

UNWRITTEN:
Serpent of Time

Shelton Fox

First Lexicon Books

Unwritten: Serpent of Time

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For Alec and Zander – never give up

Thank you, Mik and Mom

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Prologue

Present Day

Sionn crouched frozen against the rough wall of a wooden hut. He wiped sweat from his brow, breathing so shallow his chest ached, trying to stay motionless. Against the dark greens and browns of the African night, his ivory skin glowed, his red hair flickering above him like a flame.

A large truck clambered by. The voices of the warlords packed behind the cab faded as the roar of the rattling motor rolled away.

The men around him held their breath. *Pop.* A sound like a single firecracker pierced the night. Sionn startled, flattening back against knobs of wood that dug into his back. The men to the left of him hit the ground. As he peered to the right, his eyes met a small boy smiling brightly, mocking the grown men's fear of the backfiring engine that was not the spray of gunfire they had expected.

Crouching low, the boy eased himself along the wall to peek around the edge of the hut into the clearing. He scurried across the dirt toward a wooden cache. Checking the empty yard again, he signaled to Sionn and the men.

Scrambling to his feet, Sionn inched along to survey the yard and ensure they were alone. Cautiously, he stepped out from behind the protective hut. The boy was already removing the padlock hanging open on the cache door.

"Duante, no!" Sionn yelled, running forward. A flash of white-hot heat hit him like a double-decker bus.

An expanse of darkened space filled empty time.

A maddening ring saturated Sionn's ears. His brain pulsed against his skull, as if trying to burst through an ever-tightening space. Blurred light met his squinting eyes. Flat on the ground, one hand found cool marble

instead of packed dirt. He reached out with his other arm and felt a smooth, tiled wall instead of splintering wood. He was not in Africa anymore.

For a moment, he thought he must be dreaming, but not in his worst nightmare could he recall feeling such intense pain. Using the wall for leverage, he labored to his feet. His head swam with dizzying pain. The silhouette of a man partially blocked the light. Sionn's eyes struggled to focus enough to define features hidden in shadow. "Duante? Duante? Duante — the lad. Where is the lad? Is he alright?"

"Sit, Sionn Owaine Eiosioban, before nature makes you," a rich, laughing voice directed.

Sionn jumped back against the wall. Stretching a hand out to create distance from the unfamiliar voice, his sky blue eyes strained to regain his bearings. In a controlled voice, he asked, "Excuse me, friend. How is it you know me?"

"I know a great deal about you. In fact, I have been searching for you, Grandson."

Sionn's eyes widened. A moment of clarity revealed a royal smile on the face of a dark-skinned man. "Mate, you may recognize me," he said, raising a pale arm that contrasted against the blue-black of the other, "but I believe you are mistaken."

"Am I?" The man sounded amused. "Fifty thousand years ago, my twelfth son was born to one of this planet's first children. One day, when she was collecting medicinal flowers in a field, her head covering slipped off, revealing her beauty. Her son was one of my greatest accomplishments. He was perfection. You are the generational descendant of his third son."

Sionn saw he propped himself against a mural depicting a man with the head of an eagle on a chariot, leading a band of toga-clad ancients into

battle. Lapis gems the color of his eyes fit beside pure onyx above polished bronze. Considering the man's statement, he muttered, "Plausible."

Booming laughter echoed throughout the halls, ringing harshly in Sionn's ears. "Plausible?" The distant voice instantly crossed the room. "Believe it."

A hand clasped his forehead. Immediately the vertigo stopped. A warm sensation spread from his temples to his toes, relieving his discomfort. His eyes focused, fully registering the lavish scene. From ceiling to floor, gemstone murals with scenes from the beginning of civilization covered each wall. Golden crowned molding framed the ceiling that opened to the heavens, which appeared much closer than Sionn had ever seen. "Where are we exactly?"

"Realms above what was, not too long ago, called Sumer." The Ancient One, Engiki, remained uncomfortably close. Mocking laughter glistened in his licorice eyes.

"Not too long ago?" Sionn coughed a forced chuckle. The dark-skinned man remained unmoved. Sionn leaned away. "That would make it now... Iraq? Lovely. What is it you want with me?"

The old one's laughing voice echoed through the hall. Purple silk robes billowed from his arm as he summoned a giant replica of the planet Earth. It gravitated toward him, orbiting until the world rested in the palm of his hand. Directly in front of Sionn appeared the Pacific Ocean. The middle of the great body of water trembled. The ocean sloshed as the ground beneath it shifted. Giant waves spread out from the epicenter in every direction, racing toward land at a height that promised mass destruction. Inside Sionn's ears echoed screams of dying. Horror struck his face. The dark-skinned man watched with detached curiosity. "A mere wave. I've seen worse in my time. Those days are to come. For now is the time."

"And what time might that be?"

A steady smile spread across the ancient face. Methodically, he spoke, “The Sisters of Fate work endlessly. As we speak, the fibers are being gathered to spin the final threads of this age. The pattern of this generation will be woven in a loom. Once it is complete, this era will be severed.”

“Splendid, a sewing bee.”

Engiki roared with laughter. “Yes, my son. You are quilting the fate of the children of Earth. Their destiny depends on your skills and those who are to help you.”

“This may be a bad time to tell you,” Sionn said, “I don’t sew.”

Chapter 1

Present Day Hawaii

A level above the earthly dimension, Sionn and Engiki walked unnoticed between tourists enjoying their Hawaiian holiday.

“Where exactly is it we’re going?” Sionn trailed behind the ancient. “I imagine not to a luau.”

Engiki’s purple robes billowed in the island winds. His hand extended toward the mouth of a cave. “To a land relatively untouched by time to find your partner.”

“Untouched by time? Of course, I can tell by the power lines there. The concession stand gives a sure sign. Is that an Audi in the parking lot? Everyone in antiquity had one of those.”

The human tourists could not hear Engiki’s bounding laughter in the angelic realm beyond their senses. The ancient crossed between a camera and the tourist capturing a memento from his tropical island vacation. Behind him, Sionn held back.

“It didn’t come out,” the photographer called from the human plane. “It whited out like it’s overexposed. Let’s try it again.”

“What are you waiting for, Son?” Engiki walked back to meet him.

“It did it again,” the photographer said. “Is something wrong with your camera? How do I turn off the flash?”

Sionn’s fair-skinned face flushed. The camera owner left the group to examine the device. He walked through where Engiki stood in the alternate dimension overlapping the human plane.

“I, uh...” Sionn stammered. “The picture — give the bloke a chance to get the shot before our energy messes it up again.”

All of a sudden, Engiki became aware of the existence of the humans. White teeth shone in his earthen smile. “They are delightful, are they not?”

So preoccupied with such pettiness.” Engiki toyed with the humans, releasing small amounts of energy that further baffled them as orbs of light appeared on the camera screen.

“Adorable.” Sionn shifted uncomfortably. “We should get on with it.”

A caterpillar extended down from the opening of the cave with its tiny claw clutching a picture fly. Pausing mid-snack, the caterpillar appraised the two men.

“Greetings, ‘aumakua. I come not for your islands, but for the passageway to your brother lands.”

Sionn cleared his throat, questioning the ancient’s sanity. The caterpillar’s claw tightened, returning to its insect snack. “Well, he didn’t pull out a hookah,” Sionn defended. “Does that mean we’re not going to Wonderland?”

“Watch yourself.” Engiki passed through the entrance to the cave.

Sionn followed. A sound like a woman’s sigh engulfed him in heat like a volcanic fire. It passed, leaving him stammering in shock. Sionn heard the sound of Engiki’s laughter greet him on the other side. He trotted to catch up. “What in Hy Breasil is that?”

“Don’t your sacred lands have their own barrier of mists?”

“Well, yeah.”

Engiki gave a mocking chuckle. With Sionn in tow, he departed the railed tourist pathway, entering a hollow opening hidden around a corner. As casually as one would ring a doorbell, Engiki stroked a flattened patch of rock. The air around them began to vibrate. A warping sensation enveloped them, making Sionn stumble, unsteady in the change.

“You do not travel much outside the human world,” Engiki stated. “How long has it been since you parted the mists to enter your own Old Country?”

Sionn reached out, trying to grasp on to walls that were no longer there.

The vibrating wall passed through them, solidifying behind them into stone. From the darkness of the cave, they emerged into the blinding brightness of a new day. There were no buildings, tourists, or power lines on this island. Crystal clear water crashed into bleached white sand. Palm trees swayed around the opening of another cave that housed sparkling water that poured out to merge with the sea. Purposely avoiding Engiki's question, Sionn stepped toward the new cave. An invisible barrier knocked him backward. The air began to vibrate. The vibrations built upon each other, setting off a sensation where the air undulated like a mass of jellyfish.

Engiki roared with laughter. "Now they will know for sure we are here. Let us see if the Iilediaweh will, for once, welcome visitors into their reclusive land. Our welcome party should arrive at any moment."



Iilediaya — Outer Northwest Lands

Although the fog of the morning had burned off, heavy clouds were rolling in from the east. Cool wind blew sheets of rain diagonally, washing away remnants of winter snowcaps. The smell of wet cedar filled the crisp air.

"The herd of caribou is crossing the Nikihnee runoff on the west side of Deeqi'liimo." Wihni flew around the protruding rock off the peak, of the mountain that gave it the name *Big Nose*. Wings spread out over five feet; she caught an updraft, gliding on the easterly wind stream toward where the gathering party planned to meet. Like a kite, the gust held her eagle body weightless over the landscape. Tilting her wings, she threw herself into a different, more forceful drift. It swept her forward, hurling her at high speed toward the giant cedar amidst a dense patch of forest overlooking the valley below. Thirteen voices spread out through the

lands, all answering back through their telepathic connection.

A lynx was the first to respond. Bracing his paws, he slid down a steep stretch of hill. Two coyotes raced around him. A fox rolled down a muddy patch of earth, tinting the white patch of fur under his neck red with mud. Behind him, a bobcat bounded four feet of distance from one large rock to another down the slope. The lynx leapt over a crevice in the terrain, closing the distance between the ragtag group and the herd. One of the coyotes took a large leap from the hill to lead the party into the forest below, where Wihni circled overhead.

Miles away, under the dense cover of two areas of brush on either side of a small, open pathway, the other hunters hid, waiting to spring the trap. A panther rested on top of a tree branch. Izak's cougar body perched on a higher branch. Wihni soared above the terrain. Coming up fast upon the forest, she hurtled toward two ancient trees. Close enough to feel the wind draft around the trunks, she tilted sideways, weaving between nature's towers. Beak first, Wihni dove straight down at full speed. The brisk air stung her eyes as they locked on the ground racing toward her. Far away, Izak closed his eyes tight.

"Breathe, Brother," Kantin growled in his grizzly bear voice as he scratched his back against the thick trunk of a tree. "She will pull up."

"One of these times, she's going to underestimate the risk." Izak shook off the droplets rolling down his amber fur. "She comes closer and closer each time."

"She won't crash," said the large bear crouched behind a clump of trees. "If she does, she will learn."

"If she *does*?" Izak asked, incredulous.

"You love her for her recklessness as much as anything else. She throws herself into every sensation for the euphoria of it, to experience everything to its fullest."

“Then don’t curse her with the idea of falling.” Izak squeezed his eyes closed again, seeing the blanket of grass closing in on Wihni. Where no one else could hear, he pleaded, “Pull up already.”

“You cannot always be there to catch her,” his brother warned.

“I know that. It doesn’t mean I won’t try.”

“It’s getting closer now, Brother. In less than a month, you will know.”

Izak was counting every minute until that time.

Wihni plunged low enough to see the drops of rain bouncing off blades of grass. A moment before impact, she pulled up in a graceful arch, just in time to feel the tips of the tall grass brush against her downy underbelly. Swooping up the side of the massive sequoia, she perched high on a branch, shaking the excess rain off her brown feathers. From the top of the mountain, the ancient tree gave her a full radial view of the area.

Flinging more water from her feathers, her eagle eyes focused through the downpour into the distance. She honed her vision past the rain, through the trees, to where the others ran beneath the forest cover. With a small push off, her wings beat in large strokes, lifting her high enough to ride a new gust of wind to the party below.

Wihni came up behind the five gathering hunters. One yard away, the caribou turned away from the smell of predators approaching. The five ran behind them, chasing them into the waiting snare. From overhead she saw the youngest of the coyote brothers sneaking up to pounce on the bobcat. Diving down, her talons grabbed hold of his haunches. Beating her strong wings, she lifted his coyote paws off the ground. Shapeshifting from eagle to her grey wolf form, her momentum tossed him sideways. Padded lynx paws turned, working in unison to block the older coyote from tackling her in revenge. Diving sideways, the younger sent Wihni sliding in the mud.

A mustang reared up on his hind legs, blocking what could have been an open escape for the caribou. When the herd detoured, he galloped along

the side. Kantin's grizzly bear voice echoed a gentle warning to the mud-soaked, wrestling pack. A black bear echoed his roar from a thicket across the way. Threatening the caribou with hoof and horn, a large mountain goat blocked another escape route from the herd. Bleating loudly, he joined the run.

The thundering caribou clambered over each other in the chase. The pungent odor of their fear rose in vaporous mists above their hides. To their right, a moose charged out of another possible escape route, threatening them with his massive horns before joining the right flank. The smell of so many different predators working together in such a complex way, driving them toward another band of predators waiting ahead, frightened the caribou into confusion. The part of the unit running with the herd surrounded the bewildered beasts in a crescent. Two patches of forest narrowed the valley in one place, where trees concealed the hunters on either side.

Wihni's heart pounded in her chest. The thrill of the hunt drove her forward. Her paws splashed in the torn grass behind the thundering herd. One hundred yards to go before the snare would close. They turned on even more speed, and the ground vibrated with the pounding of harried hooves. The air crackled with the excitement of the chase. The makeshift pack ahead and behind began marking their targets.

Fifty yards — still in her wolf form, Wihni bared her teeth, almost tasting the kill. On behalf of the group, she offered up the traditional prayers of gratitude for the hunt, with liberation for the souls of the hunted. A resounding bear roar echoed through the valley. Rebounding off the rocks, it was joined by a dozen more predator calls in a fear-provoking, unnatural spectacle of interspecies cooperation. Fourteen moved as one, descending upon the herd. The wolf, fox, lynx, bobcat and coyotes chased the herd from behind, attacking at the same moment a cougar and panther

pounced from a tree. Two bears emerged on either side of the small opening that was the only escape for the caribou. A wild boar stabbed at legs. There was nowhere for the caribou to go but forward, as the mustang, moose, and mountain goat continued the chase.

Unexpectedly, a wave of energy vibrated through the air, blowing back the shapeshifters' fur.

"What the..." the mountain goat's head rose. "Was that the alarm?"

"Are we expecting an incomer?" the panther asked.

"No," Wihni answered. Diverting herself away from her chosen prey, her paws bounded off the back of a fallen buck. In a midair spin, she changed back into eagle above the felled caribou. "I have it."

"You need to take back-up," Izak directed.

"Not even engaged, and he's already giving you orders. Are you going to take that?" The ribbing from the rest of the guys began instantly.

Wihni refused response. Tucking her affections away, she called through the tribe's telepathic connection for support. As if on a walkie-talkie, she radioed in, "Wihni to Headquarters Duty Master."

"Duty Master, here," their lieutenant answered from the inner heart of Iilediaya.

"We have an incomer signal. Is that correct?"

"That is correct. We have an unexpected incoming signal from the southwestern island at Tilailee Cave," the Lieutenant confirmed.

"I'm on my way to intercept." Switching mental channels to include the others, Wihni called, "Attention, Unit Twenty-Two. Water Unit, meet me undercover at the underwater crossing in Tilailee to make our approach. Air Unit, provide support. Be armed and ready."

"The rest of Titan Twenty-Two, deliver the hunt to the Market Square," Kantin directed. "Then meet up at Do'hnoozu Island."

"Affirmative. Report all interaction," their superior ordered. "Hold

incomers there until officials arrive.”

“Jiidweh.” Multiple voices confirmed obedience of the given commands.



Ilediiaya — Tilailee Cave — Southwestern Outer Lands

Sionn kicked the ground; his long ginger bangs fell in his face. The tropical sun beat down on his fair skin. He began to suspect they were in the wrong place when a dolphin leapt out of the cave’s ocean water.

“Ahhh, there is our welcome party!” Engiki raised his arms.

Sionn turned three hundred and sixty degrees in search of people. Again, the dolphin leaped. A third jump brought Wihni, in her dolphin form, close enough to identify and report back the dark and light-skinned outsiders waiting beyond the boundary. Diving deep, Wihni gave directions to her unit. After her curved dorsal descended, an angular shark fin appeared, carving the surface of the water. The shark swam with Wihni beneath the waves, making way for an even larger dorsal fin to emerge. Like a rocket, the killer whale drove forward at impressive speed. In one intimidating surge, the orca beached, displaying large teeth. Black and white whale skin morphed into eight feet, five hundred pounds of a tattooed man. In a display more frightening than the killer whale, the monster of a man took a stance like a mountain, yelling a warning in an ancestral war cry of his father’s Polynesian people. Hands as wide as palm leaves slapped against his flesh, cracking like thunder. The giant’s face contorted into a menacing expression, tongue flicking, with teeth bared as if ready to rip flesh. The ground seemed to shake with each stomp of his feet.

Engiki clapped his hands, declaring, “Excellent! Wonderful!”

Wonderful if you mean horrifying, thought Sionn, cowering behind.

To the right of the fearsome man, an enormous snake slithered out of the water onto the shore. On the left, a weasel shot like a missile onto the beach. The snake changed to a tall, thin youth brandishing a war hawk. The weasel became a lithe male, stretching the string of a bow with a pointed arrow ready. A swarthy vulture and red-tailed hawk landed on the top of the cave. From behind the massive man, the shark became a man that emerged, clutching a long antler knife. Wihni changed from dolphin to woman, walking around the other side, holding her tomahawk in one hand with her knife in the other. Drops of water slid over her smooth face.

“Ansull’air alakin.” Wihni walked to the front of the group, using the universal greeting of the Star Children. Her knife hand extended the gestured greeting, saying in English, “Under the sight of the stars, we greet you and ask what your business is with the Ilediiaweh?”

“Ansulaikom.” Engiki returned the greeting and gesture. Sionn returned it as smoothly as he could from where he ducked behind the older man. In perfect Ilediiaweh, Engiki answered, “We have come with peaceful respect to discuss matters of utmost importance with your tribe.”

Stunned by the use of her own language, she answered back in Ilediiaweh, “Then you will not object to being escorted to meet with our tribal officials.”

“Not in the least.” Engiki bowed slightly to her.

Wihni led the way. Two of her unit stood on either side of the newcomers. The others stood as a barrier between their only female member and the outsiders. No matter how hard she had fought to earn her place alongside the men in the shapeshifting unit, the tribe still distanced their women from outsiders as a matter of precaution.

Melting into ether, the Ilediiaweh and the newcomers solidified on Do’hoodzu Island, where their armed unit waited in human form on a hill overlooking the ocean. Forming ranks, the men surrounded an opening

intended for the strangers. There was no warning in their stance, but a promise of concise action.

Visibly, the unit maintained its disciplined ranks. Internally among them, Lawen, Wihni's maternal cousin, mentally joked, "I am loaded and ready to blow."

Laughter rolled inside the stern warriors. Lawen's wolverine musk gland was legendary.

"Stand down," Kantin directed through a mental chuckle.

"*Please*, stand down," multiple members of the squad requested.

But Wihni directed her cousin, "Stand ready, Stinky Bear."

"Why do you encourage him?" the panther asked.

No one watching from the outside could see the ongoing argument inside the minds of the stern-faced warriors. On behalf of the unit, Kantin stepped forward to make a formal introduction. The unit leader led the proper searches, questioning, and scans of intent for Engiki and the one they identified by speech as a Briton. Trained to react off her unit's subtle muscle movement, Wihni's muscles started tensing.

"That's her?" Sionn asked Engiki, connecting his thoughts to the old one. He watched Wihni, studying his new counterpart. From her height alone, he would have thought her a girl. Soaking wet from head to toe in her chest band and low-tied pants, everything that was woman about Wihni stood evident. Although all of them had long hair, Wihni's waist-length locks accented her beauty like a crown of glory. Sunlight set off the natural choke cherry highlights hidden amid the black in her tresses. Tendrils that slipped from her braid created sensuous waves around her bronzed face. The rush of adrenaline set her skin aglow, adding radiant color to the apples of her cheeks. The alertness in her chestnut eyes lit them on fire. Though her physique was extremely well-toned, without the weapons in her hand, she did not make for an intimidating sight.

The unit's internal laughter ceased. The male warriors stared down the strangers as if the touch of their eyes upon Wihni were an assault. Jaws clenched, their hands tightened around weapons. Stances prepared for a fight. Acting as one with them, Wihni shifted her weapons, though unsure why. A moment before the breaking the point, the delegate of tribal officials appeared in full traditional regalia.

"I want you to head back to the market to begin processing the meat," Kantin spoke directly into Wihni's thoughts.

"That doesn't make sense," she argued privately. "Aren't we all headed there after we finish?"

"That's a direct order," Kantin insisted. Beside him, the other tribal officials nodded in agreement. Fury rose up inside Wihni. She had not spent six years fighting her way to second-in-command of her male-dominated unit to be dismissed for no reason.

"Please don't send her away so quickly." Engiki intercepted their private thoughts. Speaking out loud, he addressed their surprise, "For it is her we are coming to see."

Izak surged forward. Kantin restrained him.

"If you would please excuse us, Wihninyv." The councilman's order disguised itself under the pretense of a request.

"Now," Kantin reiterated.

Wihni felt her first twinge of uncertainty.

"What did you do?" Mu, the eight-foot, orca-shifting giant questioned her privately.

"Yeah, what is it this time?" Lawen asked.

"Nothing!" Wihni answered defensively. "I didn't do anything, I don't think."

Chapter 2

Ilediiaya Needooshi'hee Central Land

The clear sky took the edge off the light breeze in the beating heart of Ilediiaya. Spring presented the very best of herself, smiling down on the Ilediiaweh workers. On the shore of Miitziiooh Sea, outside the boundaries of the Asoodz'que lands, the women sang in celebration while the incoming tide washed clean the harvested roots. Other women gathered, working around the kitchens where the smell of dinner's succulent roasted pork filled the air. Many from the Siwehqi'oosi clan raised up their own songs as they refreshed the paint on their family's pyramid-style dwellings. A group of men sheered sheep in a front pasture, delivering the collected wool to be stored. Others herded animals to fresh, open pastures. Leatherworkers, woodcarvers, even metal smiths worked outdoors, basking in the pleasant weather. From the steps of every pyramid to the orchards and fields, curiosity about the first foreign visitors allowed into Ilediiaya in a thousand Ilediiaweh years lit a match of gossip that spread like wildfire through the land. The fact that the strangers wanted Wihni only fanned the flames.

Women washed clothes in the stream close to the official Iippaadzoo structure, watching male members of Wihni's immediate family — over one hundred stern faces — keep a close eye on the outlanders. The women of Wihni's extended family filled in work for her immediate family, who gathered to prepare Wihni for the formal meeting to be held that evening.

“Does this really have to be this big of a deal?” Wihni pleaded with her mother. “Let me talk with them at the station, and then we send them away. I'm not interested in whatever they're offering.”

“That's not how things work, liiloweh,” her mother said affectionately. “Let's just do our best to not think about it. We have enough on our hands

just getting you ready. You are representing all Iilediiaaya tonight. You must be at your best.”

Runners carried messages to those living in the outer lands to give everyone an opportunity to be a part of this historical encounter. For all anyone knew, it could be hundreds of years before they received any other non-related incomers on their shores. The sky was the limit in speculation of what these foreigners might want.

After being sure every bit of mud from the day’s hunt was scrubbed off Wihni, her mother and first grandmothers escorted her to the family’s Nawa’ee meeting room where the rest of her immediate family waited. The girl’s eyes lit up when she saw her unit brothers spread out over the sprawling outer steps of her family’s home pyramid.

Before she could open her mouth, her mother, Arundi, stopped her. “No, Wihni.” She called out, “Away, boys! Go on! I’m sure you have plenty of things to do today. Clear out! We have women’s work to do. You can talk to her tomorrow. There is no need for extra guard here. Heaven knows there is nothing in the universe more dangerous than a house full of mothers and grandmothers determined to protect their young. Now, please leave before you distract her completely.”

The guys cracked jokes as Arundi dragged her up the steps into the archway of the main room. “Is that Wihni? Wihni doesn’t wear dresses. That couldn’t have been Wihni. That was a girl.”

“Just wait,” Wihni yelled back threatening. “Just wait.”

“Hush, Wihninyv. Be a lady, at least for today.” Her paternal first grandmother, Enada’s, moonlike face scowled.

“Until the meeting is over. Then she can go back to being our Q’ieyanmiil — Goodson.” Her maternal first grandmother Niniqia rubbed her back reassuring her.

Carefully cut skylights flooded the large stone great room with

sunlight. Ventilation holes brought fresh, cool air into the centrally located area. Zigzag stairs climbed the walls inside, leading to various family dwellings built into the five-story structure. Beautifully woven mats with different designs blocked the doors of private family homes. Carved into the sides of mountains, the pyramids were built with megalithic stones fit perfectly together, creating structures that had lasted millennia. Each clan maintained their homes, keeping the pristine whitewashed outer stones, as well as the accent colors of the clan like new. Here the trim was turquoise for Wihni's mother's clan the Nawa'ee. Inside, colorful hieroglyphics for each generation of Wihni's ancestors were carved around the great walls, maintained to perfection no matter their age so that only their height on the wall distinguished the newly born Nawa'ee from the ancient.

As a semi-immortal people, each family group numbered five hundred or more living members. Strict rules dictated immediate, extended, and heritage family connections. Immediate and extended family were counted up the artery of the matriarchal line. The patriarchal lines were considered related by more distant heritage, and were mostly important in determining who in the tribe was marriageable. Immediate family included parents' siblings, their children, and their children's children. Both sets of first grandparents were counted, as well as the second and third grandparents on each side. Being the oldest child of an oldest child, Wihni's 47th, 77th, 107th, and 147th grandparents rounded out her immediate family, those with extensive responsibility for her care. When they chose to, it was considered a great honor when the oldest grandparents took part in rearing activities as well.

Several buffalo hides spread over the polished stone ground where the women of Wihni's immediate family gathered. A tightly woven mat lay over top to form the women's workspace. Wihni, her mother, and first

grandmothers removed their shoes before entering the mat. The younger walked in line behind her mother and elders as they worked their way around the room to make proper greetings.

“Arundiya, tell your husband’s grandmother Naala that Wihni should wear my mother’s hunting armband today. She was the most renowned female hunter of our tribe after Neene Minhawaanisque.” Like the rings of a tree, wrinkles hung from the face of Wihni’s oldest Nawa’ee grandmother, Tokalla, each line marking the distinction of another of her thirty-nine hundred years.

“Neene Tokalla,” Naala, Wihni’s 147th grandmother from her father’s Idzweh’eloo clan, defended to her elder. “I’m not being impertinent. My father’s armband is very nice. That is all. The best jewelry makers say the gold alone is unmatched. I’m just making a suggestion.”

In her mind, Wihni heard her cousins adding, “Over and over and over and over again.”

Wihni knelt in front of her oldest Nawa’ee grandmother, lifting her hand to her forehead in a show of respect. “I would be honored to wear it, IileNeene Tokalla.” Wihni rested her head on the old woman’s lap as the withered hand patted her cheek. Smiling to her Neene Naala, she took her hand, repeating the gesture. “Remember, Neene, I carry Neenu Hootsayn’s skinning knife with me, keeping him close at all times.” The old woman smiled so hard, her eyes disappeared.

“What is most important is that they are able to read from what you wear, not only how extraordinary you are, but the grandeur of our people,” Upanaya, her 147th Nawa’ee grandmother, interjected. Over three thousand years of life hung in deep, fleshy creases off her strong cheekbones.

“In every way, though,” Wikhe, her 107th Nawa’ee grandmother added. Insistence etched the corners of every square feature of her face. “Not just in women’s work. There is only one other woman in our tribes recent

history that has earned both the advanced warrior and expert hunter markings to wear beside her women's ones."

"She earned it through diligence," Neene Coche said. Wihni's 77th Idzweh'eloo grandmother's beautiful face glowed with a smile. Framed by her salt and pepper hair, her face held the clan's notorious beauty — with perfectly placed eyes, a strong nose, and high cheekbones.

"Gratefully baring hardly any lasting marks." Neene Yakiniv, her 47th Idzweh'eloo grandmother's elegant face was not as approving.

"I suggest letting me wear my heavy winter wear, and I can spend the day recycling the waste pile." Wihni gave both women respects. "That will send a message."

Shocked laughter sounded around the room. Wihni knelt in front of Iza, her 77th Nawa'ee grandmother, whose clay face had been hardened by life, with cheekbones so sharp they looked as if one could cut against them. The stern face cracked into a smile.

"That would be extraordinary as well, Daughter," Tilitha, her 107th Idzweh'eloo grandmother, patted her face, "in a whole other way."

"Are you going to sing for us, Neene?" Wihni's knees fit under where her tiny grandmother's feet hung from the chair without reaching the floor. Tilitha was petite in size, even smaller than Wihni.

"Do you have any requests?" The woman's childlike face softened.

"Shadow Dance of the Sun," Wihni answered.

Tilitha squealed, "My favorite."

"Mine too," Wihni agreed knowingly.

"We must break up all of the turquoise and yellow," Ioshe, the 47th Nawa'ee grandmother said. Her black hair shined around a face that showed a lifetime of smiling. "Even though those are her family clans, I do not think it inappropriate to incorporate colors of all Iilediiaweh clans, so that the outsiders see our unity."

“We must have red for the human blood that mingles in our veins.” Oga, her 2nd Nawa’ee grandmother sifted through items she, like all the other grandmothers, had brought as suggestions. Oga’s face, more weathered than aged, comforted Wihni enough to linger for a moment.

“Pure white for the Star Parents is more important.” Her 3rd Idzweh’eloo grandmother, Soli’s pride shone in her picture-perfect face. “My prized shawl that’s decorated with artic fox fur and crystals, the one with the swan feathers floating off the edges, would top whatever she wears perfectly.” Wihni listened, continuing her trek around the room.

“There is already plenty of black in any of Wihni’s clothes,” Komi, her 3rd Nawa’ee grandmother, added. Her pecan-shaped eyes showed her desire to un-complicate things. Wihni smiled appreciatively. Komi’s un-aged hands brushed over her face and hair before she laid a kiss on her cheek. “Already, Wihni’s formal wear for her wedding is exceptional by itself.”

“This is not my wedding!” Wihni pulled back. “Neene... Mahmii, this is not... not... no way is this, in any way, my wedding day.”

Her 2nd Idzweh’eloo grandmother, Haanwi, hushed her. “You have to look your best.” Haanwi’s face was the image of her daughter Enada’s moonlike one. But the elder’s features were more carved in wood than softly painted. “Aya, Arundi. Look at these bruises — completely unfit for a young woman.”

“Just small marks, Neene.” Warmth spread from Arundi’s hand, where she infused energy into her daughter to erase the marks. “They heal easily enough.”

“That’s not the point,” Haanwi scowled, folding her hands in her lap.

Wihni’s mother sat down with her sisters and sisters-in-law. As if she were sculpting the spout of a jar, her hand smoothed around the opening of Wihni’s handbag. Peering inside, she tsked, “It’s such a mess in here,

Wihni. You should keep more things stored outside your bag.” Arundi reached into the bag; her arm disappeared completely to the shoulder.

“After all the time your father spent making such a beautiful home, you haven’t moved your things in?” Enada chided.

“I will, Neene. I just haven’t had time.”

“Too much time spent running around with ruffians to set up a proper home,” Soli reproached.

“Who invited all the yellow?” Shaana, Wihni’s cousin by her father’s brother, asked her telepathically.

“Look who’s talking,” Wihni answered back privately. “They’re your family, too.”

“Quiet, now. I try to hide that particular part of my past,” she joked.

“Like it’s not written on every stone tablet that bares your name and marked on everything you wear.” Wihni pointed her nose toward the yellow that mingled with the orange of Shaana’s Dza’saile clan on her wrap and jewelry. The chubby hand of her infant son reached out from where he nursed inside.

“She has every right not to set up her house yet,” Arundi’s oldest sister, Ovalee, weighed in with the grandmother. Giving proper respects, Wihni knelt in front of her, lifting her aunt’s hand to her cheek. Ovalee continued, “Wihni has not yet dispensed her duties to her elders.”

“It’s honorable to be the oldest of those serving the grandparents. We should make sure to add something representing that as well,” Situ suggested.

“As is her right, she still sleeps with us,” Ioshe agreed. The eyes of the Idzweh’eloo turned Wihni’s way — half in admiration, the other half admonished.

“At twenty and four years?” Coche asked with a mixture of both.

“I’m not ready to leave my nest,” Wihni admitted. “I like being with

my family.”

“I don’t know how you can sleep with all the snoring,” Cece, Situ’s daughter, spoke directly into Wihni’s head.

“Better than a lullaby,” she answered back. To the room she said, “Soon enough, I will be married and sleep away from everyone except my husband. I am making the most of my time.”

“Stalling,” Shaana joked telepathically to all the older cousins.

“Quiet,” Wihni warned, kneeling to give respects to her mother’s brother’s wife. Her Aunt Levalda’s buoyant personality fit her round build. Beside her, Wihni gave respects to her oldest cousins, Emilya and Cahnyupe.

“Everyone knows you’re stalling,” Cahnyupe added.

“I have to weigh the decision so no one questions my choice later,” Wihni repeated out of habit.

Wihni sat down beside Shaana, who was her own age. She lifted up a part of the hanging wrap to kiss the sugar cane cheek of Shaana’s son, her guardian child, nestled inside. She received quick respects from Cece, who was a year younger than she. While she greeted her other Nawa’ee cousin, Tashique, the last two women of Wihni’s Idzweh’eloo immediate family entered the room.

Contrasted with her Noohe’de aunt and cousin’s generous approachability, the entering Idzweh’eloo mother and daughter held an air of hardened pride. Where every feature of Levalda and her daughters was broad and inviting, Neera and Devweh were strictly handsome. They boasted the petite frame inbred into the Idzweh’eloo clan. Every one of their features appeared as though carefully chiseled to create the perfect Idzweh’eloo bride. Devweh showed off her new engagement braid-within-a-braid and recently pierced ears to the unmarried women of age in the room.

“That means she’s choosing Izak.” Cece shifted uncomfortably as the women began their way around the room.

“No, it does not.” Shaana opened her wrap. Her son’s inquisitive brown eyes took in the new scenery.

“I will never forgive you if Caven moves in here,” Cece told her honestly. “I’ll never be able to leave my house again.”

The younger cousins made their way to give Wihni respects once she was seated. The very last, the daughter of Wihni’s cousin, toddled up. The three-year-old’s tiny mouth hid inside her billow of cloudlike cheeks until she smiled. Then her eyes lit up like black-eyed Susans touched by the sun.

“Where is your mama?” Wihni asked Sayasada, cupping a handful of soft cheek. To Tashique, Sayasada’s aunt, she repeated, “Where’s Coweska?”

“Birthing in her room,” Tashique answered. “We’re just waiting for the final word from the midwife before we join her. And Sayasada,” Tashique straitened her niece’s tunic dress, adjusting the girl’s turquoise and blue beaded clan belt, “is representing our family by staying here to be helpful. Isn’t that right?” The little one nodded, tucking three fingers into her mouth. Pulling the fingers out, Tashique saw Ovalee’s signal from across the room and kissed the little one before following her mother up the set of stone carved stairs that led to her sister’s dwelling. Clinging to the closest familiar haven, the girl climbed into Wihni’s lap.

Wihni hugged her tight, rocking back and forth. “Are you frightened, little Tulip Bee?” Button eyes laced with fear turned up to find hers. “I’m going to tell you a secret,” Wihni whispered. “I’m afraid, too. You await the unknown with your Mahmii and the new baby. I await the unknown with the two strangers visiting here. Do you think we can give each other courage?”

“I can give you this.” The little girl lifted a beaded necklace from around her neck. The mismatched sizes of beads suggested it had been the little one’s first attempt at making a necklace.

“That looks like it has a lot of courage in it.” Wihni smiled, taking the necklace and wrapping it around her wrist. She pulled a decorative comb from her hair. “This belonged to our greatest of grandmothers, Minhawaanisque. We both know how much courage she had.” The toddler’s eyes widened. Wihni pulled back one side of the girl’s shoulder-length black hair to tuck the comb into place. “Now her courage is in you. No matter what happens, you will be strong.”

“And mine is in you.” The little one honored tradition by touching briefly the beads on Wihni’s arm before jumping to her feet. She knew she had traded up. She traveled with excitement to every one of her great-aunts and grandmothers in the room to show off her new courage from her most famous grandmother.

The foremothers made the final decisions for Wihni’s wardrobe. The items were handed out for mending, cleaning, and to be polished like new. Cece held a palette of different paints to be mixed. “Fidget now and get it out. You will be sitting still for a long time. We all know how hard that is on you.”

“It’s time for us to talk, anyway, Cousin.” Emilya sat behind Wihni, with Shaana and Cahnyupe, to dry Wihni’s hair while Cece worked on painting her nails and skin. “You need to tell us everything you know about these strangers.”

Wihni grumbled, “I know nothing more than anyone else.”

“I want to know where he comes from,” Cahnyupe admitted. Hot wind from her hand sandwiched Wihni’s hair against a horsehair brush, making it smoothly straight. “Does he live in one of the towers of glass or in one of the boarded-up huts? Or maybe he’s from one of those old castles.”

“I really don’t care if he lives in clouds,” Wihni told them. “He’s not Ilediiaweh. That’s all that matters to me.”

“You saw him up close, Wihni. Do you think the Star Child is from a country like ours?” Shaana asked, tugging to dry another portion of Wihni’s hair. “Or do you think he lives out with the humans?”

“I would think if he came from a land like ours, then he would know more of our customs and traditions,” Emilyya answered. “From what I’ve heard, he is ignorant — very humanlike.”

“I wonder,” Shaana adjusted her son sideways in her lap; his fat fists continued playing with her necklaces, “what he looks like under those clothes. Is *all* of his hair red?”

Wihni gasped out loud. Cece shrank back with a smile. The three married women laughed. “He could have plants growing from his legs with tree sprites that keep them,” Wihni said low to her cousins. “I don’t care.”

“You’re tempting me to paint tree sprites on your fingernails,” Cece laughed.

“It’s a good question,” Emilyya continued. “Do you think he’s as hairy in his human skin as our animal shifters are in pelts — just like the ones our ancestors spoke of?” Wihni shivered, making a face.

“Do you think his hair would be soft like rabbit skin or harsh like a goat?” Cece inquired.

“If you’re interested, I will send him your way, Cece,” Wihni teased. “You’re about half the same genetics as I am.”

“If he’s as stinky as the ones our ancestors spoke of, then maybe it would be a good match.” Cece smiled painfully. “They said the Europeans smelled worse than my skunk musk.”

“Do you think that’s what he wants from you? To breed?” Cahnyupe asked.

"He will be thinking again," Wihni insisted.

"Not like anyone hasn't done it before. Isn't one of your greatest grandfathers from the Tundra?" Emilyya asked.

"Yes, but *I* won't be one marrying outside our men. That just does not interest me. Don't I have my plate full enough with two? My life is here, planning for the future of my generations to come. They will have a horrible awakening if they think otherwise. Besides, this whole thing is just ridiculous. Shaana, we should fix your hair just like we did for your wedding. Pull it up in a wrap with flowers..."

"Today is not about me," her cousin replied.

"It's not about me, either. I don't see why I need to be there. There's nothing they could say that has anything to do with me. I'm positive. I didn't do anything! Really! They can go back to whatever they were doing before they stepped foot in Iilediiaaya. I wonder if I can sneak that message to them and maybe we can avert this whole thing."

"No way, Cousin," Cahnyupe said. "This is bigger than you now. The whole tribe is excited."

"We could switch places. You're interested to know about everything out there. We can make you up, and I'll sit in the crowd."

"After they've already seen you?" Shaana replied. "And they recognized you immediately — they won't notice I am six inches taller than you and have the Dza'saile face of my mother, not the fine Idzweh'eloo features that you and my pahpii have?"

"Don't even look at me," Cece snapped. "My scent would give me away."

"Besides, you know that kind of trickery is not tolerated," Emilyya said. Wihni sighed heavily.

"What if he did come here to breed?" Cahnyupe questioned. "You know out there, they often just take what they want."

“He wouldn’t dare do that on our land,” Wihni said appalled.

“They are from out there. You know how they are.” Emilyya’s sincerity leveled her voice. “Their men do not know how to open a woman and really show love to her body. They just do it for themselves.” Wihni felt her stomach turn over at the idea.

“Or to hurt her,” Cece whispered. The cousins glanced over at the grandmothers, knowing the Great Wars had left scars on generations of their foremothers.

“I don’t think he would have been allowed in, past our protections, if he was that harmful,” Shaana offered.

“Do you see how they’re keeping an eye on him — on both of them? Just because he’s a Needeoque doesn’t mean he’s trustworthy.” Wihni narrowed her eyes. “We don’t even know which star he is from. He cannot presume to come onto into our lands expecting we’ll do his bidding.”

“Especially you.” Cahnyupe raised a brow. “I’m not even sure a Great Mother could get you to change your mind once it’s made up.”

“They made you and Izak step back from marrying young,” Cece reminded her. “And they made you consider Caven. If the grandparents all agree it’s for the best...”

“I still have my say. They have always told me I have my say.” Everyone fell silent for a moment.

“What do you think Caven will say?” Emilyya broke the tension.

“Izak was not very happy this morning.” Wihni stared out the open doorway, hoping to see him. “He was so tense.”

“What else could it be other than trying to arrange a marriage for you?” Cahnyupe hesitated. “You have the rarest abilities our people have seen in generations.”

“I’m not a broodmare.” Wihni pulled back her hands.

“Unless you want redheaded trees on your fingers, keep your hands

still.” Cece took her hands back.

Wihni conceded. Impassioned, she pleaded, “A lifetime is a long time to be with someone. Whomever I choose, we will be raising four generations of our children together. All I have ever wanted is to find happiness by creating a family that is a blessing — not only to our family — but to our people. If these strangers have come here thinking otherwise, they will be corrected. Can we stop talking about this now? It’s making me nervous.”

“Look what I found.” Wihni’s friend Oona, a distant cousin, walked in with her arm around a young woman. “I go looking for Emilyya’s little girl and this woman comes out.” Enhuska, Emilyya’s oldest daughter, blushed.

“For sure,” Emilyya called out. “It seems like just yesterday I was cutting my hair for her tenth year. Then overnight, she shoots up like a cornstalk.”

“Filling out like a squash,” Cahnyupe added.

“How are you? I came to bring support.” Oona sat down in front of Wihni after making her respects around the room. “I just passed by your father. He looks like he could chew through steel, he is so upset. This is one thing Pahpii’s Goodson is not going to face by herself.”

Arundi joined them, carrying a basket of items for Wihni’s hair. She knelt behind her daughter. “As he should be. We don’t know these people or what they are coming to ask of our daughter.”

Knots tied up Wihni’s insides as the conversation continued. At times, she pulled out of her rut, falling into an easy flow with her family. Then the topic would round again to her impending marriage or the strangers, and her mouth would become as dry as the Mojave.



The sun had shifted from shining from the front skylights to the back ones by the time she was completely ready. From the toe of her turquoise

beaded boots to the tip of the eagle feathers stuck in her headpiece, she was ornamented. Layers of fine clothes were covered by belts, bands, and smaller decorative items. The finishing touches of jewelry polished it off, covering everything except her ears. Cece's fine work accented the best of her facial features, turning her already pretty face into a work of art. The Ilediiaweh Crest was painted on the back of each hand.

Standing on the flattened stone roof of her dwelling, Wihni could see past the ocean into other sections of the land. Below, some of her family waited for the rest to finish dressing. Trepidation crept like a spider spinning a web inside Wihni as she walked the five floors of her acres-wide pyramid dwelling. Skipping over the lines of every stone block, she stared out over the water, watching the setting sun glitter in an array of pastel colors off the waves. A flash of amber at her clan's entrance caught her attention. A wide smile exploded on her face as she heard the grunting screech slice through the air.

"Mahmii!" Wihni called out, skipping steps down the pyramid.

"I see. Go ahead. Hello, Izak." Her mother called over, "Don't run, Wihni. And don't get dirty. Izakam, don't take her far."

With the restraint of a child, Wihni fast-walked, pushing a stiff jog. The multiple layers of beads around her banged into each other, sounding like a shaken rattle. Izak bounded on his cat paws toward her, closing the distance. Mentally, he made his greetings to Wihni's family before lying at Wihni's feet. Squatting down, pressing her nose to his pink mountain lion nose, her fingers buried in the scruff of his neck as she said, "I'm so glad you're here." Both could feel the eyes of Wihni's many family members on them.

"Check my fur," Izak suggested from his head to hers. Wihni glanced over her shoulder at her family. She led them to the eastside stairs, underneath where her father had recently carved her home. Leaning

against the handrail, she parted the fur by Izak's ear to check the skin for ticks he might have picked up in the forest.

"Any new word?" she asked.

"No," Izak chuckled. "Kantin sent me away."

"Why?" Wihni used heat from her fingers to loosen a tick in his neck fur. Once it was removed, she sealed it in a container to return to the forest.

"Contrary to what you believe, Wihni, you are very much a woman," Izak seethed. "They are like me, very much men. Them... looking at you like that, wanting you..."

Wihni smiled to herself, singing to him, "Somebody's jealous."

"Protective," Izak corrected. Staring into the distance, his scowl cracked into a one-sided cat grin. "And maybe a little of the other."

Laughing, she secured another tick from his back into the bag. Giving his fur a good scratching, she searched for more. "I've thought through everything lately. I cannot think of anything I did to cause this. If anyone knows, you do."

"I've been trying to find something." He rolled onto his back to give her his stomach. They both laughed a little. Using her nails, she scratched the skin under the fur. He began to purr, his eyes closing at her touch. "I can't remember one mischievous thing we've done outside our circle of friends."

"No one can force me to make a decision I do not want to make, right?"

"They haven't so far." One of his eyes opened. Heaviness settled between them. To lighten it, Izak offered, "It's not like they can take our mud house away." He rolled onto his side. Wihni's palm ran over him as they stared off into the distance. Shifting, he lay atop her feet. His voice, soft as a caress, reminded her, "No matter what."

Wihni nodded, acknowledging the promise they had made to each

other: *No matter what, we will always be friends.* For that moment, her eyes stung with all the possibilities the unknown could bring. Before the tears could fully develop, she put them away. Izak could see past the smile spread across her face to the meaning laden in her eyes as she agreed, “No matter what.”

They released the ticks in the woods beside the clan house. She whispered a prayer after them. In one shift, his fur melted into his skin, four legs becoming two, as he changed to his human form. One arm snaked around her. They both glanced back to where her family waited, making sure the wrong eyes were not watching. She leaned into his warm embrace. “There are so many important things impending at the moment.”

“There are,” he whispered. Carefully, he found a spot around her beaded headpiece to rest his chin. His hand slid along the decoration that wrapped around her braids, extending them to her feet.

“They are going to have to understand that no matter what they want,” she rested an unpainted part of her cheek against his bare chest, “three people’s happiness is at stake here. I cannot imagine anything they could say to me that would be more important.” He hovered over her hair, inhaling the sweet lilac essence. His lips pressed the curl of her earlobe. She trembled.

“I have a set of earrings that would look great with this.” They laughed, stepping away from each other. Glancing over, they made sure no one else had been close enough to hear the suggestive statement.

She wore the rawness of her fear open for him to see. Izak held an undecorated part of her cheek between his fingers. “I am... we are all here for you.”

She smiled, placing her hand against his chest. It rose and fell with his natural breath. He covered her hand with his. She let her hand trail slowly down his chest and stomach. A sly smile broached his face.

“Just checking,” Wihni defended.

“Want to check again?” he offered. “In case you missed one? Maybe check here? Or here.”

“Oh, hold on... I see one... be still.” Between her nails, she pinched the strong skin of his shoulder.

“*Ouch.*” He rubbed the skin.

“I got it.” Already she was running. Falling into their natural play, he was a step behind.

“Wihninivv iiy Wane Nawa’ee om Q’ieyanmiil, stop running!” Arundi yelled.

“You’re in trouble,” Izak teased as Wihni ducked behind a tree. Wearing his wide, crooked smile, he held on to the bark on the other side. Ducking back and forth, they dared each other to move first. Wihni bolted to the right. Izak met her there, capturing her in open arms. Bodies pressed together, the air around them came alive with electricity. They tore themselves away from the brink. He tugged lightly on her earlobe. The “if” in the air hung silent between them. Flesh met as her hand dropped to her side, catching his.

“We’re so close,” he whispered.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Shhhhh. Don’t apologize.” His thumb rubbed the palm of her hand. “Anything freely given, without testing, is not worth having. I would walk through fire to be with you. I know that now beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

“Would you? We could make that happen. Maybe we should make that a test for all the young women wanting to marry you.”

“No,” Izak insisted, “because you would do it. You absolutely would do it, crazy girl. My crazy, beautiful girl.”

Wihni leaned in, smiling against his arm. Out of the forest beside them, her cousin Lawen made a mad dash for the housing. “You did not see me!”

The lingering trace of his musk odor made both Wihni and Izak groan. Lawen charged up the steps, past Cece, into their family's home to hide.

"We're ready to go," Arundi called.

Izak squeezed Wihni's hand one last time. "No matter what."



Outside the Great House, in the heart of the land, the women and men of Wihni's family began to arrange themselves for the processional. Inside, the ceremonial drums played; singers' voices filled the air, echoing a spirit-moving song off the walls. Wihni tried to focus past the impulse to dance in order to take in the last bit of advice her family was attempting to give her.

"Remember, even though we choose not to adhere to the ways of the world out there," Niniqia warned, "his ways may be as important to him as ours are to us."

"In other words, don't jerk your chin like that to show your distaste for his world," Oga clarified.

"Give him the respect you would expect him to give you," Ioshe offered.

Wihni opened her mouth to speak.

"Even though they do not learn the deeper ways of respect," Iza interrupted.

Wihni's mouth closed.

"Speak when you are spoken to," Haanwi ordered.

"Honor the ancient's age and status." Coche straightened her granddaughter's shawl.

"No fighting!" Enada scolded. "We all know you're capable. For once, let the men take care of it."

"I will try my best." Precociousness spawned a smile.

"Unless one of them tries to take liberties with you," Arundi

interrupted. “You then have my permission to rearrange his face.”

“Thank you, Mahmii.” Wihni held on to her mother’s slim figure. “I love you.”

“I love you, my deediia — deedsweh.” Arundi squeezed her oldest baby — her only baby — and refused to let go. Another set of arms enveloped them. The women leaned into Wihni’s father, Wane’s, powerful embrace.

“You are the bravest woman I’ve ever known, Wihni,” her father said. “You have never run all the times you should have. Remember when that bull broke free from the pen? The children ran in every direction. Not you. All of five years old, you grabbed the first thing you could find, an un-tipped spear, and Izak grabbed a rake. You two yelled and screamed to keep that bull from trampling the cornfield and destroying the new crop.”

“That was brave.” Wihni burrowed into the comfort of her father’s arms.

“It was insane,” he laughed, “and brave. When that mean, studding mustang got free, you and Izak waited for him in that tree, trying to capture him yourselves.”

“Oh,” Arundi sighed in remembrance, “Izak fell and was kicked. That made a mess of his nose.”

“He still has the bump from it,” Wihni reminisced.

“You, my girl, held on to that wild horse with everything you had. The horse ran all the way to the end of the Asoodz’que steading and back before word got to us about what you had done. You held on until he was so tired that he stilled. Now, you are the only one he lets ride him. You tackled that like you face everything. This will be no different. In a few days, we will laugh together about this adventure like we do the others.” She smiled into the stern, steady face of her father, nodding.

They moved aside, making room for family to carry forward Wihni’s

greatest grandfather, the tribe's oldest member, on a decorated platform. "Are you ready, my sweet?" The worn skin of four thousand years showed in the leathery wrinkles of his skin. His mouth parted in a toothless smile, milky blind eyes finding her as easily as if they were seeing.

Wihni lovingly held his withered hand, placing a kiss on the protruding veins before raising it to her forehead. "Or... we can just make a run for it, IileNeenu!"

"Next time, Minhawaanique," he patted her head, "next time."

Since the day she was born, he had always said she reminded him of his beloved wife. Only lately had he begun to mix up their names. Wihni kissed his withered hand again. "Lead us, honored Father." She held onto the folds of her parent's clothes. Sayasada's beads looped between her fingers as she held onto her courage.