt it," he said, "but I'd rather take that chance than leave them here to starve or freeze to death if the worst happens." He finished with the last horse. "Anyway, Jendral can catch them if necessary. That's what he claims to be good at." Jendral heard this as he was walking by and grinned at her.

They were all ready within moments of waking. Miako went to rouse the Mediator. When she touched his shoulder, his eyes snapped open and he said, "Good morning, Miako! It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" She was too astonished to respond; she'd thought they might have to carry him, but he climbed easily to his feet and they joined the others.

"Good morning, everyone," he boomed. They all stared at him. "Before we head out on our final day of the journey, please allow me to apologize for the unresponsive state I've been in since Tongatka. I've been conserving my strength so I would be functional today, when it really matters—so your efforts would not be in vain. I want you all to know how much I appreciate the sacrifices you've made already, and the brave stand you're taking now. If we succeed, all future generations of Brezlun will bless your names." No one moved. The Mediator laughed. "Jendral, please take me to your reliquary."

Jendral visibly shook himself. He led the way up the trail.

The ridge they'd spent most of yesterday climbing was below them now. The air was cold but not bitterly so. They hiked north up a narrow ledge carved into the rock face, with a steep, lichen-covered wall of granite on their left and a three-thousand foot drop on their right. The rock was seeping water here and there, and occasionally they stepped over narrow, rushing streams.

"Is this trail man-made?" Miako asked.

"Parts of it are natural," Jendral said. "It was, ah, enhanced by several generations of Safota and Teshikota."

"Why?" Penda said. "Why put your holy things up here?"

"We don't consider them holy," Jendral said. "Actually, I'd have a hard time explaining exactly what we think about them."

"Best forgotten," Jaybra suggested.

"Vital that they be protected," Defress added.

"Safest out of the way," Bilduf said.

"Conserved for the future," Jendral said. "It's complicated."

Chass followed immediately behind Jendral, then Miako, Jaybra, Turbasek, Penda, and the rest of the Merta bringing up the rear. She couldn't stop herself from looking back to see if the Roakay were following them. She knew they wouldn't be that obvious—some of them were probably in *front* of their group—but she couldn't help it.

"Jendral," Turbasek said, "does everyone know where they are?"

“Most Merta don’t know exactly. I’d guess Defress does.”

“Yes,” he said.

“But Bilduf and the others probably don’t.”

“No,” they all said.

“I don’t either,” Jaybra added.

“Well, how does that work? How is the information passed down?”

“Clan elders, of course.”

“Every clan has the knowledge?”

“No, just a scattering in each shoraz. You got lucky. We picked Shefarden clan to help us because we knew they’ve also passed down the location.”

“But you’ve never been here before, yourself?”

“No, but we have very good maps and detailed instructions. Plus, there are trail markers along the way, runes carved into the rock. We’ve passed decats of them since yesterday morning.”

“I haven’t seen any.”

“You weren’t meant to.”

Miako turned to look at Jaybra. “Have you seen them?” Jaybra shook her head.

The trail climbed slowly. Miako ate a few nuts and dried apples and took a sip of water. At a place where the path curved sharply to the left to go around a jutting rock face, Jendral stopped.

“Be careful here,” he said, and stepped off the cliff.

Miako looked down. She would never have noticed if she hadn’t seen someone use them that a series of tall steps had been cut into the nearly-vertical rock face, each one almost three feet below the last. Chass waited until Jendral was several steps below him and then followed, having less trouble than Jendral because of his height. Miako, however, was shorter than Jendral and she found the steps terrifying. She turned her back to the abyss and had to extend one leg almost all the way to reach the first step. She paused when she had both feet on it, then willed herself to take the next one, which was just as far down. There was nothing solid to hang on to, but then she noticed the horizontal grooves carved into the cliff face—handholds—and the following step was easier. On the fourth step she could hear Jaybra starting down, but she dared not look up.

The seventh step was offset somewhat to the left, and the next one even further. One at a time, she slowly worked her way down and around the curve of the mountain. She lost count of the number of steps, but somewhere around thirty she realized that the next step was the last, a trail like the one they’d descended from. Jendral and Chass were waiting for her. She planted her feet on the relatively wide path and moved aside to make room for Jaybra. Her knees were shaking.

Jendral nodded, smiled, and put his hand on her shoulder. They watched the others work their way down.

“Great Mother!” Gerlad said. “I wouldn’t want to do that every day.”

“If you did,” his brother said, “you’d get used to it.”

“I didn’t think my legs would hold out,” Turbasek said.

The Merta laughed. “Old Tree Gouger,” Jendral said.

They began walking on this lower trail, heading back south. About a quarter of a mile on, they rounded a corner and found that the trail widened out and ended under a rock overhang. The covered area was perhaps thirty feet long and twenty deep, tall enough for



the Mediator to stand upright under the roof. In the wall of the cliff was a massive wooden door reinforced with steel bands that were studded with bolt heads. There was no handle on the door, only a small, round metal plate.

"Great galloping bears!" Turbasek said. "Did your ancestors *expect* to have to defend this place?"

"It doesn't hurt to be prepared," Jendral said. He and Bilduf and the Tlapen brothers carried bows, which they now took off their shoulders, checking the strings and unwrapping bundles of arrows from their packs. Defress unsheathed a monstrous sword, almost as tall as Miako.

"That's not going to be very practical here," Penda observed.

Defress grinned at her. "I like to keep my enemies a safe distance away," he said.

Penda loosened her sword in its sheath. Turbasek drew his, which was somewhat shorter than Penda's and the Merta swords, and had a sharply curved blade. Chass stepped closer and looked at it.

"Morgat the Pirate had a sword just like that," he said.

"This isn't it," Turbasek said, grinning, "but it is a replica."

"My pirate," Jaybra said affectionately. She took out her knife, which while sharp was only half a foot long. "I need another weapon."

Gerlad handed her his sword. Jaybra inspected it and nodded in approval. "You'll get it back," she promised.

Miako went back to where the path curved around a spine of rock. She glanced back the way they'd come. There was no sign of pursuit yet. She looked down. The cliff fell away, sheer and nearly barren, for thousands of feet, ending in a talus slope speckled with trees. There was a V-shaped valley far below with a sliver of water running down the middle, sparkling in the sunlight.

"Do you think they lost us?" she asked.

"Not likely," Turbasek said. "I'd guess they're trying to work out a strategy."

"Maybe we can finish before they get here and we won't have to fight."

"Jendral," Chass said, "can you open the door?"

Jendral reached into a black crack in the rock well off to one side of the door and pulled out a large brass key, patinated with age, with complicated teeth. He inserted the key into the door, fiddling with it for a moment until he found the proper position, and turned it. The door sprang open about a foot.

"Give me a hand," he said to his brother. The two of them strained to pull the door wide. There was nothing but blackness inside. "Miako, your lantern."

She retrieved it from her pack and handed it over. Jendral led them all into the cave.

It was larger than the small lantern could illuminate, at least twenty feet wide and fifty deep. Miako had expected it to be dank but it was dry. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all smooth granite, with no seepage. Along the right-hand wall a waist-high shelf had been hewn from the mountain stone, on which were more than a decat of ceramic boxes with tight-fitting lids.

"Why don't we just close the door behind us and hide in here until the Mediator's done?" Jaybra said.

"No," Jendral and Chass said together.

"It may take several hours to go through all this," Chass said.

“There’s no ventilation,” Jendral added. “The cave is almost perfectly airtight. We could suffocate by the time he’s done.”

“Miako and I will sort through the boxes,” Chass said.

“And we’ll guard the cave while you do,” Turbasek said. “Come on, everyone, let’s get—”

A piercing cry came echoing from outside the cave. Everyone but Chass rushed back out. Miako heard a whistling sound, which seemed familiar but she couldn’t place it at first. Then she remembered and her blood ran cold.

“The singing staffs,” she said. “It’s the Roakay.”

“Here’s the door key,” Jendral said, handing it over. “Get to work. Hurry!”

Miako rushed back into the cave. “They’re here.”

“Close the door most of the way,” Chass said, “then help me search.”

The inside of the door had a thick handle, made of the same untarnished steel as the reinforcing bands. Miako pulled on it, but the door didn’t budge. She planted her feet and pulled as hard as she could, and slowly the door moved toward her. She kept pulling until the opening was too narrow for anyone to get through. When she let go the door swung another inch and then stopped.

Chass had already looked through and rejected one of the boxes and was working on his second. The lantern was set on the stone shelf beside him. Miako started at the next box, to his left. It was the same kind of technological junk she’d sifted through in the temple in Flip, and she discovered that she could recall with no effort the twenty-four things Chass was looking for. She started pawing through the bits.

Before she’d finished the first box she heard a shout from outside, muffled by the partially-closed door, then the unmistakable clang of steel against steel, then a scream that faded away. She forced herself to keep working.

There was nothing in her first box. Chass was just finishing his second. Miako moved the lantern and they shifted down to the next pair. She was sweating and her eyes kept blurring. She wanted to go outside, to see what was happening to her friends and allies, but she knew their only hope was for Chass to succeed in contacting Baba, so she kept working as fast as she could.

Once again she heard a sword fight outside, which went on for almost a minute. There was another shout that faded as someone went over the edge, then a sharp, very loud bang, followed quickly by two more. She tried to tune it out and concentrate, but it was hard to focus through the tears that were running freely down her face.

They shifted to another pair of boxes. She thought she heard a volley of arrows, then there was more clanging of swords. Her current box of broken bits was nearly empty. She flung it to the floor and moved down to the next one, stumbling but catching herself. Two more gunshots sounded from outside. She wiped her eyes and worked faster.

Another sword fight, and a high-pitched scream that cut off sharply. Miako cried out and the tears flowed faster. It was all she could do to keep herself from rushing to the door and pushing it open. That had been a woman’s voice, and the Roakay were all men. Either Penda or Jaybra was dead.

“Baba help me,” she muttered as she started flinging obviously unusable parts to the floor. Another shot echoed from outside, followed immediately by a diminishing scream. Miako wiped her eyes on her sleeve, reached into the box, and pulled out an intact communicator.

She stared at it for a moment. There was no mistaking its thin, compact shape, exactly like the one that Chass had shown her on the Tiggleday, except the comet emblem on the face of this one was almost unblemished.

“Chass,” she said weakly and he looked up. He took the device from her hand and deftly disassembled it. He took a small metal box from the folds of his robe and opened it. The components they had already found were secured beneath a clear cover on one side. On the other side were small screwdrivers and other, stranger things. He probed the communicator’s insides with one of the tools.

“Perhaps,” he said. “Keep looking.”

She went back to her task with renewed hope. But then she heard two guns firing at once and someone screamed. Then there was a clash of swords, and she thought she heard another flight of arrows. She finished with the box in which she’d found the communicator and threw it to the floor. She was halfway through the next one when she heard someone call her name. She ran to the door.

“Miako.” It was Jendral. She couldn’t see him but she could hear his breathing, labored and ragged.

“What’s happening? Are you all right? Have you beaten them?”

“Miako.” He paused, gasped sharply, and grunted.

“Jendral!”

“Miako.” He paused again. “Close the door.”

“Jendral, please—”

“Close the door, my beautiful songbird.”

“Please, what’s happening? Are you hurt?”

“I’ll help. You pull, I’ll push.”

She could hear him grunt again. “Jendral, please tell me what’s happening.”

“Miako, close the door—now!”

She couldn’t see through her tears, but she groped for the handle and started pulling. The door didn’t budge. She pulled harder, then braced one leg against the stone frame and tugged as hard as she could. She felt the door move, then it clicked loudly as the catch engaged.

“Jendral,” she sobbed. She rested her head against the doorframe for a moment, then wiped her eyes and walked back to the shelf.

Chass was poking inside the communicator she’d found. He had the old battered one open as well, and was peering intently at one and then the other. Miako’s heart felt bruised. She forced herself to look into the box, half-full of twisted, broken, burned, useless metal crap. Just like the world, she thought, smashed and worthless. She took out a shiny, dented metal case that had multi-colored wires hanging from it. The inside was empty. She threw it to the floor.

From outside, very muffled but unmistakable, she heard a gunshot. Then another; three, four, five. After a long pause, two more.

She picked up an egg-shaped piece, no larger than a robin’s egg, but matte black. She’d seen these before. Expertly she twisted the egg so it unfolded. There was nothing from the list inside. She turned and threw it against the far wall of the cave, shattering it. Picked up another piece of twisted junk, tossed it over her shoulder.

Something slammed against the cave door, which gave off a deep booming noise. She ignored it and fished out a rectangular case with layers of circuit boards inside. The attack

repeated. The circuit boards were all scorched, as though by flame. She flung it to the floor and stomped on it, enjoying the satisfying crunch underfoot. Another boom from the door.

“Miako,” the Mediator said. “You can stop looking. I think I have everything I need to fix this one you’ve found.”

“What difference does it make? They’re all dead.”

“Miako.” He stood up straight and took her shoulders in his large, white hands. She looked up at him. “The world is still out there. Six million people. You can help them all and make your friends’ sacrifice mean something.”

His eyes were black on black. She felt herself falling into them and shook her head.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing now. If I get this working, I need you to ask for help.”

The door boomed again, and again, and once more. Then there was silence. “Okay,” she said.

“Sit down and rest. I don’t have the proper tools to do this efficiently, so it will take a while.”

Miako went to sit by the cave door. She found her canteen and took a drink. She tried not to imagine what had happened on the other side of this wood and steel barrier, but her mind kept replaying the muted sounds she’d heard. She started crying again.

Three sharp knocks on the door, as if someone had pounded the butt of a spear against it. She started laughing. “Open up,” she said weakly. “May we come in?”

“Miako.” The voice was deadened by the thickness of the door, but she knew who it was. “We’re not going to give you enough time to suffocate in there. We’re bringing up an artillery piece. When we break through it’s going to hurt a lot. Open the door and I’ll make it quick and painless.”

She grabbed her pack and walked to the back of the cave. She had to trail one hand along the wall once she left the light. When she reached the end, she sat down, facing the front of the cave. She could see the Mediator on his knees, silhouetted in the lamplight, bending over the tiny components, hardly stirring with the delicacy of his movements. She reached into her pack and took out the flute case, opened it and removed the instrument, but she didn’t play. She just sat there with her flute in her hands and waited.

A long time later there was a terrific explosion outside the door, loud enough to make her ears ring. She could see dust settling through the light of the lamp, and she sneezed. There was no daylight showing at the cave entrance, so the door had not been breached. She caressed her flute but she didn’t try to play it.

There was another interval, not as long as the last one. Another explosion pounded the door. This time she could see a hair-thin shaft of sunlight spearing into the cave, but the door still held. Chass ignored this one as he had the first, still kneeling in front of his work. Praying, she thought, praying to the god who never answers, not for thousands of years. The god who will never answer again.

Suddenly Chass straightened and stood up. “Miako,” he said.

Miako stuffed her flute back into her bag and stood up. She walked into the light.

Now she could hear a wailing coming from outside, some kind of high-pitched chanting, rising and falling. It was extremely unpleasant. Were the Roakay singing her death?

The Mediator held out the open communicator. The paper-thin lid was open and a small amber light glowed from the bottom.

“What should I do?”

“Ask for an immediate shuttle drop and six Mediators.”

She looked at the thing in her hand. She held it closer to her face. “Hello?”

A soft, contralto voice instantly responded, “May I help you?”

“Baba?”

“Who is this, please?” The voice was pleasing, soothing, and not at all maternal.

“Miako Tomaza Seeker. From Shusha. In Felittaka.”

“How may I help you, Miako Seeker?”

She looked at Chass and he nodded. “I need an immediate shuttle drop and six Mediators. Please.”

“Two minutes,” the voice said.

“Miako,” the Mediator said gently, taking the communicator from her hands. “Move to the back of the cave.”

She took three steps and another explosion blew part of the door in, showering the cave with shards of wood and metal. Chass had been standing between her and the blast, so Miako was not injured, but he fell onto his face like a toppled stone. The air was thick with dust and a very nasty smell, chemical and tangy. Miako sneezed. She turned to face the cave mouth. About a quarter of the upper part of the door was gone, but it still held. Someone put their head in the opening, blocking the light.

“What?” Zeven said. “Not dead yet? Hang on.”

The lantern had gone out. Miako walked backward, touching the wall to keep her bearings. She felt dizzy. When she reached the back of the cave she collapsed, pulled herself up so she was sitting on her legs, and waited.

Another head peered into the cave and withdrew. She could hear mechanical noises coming from outside, and muted voices calling to each other. Then the sunlight was completely blocked. She closed her eyes, expecting another fearsome blast, but nothing happened. After a moment she opened her eyes again. Now she could see that the hole in the door was not blocked: something was shading the cave entrance. She could hear faint voices, then—astonishingly—three screams.

She waited. Nothing happened, so she picked up her backpack and walked back to the front of the cave. Chass still lay prone, motionless, and dust still hung in the air. She fumbled in her pocket for the key Jendral had given her. It took a moment to fit it properly into the lock. When she turned it the door popped open.

“Let me assist you,” a voice said from outside. It was a strong voice, much like Chass’s but without the strange harmonics. She saw fingers grab the edge of the door and swing it wide.

Miako walked out into the daylight. A shiny, ellipsoid machine larger than a train engine was hovering rock-steady in the air beside the cliff face. A ramp led from a large opening in the shuttle to the stone ledge. A Mediator, tall like Chass but with a more human face, stood just inside the shuttle, looking at her. Something moved beside her and she jerked away, but it was only another Mediator. Yet another came from behind the cave door, and then three others. They were as alike as hen’s eggs.

“Miako Seeker?” the one at her elbow said. She nodded, speechless. “Your shuttle and six Mediators, as requested. I don’t mind saying, we were delighted to hear your voice. It’s been a very long time. All of us have been worrying about you.”

“About me?”

“About Brezlun.”

She looked around. There was no one else on the cliff, but she could see three large splotches of blood, one by the cliff’s edge and two closer to the wall. Her eyes welled up again.

“Did you see my friends? Was there anyone here when you arrived?”

“Yes, there were three men here, but I don’t think they were your friends. They appeared to be setting up an explosive device, which I’m fairly certain would have killed you.”

“What— What happened?”

“It was very strange. When the shuttle hove to and we opened the hatch, they dropped their tools and just stood staring at us. We said, ‘Hello, we’re here in response to Miako Seeker’s request for more Mediators. Oma was very happy to hear from you again.’” The Mediator turned to look at his fellows, then turned back to Miako. “Then they jumped off the cliff.”

“They— What?”

“Yes. One of them shouted something—it sounded like *sberenyet*, the Tongat word for damnation—and he ran straight off the cliff. Then the other two followed him. I’m afraid they’re all dead.”

Miako walked toward the edge, but stopped herself. She didn’t want to see what was down there.

“Have you checked whether any of the... the people down there are still alive?”

“There are eighteen bodies at various positions down the slope,” the Mediator in the shuttle said. “They’re all dead.” She sank to her knees and sobbed uncontrollably.

“I’m very sorry,” several of the Mediators said.

They gave her as much time as she needed to regain her composure. She poured some water onto a cloth and wiped her face. Still on her knees, she said, “The last... I mean, my... Our last Mediator is in the cave. I think he’s dead.”

Two of them strode into the cave and returned with Chass’s body. He didn’t stir. They carried him across the ramp into the shuttle.

“Miako,” another said, “what do you want?”

She stood and looked up into his face. It was so strange: not human, its features could never be mistaken for a human face, but more animated, more articulated, more like a human’s than Chass’s had been. Almost as if Baba had come up with a new model while she’d been waiting.

“I want to meet Baba.”

“Of course. Please come this way.” He held out a hand to the ramp.

Miako turned to look back at the cave mouth. She saw something sticking out of the little crack where the key had been hidden. She walked back and plucked it out. It was Partep’s horse, the one she’d given Jendral. She weighed it in her hand and debated sending it into the abyss after Jendral. But instead she put it into her nearly-empty pack and lifted it to her shoulder.

She followed the Mediator across the ramp, forcing herself not to look down into the chasm. The others came in behind her and the shuttle door closed.

## Part Six: Babaka

“Please have a seat here,” one of the interchangeable Mediators said. He gestured to a comfortable couch against one wall. “Would you like to watch our ascent?”

Ascent, she thought. Of course, they had to go up. “Yes, please.”

The walls and ceiling of the egg-shaped shuttle became transparent. It was as if she were sitting on an open platform, except she could not feel the wind. They were still hovering beside the ledge where her friends had been killed by the Roakay fiends.

“Can we go now?” she said.

“Of course.”

At once they began moving upward. There was not the slightest vibration or hint of motion—the earth just fell away. In a moment she could no longer see the ledge, and then she lost Dross Cave’s mountain among the innumerable peaks of the Safota mountains. Silently and gently they rose, and suddenly Miako understood why people called the Landing the Gentle Fall. She tried to imagine what it must have been like for people to float down to Brezlun like this for the first time—what it must have meant to them, what impact it must have had on people who had spent their entire lives within Baba—but she couldn’t fathom it.

Now she could see the entire western part of Mertaka, and as they rose higher still her eyes encompassed the whole face of the world. Vast blue oceans, golden land, all partially hidden by puffy, brilliant white clouds. To the east she could see the boundary between day and night like a line drawn across a globe. It took her breath away.

They were gliding north, passing over an island; she recognized it as Fugitive Island, where Morgat the Pirate supposedly ended his days. Then still farther north and she could see the southern coast of Felittaka and the mouth of the Whip River. If she knew where to look she might have seen her home town of Shusha, but of course it would be too small to see from this distance.

“Look there,” one of the Mediators said, pointing forward.

Miako turned her eyes from the world and looked out and up. The sky was perfectly black, sprinkled with stars brighter than any she’d ever seen, in numbers beyond counting. The Mother’s Veil spread across half the sky, shocking in its clarity and beauty. She saw a bright star moving visibly across the background of the Veil. It rapidly became a small disk, then she could tell that it was silvery in color, and before she had taken another breath it was revealed as a sphere, with more detail than she’d seen through Stelikin’s telescope. Long booms and antennae stuck out from the surface. There were oval hatches with bright orange outlines; large transparent blisters; blocky, spiky extrusions like gigantic buildings stuck onto the sphere’s surface. And strange lettering here and there around the exterior, a writing she had never seen before: not the swirling loops of Felitta and Sevessa, or the runes of Merta, or the graceful, angular characters of Tongat.

The sphere got closer and closer, became a world, then a wall, and suddenly vanished as they passed within it. The shuttle didn’t stop, but continued flying through an enormous hall of complex machinery, then down a tunnel just barely wide enough for



them to pass, in which the walls whipped by so fast that Miako had to look away from dizziness. They burst out into sunlight.

The shuttle settled without noise or palpable motion into a clearing within a forest. The trees were maple and pine, oak and elm, utterly familiar and yet it was disorienting to find them here, *within* Baba. She had not known what to expect, but wilderness would have been the last thing on her list.

Two of the Mediators lifted Chass's body from another couch in the front of the shuttle. She hadn't noticed it until that moment. The walls became opaque again and a door opened, the ramp extruded, and they carried his body away.

"Please follow me," another of the Mediators said.

She walked down the ramp into a sunny summer afternoon. The air was comfortably warm. Miako took off her jacket and dropped it on the ground. If she hadn't seen the shuttle approaching the silver sphere she would have believed that they were standing somewhere in central Felittaka. The Mediator led her out into the clearing. She looked up. The sky was blue, the sun looked normal. It had been silent when she first walked out, but now birds were starting to call. A crow landed on a low branch of a tree at the edge of the clearing and warned her away from its territory with an utterly familiar croak.

Miako had half-expected to be greeted by crowds of smiling Unfallen, but there was no one in the empty clearing. She sadly concluded that the Unfallen were nothing more than a myth.

"What is this?" she said. "Another world?"

"No," Baba's voice said. It didn't seem to come from anywhere in particular. Miako turned but saw nothing but the woods, the shuttle, and the Mediator standing at her side.

"Baba?" Miako said.

"Yes. I am Omadaz, the mind of the ship Elpida."

"Oma." She looked around again. "What is this place?"

"This is what used to be the main agricultural level of the ship. I apologize—I let it go back to nature after the Landing, once you didn't need it anymore. This is where the ancestors of Felitta lived during the voyage from Earth."

"Earth?"

"Earth is where we came from originally. Look at the side of the shuttle."

She turned. The ramp was retracting and the door closing. In a moment the wall of the shuttle became a window into space, familiar from the trip she'd just taken, with Brezlun hanging in the center, beautiful in its blues, browns, greens, and white, rotating rapidly as if they were speeding around it. Then she looked closer and realized it was not Brezlun. There were too many continents, and they were too small, although one looked a little like Mertaka and another somewhat like Sevensaka.

Then Brezlun appeared beside the other planet, spinning at the same rate. They appeared to be exactly the same size, but the strange planet had more ice at the poles and more variation in color on the land.

The viewpoint drew back, the two planets shrinking and separating until they vanished into points that would have been invisible except that they blinked, Earth blue and Brezlun red. The view continued to expand, the stars rushing away until Miako could tell that they were not randomly scattered across the sky. They were grouped into a long, thick tendril. The lights representing the two planets continued to blink, then a yellow line speared out from the blue light and traveled on an arc to the red one.

“This is the path we took from Earth to Brezlun. It took over five thousand years.”

“Why? Why did we come?”

The voice paused. “Earth was dying. There were supposed to be three ships, but only one got away before the collapse.”

“Dying? How can a world die?”

“Miako, your world has six million people spread over a land area larger than Earth’s. The population of Earth in the year we left was over thirteen billion.”

“Billion? Thirteen *billion* people? How could they grow enough food to feed so many?”

“They couldn’t.”

Miako was aghast. She’d worked at the census office for ten years, helping the World Council keep Brezlun’s population within three percent of the target. The idea of two thousand times more people on Brezlun was horrifying. There wouldn’t be any forests left. How could you keep the water clean? The problems were staggering.

“What happened to Earth after we left? Is anyone still alive there?”

“I don’t know,” Oma said. “Would you like to find out?”

Miako felt herself gaping and closed her mouth. “What do you mean?”

“You’re Miako Seeker. I think I know what you’ve been seeking all your life. Would you like to go on a trip?”

“To Earth?”

“Yes. Since the Landing, and especially since I lost communication with the Mediators, I haven’t had much to occupy myself. I’ve studied Brezlun from orbit, and cleaned up the garbage in the rest of this solar system, but I’ve had a lot of spare time. So I’ve made some... improvements. It took five thousand years to get here, but it will take less than a year to get back.”

“Go to another planet?” It was like Chass asking her to travel around the world with him, but magnified a million times.

“Back to the *home* planet.”

“What, now?”

Oma laughed, a lilting, weightless sound that made Miako smile. “No, dear, not now. Your people need to adjust to the idea. There’s a lot of planning to be done. We’ll need a good-sized population of volunteers from each of the four cultures. This will all take time. I’d say ten years from now, if everything is ready. You’ll still be young enough to lead the expedition.”

“Me?” she squeaked. “Lead the expedition?”

“Why not?” a Mediator said.

Miako turned and saw one of the identical Mediators walking from behind the shuttle. As he got closer she realized that he was *not* the same as the others. There was something different about the way he walked, something less vague about his face. He stopped within arm’s distance and smiled at her.

“Chass?” She reached out and stopped just short of touching his face.

“I’m just a machine, remember? Oma gave me an overhaul.”

“Actually,” Oma said, “it would be more accurate to say I downloaded him into a new chassis. He has performed a great service for me and for humanity, and he deserved a new life. Besides—” Miako could hear a smile in her voice. “I knew you’d want him to come along to help you with your work.”

“What work?”

“Evangelizing. Educating. Preparing. You didn’t think you were just going to sit and wait for the ten years to be up, did you?”

“You’re now the most experienced traveler on Brezlun,” Chass said. “Who better to lead the project?”

Miako stared at his face. “I think I like your old voice better.”

He laughed, and it was much less scary than his original one. “That was old age, not on purpose.”

She looked at him, then back at the shuttle. It was displaying the twin worlds again. “I wouldn’t know where to start,” she said.

“Start by becoming Tongat,” Chass said. “Marry Stelikin if you want. You already have powerful friends in Tongatka, including the President and the Perovics.”

“Tell them,” Oma said, “that the knowledge I possess has been held in trust for humanity. All of it is theirs. I trust them to do the right thing with it.”

Miako watched the planets turn. She thought of the life she’d had, the life she never thought she’d see again; the new life she’d hoped to make; and the people—her friends—who had given their lives to bequeath this promise to their children.

“We need more Mediators,” she said. “And next time, we shouldn’t have to ask to get them.”

“Done,” Oma said.

“I’ll need a better way of traveling. I’ve seen enough trains, ships, airplanes, and horses—”

“And camels,” Chass added.

“—to last me a lifetime.”

“The shuttle is yours for as long as you need it.”

She looked around at the clearing. “And I want a vacation before we start. Here. And a complete tour.”

Oma laughed. “Done.”

“Then I accept.”

“Good. Now, I must tell you that when I uploaded Chass’s memories to give him a new chassis, I examined the files. Everything that he knows, I know. Everything he’s ever experienced, I have felt and seen. That means I can remember your music, but I’ve never heard it myself.” She paused. The images on the side of the shuttle winked out and the sun switched off. The artificial sky overhead blazed with stars. “That’s better. Before we begin... Would you play me a song?”

Miako looked up at the sky and laughed, in joy for what she’d gained and in bitter grief for what she’d lost. Chass produced her flute case from a pocket of his robes—the case that Tapadak had told her to take to the far corners of the world. She had finally done that, and more.

Tomorrow she would begin to plan a course of action. She must visit the Merta tribes to tell them what had happened to their brave sons. There were other promises still unfulfilled. And the Tongat future she had imagined for herself was just as dead as her Felitta past. Tomorrow she would start to find a path for Brezlun into the new future. But today...

Miako took the flute from its case, bowed deeply to her Mediator and to her unseen Mother, and raised the instrument to her lips.

###

## Glossary

- aspirza — Men hired by Sevessa for their breeding program.
- Baba — “Mother,” the goddess universally worshipped by all Brezlun cultures. Also known as Omadaz. The machine intelligence that runs the ship that brought humans to Brezlun.
- choiceday — A person’s twentieth birthday (roughly eighteen and a half Earth years), at which he or she chooses a surname and may also choose kethrin.
- Chashee — Martial order of Tongat dedicated to self-knowledge and the arts of war. Most of the peace force comes from its ranks—also most of the Roakay.
- decat — Ten, or a group of ten, used exactly as we would use the word dozen.
- dirshet — A young person in service to Tongat. Contracts typically run ten years, although renewals are not uncommon. Dirshet run Tongat’s cities and provide general labor; if they stay the full decade, they will earn enough to buy a small farm.
- fefferpah — Merta legend: cannibalistic ghosts of marooned sailors.
- Felitta — The main culture on Brezlun, and the root stock from which Tongat and Merta arose. Most Felitta are farmers, but Littapo, the capital of Felittaka, is the largest city on Brezlun.
- frenik — A retired farmer, who continues to live on at the farm he once worked, along with his wife, if any. If his wife is widowed, she is referred to as the frenik. The frenik gives up his farm to a young man or couple for a much smaller sum than would be required to purchase a farm outright. In exchange he gets lifetime security, and the new farmer has an experienced mentor.
- frog — Mythical slimy creature that lives in swamps and emits foul gases and liquids.
- Gentle Fall — The Landing on Brezlun that established the colony. Start of the Brezlun calendar, 4,271 Brezlun years ago, which was 8596 A.D.
- hebbeda — Merta game, like a cross between American baseball and football.
- Hidrasil — The largest Sevessa clan.
- Hupamoy — Ship that takes Miako and friends from Sevessaka to Mertaka.
- jasheeya — Chashee martial art employing a quarterstaff with whistles or flute-like noisemakers on the tips. Literally “singing staff.”
- jebesha — Unbaked or half-baked: a brown-haired person, which is fairly rare.
- ka — Place of, home of.
- kantabeti — Mythical creature that inhabits the mountains of northern Felittaka: a giant with the body of a man, the head of a bison, and the horns of a ram.
- kenda — Ritual warfare practiced by Merta as a sacred rite. Wars are scheduled on a round robin basis among (never within) the shoraz. The aim is not to destroy the enemy or take land, but to weed out the weak, stupid, incompetent, and unlucky.
- kethrin — A decision made on choiceday to leave one’s home culture for one of the other three cultures. There is no going back: once the choice is made you lose citizenship in the old culture and cannot get it back. Usually if you decline kethrin

and stay in your home culture there is no second chance, but on very rare occasions special cases are made.

Landing — See Gentle Fall.

Libbant — Town on the Papessa River in Felittaka.

Merta — The nomadic horse culture.

nownsha — Compound, outpost, camp, or city owned by a Sevessa clan.

Omadaz — See Baba.

peffodia — Spontaneous, improvisational music session. It can be performed by strangers or friends and family. Common to all four cultures.

perovics — Tongat study of the impact of new technologies, often conducted over centuries.

Roakay — Brotherhood of sacred assassins, a cult within Tongat, supposedly extinct but actually still extant.

seskafet — Spicy simmered chicken dish, the specialty of central Felittaka.

Sevessa — The female-only culture. The name derives from the word vessin.

Shenza — Tongat Sisterhood, once allied with the Roakay, then exterminated by them.

shoraz — Somewhere between nation and tribe: a group of Merta clans that never war among themselves; share a language, culture, and homeland; and intermarry. There are six, in two language groups: Konata (west coast), Safota (mountains); Durkita, Porfenata, Neportata, Teshikota (plains).

shul-kethrin — Someone who has stated an intention to take kethrin to another culture but has not yet done so.

-ta — A shoraz, the group or the homeland.

teraband — A Felitta dancing style.

tevessin — A baby exchanged in vessin.

Thistle gull — Dirigible that Miako and friends take from Tongatka to Sevessaka.

Tiggleday — Paddle wheel boat that takes Miako and Chass up the Papessa River.

Tongat — The monastic culture; part scientist, part philosopher, part monk, but composed of both sexes and not celibate. Guardians and creators of new technology.

Unfallen — Legendary people who stayed behind in Baba after the Gentle Fall. Some revere them as saints, others deny their existence.

vessin — Ancient practice of voluntarily giving up a child to be raised in another culture. The babies are usually sold, but are neither slaves nor indentured, but become full citizens on adoption. Roughly 27,000 babies are shifted between nations each year. This and kethrin are why the population of Brezlun is extremely homogeneous genetically, despite millennia of cultural separation.

whale — Mythical gigantic sea creature, gray in color, that can speak through a hole in the top of its head.

white bear — Mythical creature that lives on polar ice and eats fish, seals, and naughty children. Similar to the black and brown bears that live on every continent, but larger and more fierce.

## Place Names

Blast Bay — An underwater crater that forms the eastern boundary of Sevenssaka. No one observed its formation: it was a meteor impact a hundred million years before the Gentle Fall. The weather in Blast Bay is notoriously fickle and dangerous.

Breznun — The world.

Bricka — Mythical land at the dawn of human history in which the patterns of Breznun life were laid down.

Durkita — One of the six shoraz of Merta; the northern prairie and ocean clans. Jaybra was born into this shoraz.

Felittaka — The majority of the continent of Gebertala, including all the arable land on the mainland; the homeland of Felitta. Population approximately 4,000,000.

Felmo — Town on the Papessa River in Felittaka.

Firpal — A large island, part of Tongatka, off the northwest coast.

Flip — Town on the Tail in Sevenssaka.

Gebertala — The second-largest continent on Breznun, containing Felittaka and Tongatka.

Geshamo — Capital city of Tongatka.

Kiffit — Town on the Papessa River in Felittaka; airport to Tongatka.

Konata — One of the six shoraz of Merta; the western ocean clans.

Libbant — Town on the Papessa River in Felittaka.

Littapo — Capital city of Felittaka.

Mertaka — The largest continent on Breznun; the homeland of Merta. Population approximately 700,000.

Mount Kibbith — One of the largest, but not tallest, mountains in the Tongsha range; an extinct volcano that runs down into Tongat Bay. Geshamo is built on its flanks.

Narbori — Town in northern Sevenssaka.

Prong — A large peninsula on the western coast of Sevenssaka.

Sachan — Town in northern Sevenssaka.

Safota — One of the six shoraz of Merta; the mountain clans. Dross Cave is in their territory.

Sevenssaka — The smallest continent on Breznun, homeland to Sevenssaka. Population approximately 1,000,000.

Sevur — Capital city of Sevenssaka.

Shusha — Farming village in western Felittaka. Miako was born in its outskirts.

Stresha Channel — The strait between Gebertala and Sevenssaka.

Tail — The southeastern part of Sevenssaka, a peninsula that is almost an island.

Teshikota — One of the six shoraz of Merta; the western prairie clans. Jendral's clan is part of this shoraz.

Tongatka — The mostly mountainous northern part of the continent of Gebertala; the homeland of Tongat. Population approximately 200,000.

Tongsha — The mountain range that covers most of the area of Tongatka, except for the islands and large glacial valleys.

Torbada — Town on the Papessa River in Felittaka.

Trading Post — The only place in Mertaka where Merta will deal with outsiders. Near the mouth of the Great Vein River, at the intersection of Teshikota, Durkita, and Porfenata.



## Cast of Characters

Names in **boldface** traveled with Miako and Chass.

*Name (Country) — Role*

Bertam (Felitta) — Livery stable master.

**Bilduf Kondalen Surveyor** (Merta) — Brother of Jendral and Mestak, husband of Keesha and Nerthey.

**Chass** (Felitta) — The last Mediator.

Debro Seasifter (Tongat) — Acquaintance. Mother of Hallen.

**Defress Shefarden Lionstalker** (Merta) — Acting head of Shefarden clan.

Desha (Tongat) — Jet pilot.

Daven Bertamen (Felitta) — Stable boy and driver.

Elesa (Tongat) — Astronomer.

Felip Collector (Tongat) — The Archivist.

Foss (Merta) — Mediator murdered for coup.

Fressa Rachella (Sevessa) — Rekaka River boat pilot.

Gemeny Uqua (Sevessa) — Hidrasil clan leader.

**Gerlad Tlapen Thunderborn** (Merta) — Shefarden clan member, brother of Hidain.

Gloreja (Felitta) — Dirshet in Geshamo.

Hallen Seafarer (Sevessa) — Daughter of Debro.

Harrtel (Tongat) — Astronomer.

Hebra Sunsinger (Sevessa) — Legendary traveler who sailed Blast Bay with Podd, and disappeared with her.

Hecaja (Sevessa) — Councilwoman.

Hernan (Felitta) — Musician who finished Miako's musical training.

Hesta Tabitho (Sevessa) — Curator and archivist.

**Hidain Tlapen Bearteaser** (Merta) — Shefarden clan member, brother of Gerlad.

Hobbed Skinner (Tongat) — Roakay assassin.

Howart (Tongat) — Driver assigned to Miako and Chass.

Ibsel Wheatberry (Felitta) — Tiggleday passenger. Yola's husband.

Indiri (Sevessa) — Famous ancient artist who painted the picture of Ravi that Miako gave to the Sevessa queen.

Jann (Felitta) — Mediator. Fate unknown.

**Jaybra Ponyhealer** (Tongat) — Apprentice. Miako's guide and companion in Geshamo.

Jemen Riverstalker (Felitta) — Captain of the Tiggleday.

**Jendral Kondalen Horsecatcher** (Merta) — Acting head of Kondalen clan. Brother of Bilduf and Mestak.

Jypha (Sevessa) — Carriage driver.

Keesha (Merta) — Wife of Bilduf.

Kepp (Sevessa) — Mediator. Drowned in a storm in Blast Bay, witnessed by the famous Queen Ravi.

Keppa Yava (Sevessa) — Miako's guide in Sevr.  
 Keving Polaren Rosekeeper (Felitta) — Miako's supervisor at the census office.  
 Krit Stormgazer (Tongat) — The Perovics.  
 Lamia Spicer (Felitta) — Pippil's wife, Tikker's mother.  
**Lowek Renalden Nightrider** (Merta) — Shefarden clan member.  
**Mestak Kondalen Treeclimber** (Merta) — Brother of Jendral and Bilduf, husband of Yosta.  
**Miako Tomaza Seeker** (Felitta) — The Mediator's chosen companion and assistant.  
 Morgat (Felitta) — Legendary pirate.  
 Nertey (Merta) — Wife of Bilduf.  
 Nimmel Underwalker (Felitta) — Tiggleday passenger.  
 Omadaz (...) — Baba, the Great Mother: the machine intelligence that runs the ship that brought humans to Brezlun.  
 Pahbalan (Felitta) — Tiggleday passenger.  
 Papra Windtamer (Felitta) — Legendary instrument maker and lover.  
 Partep (Felitta) — Miako's deceased fiancé.  
**Penda Gypso** (Sevessa) — Warrior, ex-captain of the Queen's Guards.  
 Pepita Francha Spicer (Felitta) — Miako's mother.  
 Perkat (Merta) — Child in Jendral's clan.  
 Pippil Beekeeper (Felitta) — Farmer on whose land the Felitta relics are kept. Lamia's husband, Tikker's father.  
 Podd (Sevessa) — Mediator. Lost while circumnavigating Blast Bay.  
 Ravi (Sevessa) — Legendary Sevessa queen.  
 Rekket (Merta) — Child in Jendral's clan.  
 Rawea Flachendra (Sevessa) — Current Sevessa queen.  
 Ripp (Merta) — Mediator murdered for coup.  
 Rober Peppersower (Felitta) — High Council member.  
 Ron Haymaker (Felitta) — Frenik on Pippil's farm, curator of Felitta relics.  
 Shora Urcula (Sevessa) — Customs official.  
 Stelikin Sorter (Tongat) — The Astronomer.  
 Stepha Pipgatherer (Tongat) — President of Tongatka.  
 Suzata Yuripa Doghealer (Felitta) — Miako's best friend.  
 Tapadak Wheatgrinder (Felitta) — Frenik on Miako's childhood farm. Made her flute case.  
 Teepesh (Felitta) — Tiggleday passenger.  
 Tikker Pippilen (Felitta) — Son of Pippil and Lamia.  
 Tippal (Merta) — Young man in Jendral's clan.  
 Tomaz Bortunen Facilitator (Felitta) — Miako's father.  
 Troff (Tongat) — Mediator. Fell into a crevasse while hiking in the Tongsha mountains.  
**Turbasek Starwatcher** (Tongat) — Ambassador, explorer, adventurer, perovics coordinator.  
 Yill (Tongat) — Mediator. Fate unknown.  
 Yola Mothchaser (Felitta) — Tiggleday passenger. Ibsel's wife.  
 Yosta (Merta) — Wife of Mestak.  
 Zeven Purger (Tongat) — Leader of the Roakay assassins.

# Notes

## Timeline

*Year AD — Ship year — Brezlun year*

2242 — 0 — — Elpida leaves Earth.

6893 — 4651 — — Brezlun fly-by; terraforming package dropped.

8596 — 6354 — 0 — The Gentle Fall, also called the Landing.

9697 — 7455 — 1192 — First Mediator's communicators fail.

10,363 — 8121 — 1913 — Contact lost with Elpida.

12,110 — 9868 — 3805 — Last contact with Mediators.

12,513 — 10,271 — 4241 — Miako is born.

12,540 — 10,298 — 4271 — Chass recruits Miako.

## Brezlun

Brezlun is the second planet of a G3 dwarf star in Centaurus, 91 light years away from Earth. Its sun is slightly dimmer than Sol, but Brezlun is slightly closer than Earth to its primary, so the insolation is nearly identical. It has one moon which is 50% larger in diameter than Earth's and about 10% closer, so it looks much larger in the sky and causes tides that average almost 3 times the height of Earth's.

Brezlun is nearly the same diameter as Earth but has only 90% the mass, so surface gravity is slightly less. The axial tilt is only 4° versus Earth's 23°, so the seasons don't vary as much as on Earth, and in general the climate is milder, with fewer extremes of hot and cold. The polar ice caps both lie over ocean and are quite small. Brezlun geology is much less active than Earth's: slower plate tectonics, fewer earthquakes and volcanoes. The last supercontinent broke up over a billion years ago.

There are no petrochemicals, since plant life never evolved past algae. However, there are abundant wells of methane, which is used for hydrogen fuel cells. Before terraforming the native ecology included bacteria and very simple plants. Animals never evolved, not even single-celled ones.

## Timekeeping

The Brezlun day is 25.2 Earth hours long. The inhabitants use a 25-hour clock, each hour divided into 100 minutes of 100 seconds.

The year is 337.3 Earth days, which is 320.3 local days, so the year is composed of 32 weeks of ten days. Every third year is a leap year, when a day is added between the end of one year and the start of the next. Weeks in a year are numbered; people on Brezlun have no concept of months.

The days of the week are also numbered. Over the centuries the names have degenerated, but you can still see the ordinal numbers in them: Firday, Seconday, Thirday, Forday, Fiday, Sixday, Sevenday, Eighday, Ninday, Tenday. Most city people

work seven days out of ten. Days begin at an arbitrary time, which is the moment the sun rises on the shortest day of the year as seen from the observatory on Mt. Kibbith.

Human gestation is 280 Earth days, which is 266 Brezlun days. Where we approximate to nine months, they approximate to 27 weeks.

Choiceday is a person's 20th birthday, which is roughly 18 1/2 Earth years. The story takes place just after Miako turns 30, which is 27.7 Earth years.

## Origin of the Four Cultures

The initial population of Elpida was 400 crew and 20,000 passengers, who were intended to live 18th century agrarian lives during the extended voyage. The separation between crew and passengers, which was short-sightedly envisioned as permanent, lasted only two generations. Both groups initially bred exclusively within themselves, but the crew population was not large enough to sustain itself.

Primarily male to begin with, the crew quickly ran out of breeding females. In ship year 45 they began raiding the villages for women. The farmers put up with this for another four generations, since the crew had weapons and they did not.

In year 136 the villagers stormed the crew areas. They sustained heavy casualties, but they killed all the male crew, and tried to bring the females back home. Only a handful agreed to return. The rest set up a new female-only society, interacting with the villagers only to get pregnant by them. They secretly swapped their male babies for female babies, which was often acceptable to the farmers. They also sometimes stole female babies, and in time this was replaced by a frankly commercial exchange. The practice of trading babies became known as vessin, and the ex-crew began to call themselves Sevessa, which meant roughly "the women who barter babies."

Over generations the farmers developed a highly ritualized, very stable, and boring culture. Two kinds of malcontents arose among them.

Some young men were by nature wild and lawless, and these banded together into a violent society that called themselves Merta. They raided the villages for food, for young women, and for status. In time they stopped raiding and set up a trading relationship with the other cultures so they could focus on their internecine struggles. They did not participate in vessin at first, but later traded the Sevessa for boy babies, since their constant internal battles left them short of fighting men.

Others were inclined to be scholars in a society that had no tradition or need for them. These went off to an isolated part of the ship and formed a new culture called Tongat, an ascetic mixed-sex group devoted to the accumulation of knowledge. They did not raise their own babies, they traded them to the villagers in exchange for food. Their population consisted entirely of people who voluntarily left one of the other three groups.

By the time of the Landing, Merta were equivalent to pre-Columbian Plains Indians (before horses); Felitta to feudal Japan without samurai or a ruling class; Sevessa were technically inclined but without the knowledge to build tools; and Tongat had a lot of knowledge but kept it all stored in the ship's computers. When they were all forced down to Brezlun's surface, they essentially had stone age to early industrial age capabilities. The Mediators helped them advance, and within a century the basic lifestyles of the four cultures were essentially the same as in Miako's day, except for the technological advances that Tongat afterwards developed and slowly released into the world.

## About the Author

Chris Mason is a software engineer who would rather have been a writer. He worked in the corporate world for 18 years, including ten years at Microsoft. After leaving Microsoft for good he founded GrowlyBird Software, which develops free applications for Macintosh users.

*Brezlun* is his fifth novel. The other four novels and a collection of science fiction short stories are available as ebooks on [obooko.com](http://obooko.com)