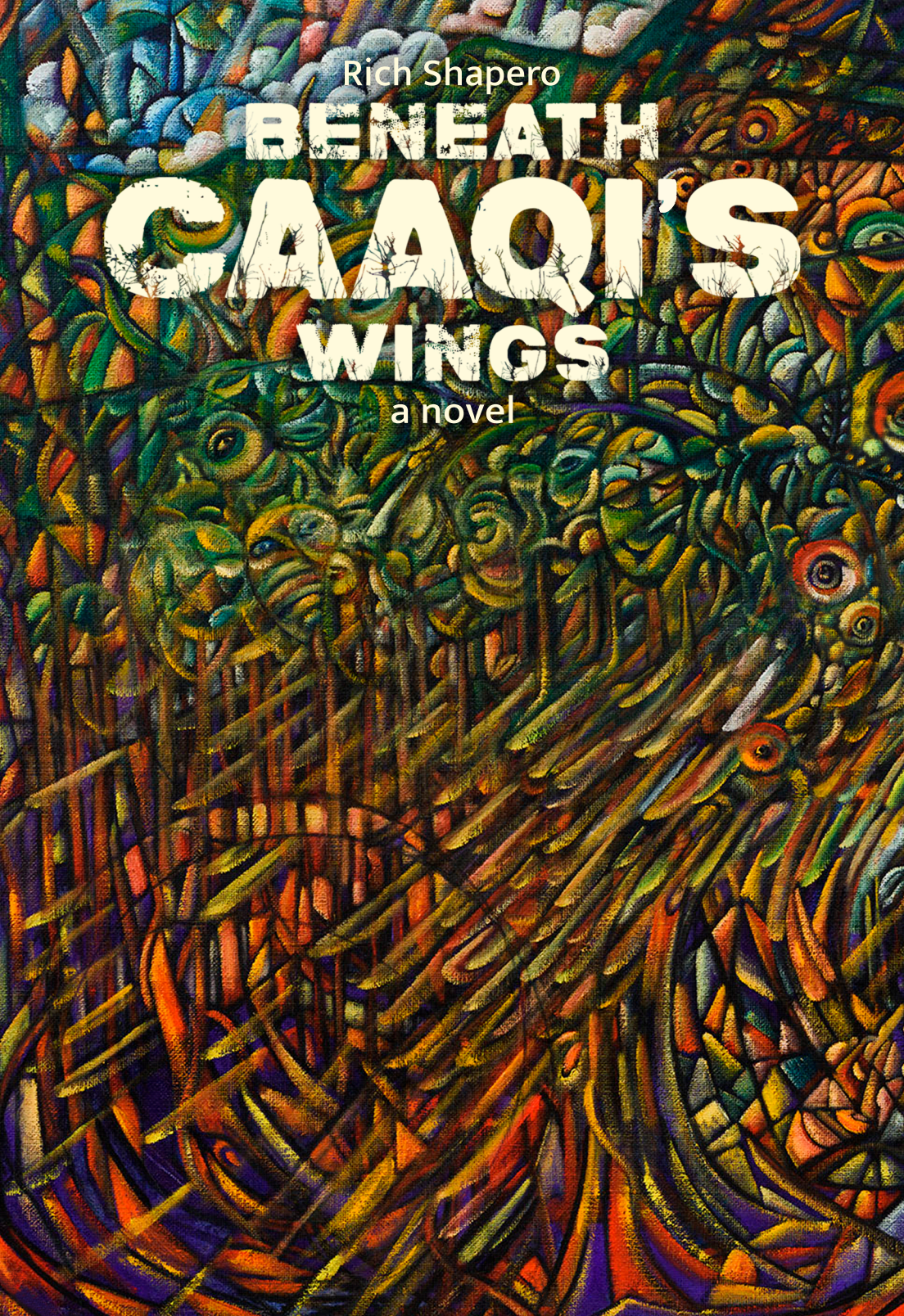




Rich Shapero

**BENEATH
CAAQI'S
WINGS**
a novel

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HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

TooFar Media
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1

Shrieks rose from the ridge, hovering and peeling, sinking through the boughs of the giant roroas on either side. Midafternoon sun lit the puzzled bark, the winding vines swollen like veins on straining arms. Panting, gasps and guffaws, choked exclamations—

None of the adults approved of the game the boys played, least of all the villa owners. Storm-the-Palace was the name Rangi had given it. In years past, the girls had often been drawn in, but the risks were greater now, the play more perilous. In addition to pushing and shoving, hands became claws and fists that dealt blows. Rather than contending with the boys, the girls watched from a few yards away.

Jema stood beside Kris, pattering while she wove a gold ribbon through the black locks above her best friend's ear.

On the hillock of blocky limestone, the boys were elbowing and butting their way to the top. The outcrop was thirty feet tall and the block sides were shear, so when someone fell,

cuts and bruises were likely. Jema looked over her shoulder. No adults in sight. When she turned back, Rangi was rising above the others. A year or two earlier, anyone might have won the scrabble, but that too had changed. The swarthy-skinned native boy, the eldest at sixteen, was always the victor now. In the spring his voice had deepened, and his shoulders were thick and muscled. As Jema watched, Wyatt croaked, waving his arms and losing his footing. Lanky, knees folded, he landed on the earth below, gasping as the visor of the sportsman's cap jumped from his brow. As he lifted himself, Jema saw that his shirt was torn. "He'll get a thrashing for that," she said.

But Kris wasn't listening. Her eyes were fixed on the top of the Palace. Rangi had reached it and stood there now, arms spread, gazing down with lordly terror.

"He's not playing," Kris said, regardful but chafed.

"He's fierce," Jema agreed. "He should give someone else a turn."

She saw Pate rising, approaching the top, kneeling over a block, boosting himself. "Pate's smarter," she murmured. "Patient. Far-seeing."

"Pate lacks cunning," Kris said.

"But he's in control of himself," Jema replied. Like Rangi, Pate was swarthy, of native heritage. The two were brothers of sorts, but different in the way they were emerging as men. "Pate's like a grownup," Jema said.

Kris met her gaze, eyes glittering. "You might be a pair."

Jema laughed, fuddled by the thought. She hugged Kris, who giggled and returned the embrace. This too had

changed. As close as they'd been for so many years, the two had grown still closer of late. Their bond had a new foundation: a consuming interest in boys. They were magically, inexplicably drawn, and they both found comfort and reassurance in sharing their feelings and imagining where those feelings might lead.

"Pate won't win," Kris said. "Watch this." And she left Jema's side, hurrying toward the Palace, hair flying. A cheer rose from the girls.

Kris barged through the melee, starting up, shoving boys aside, locked on her target. Pate was rising with his back to her. She came up behind him, gripped his shoulders and sent him tumbling down. Jema moaned for Pate and clapped for her friend.

Rangi faced Kris, snarking his lip, nostrils wide. His full cheeks, bared teeth and fiery temper menaced her. "I don't need your help," he warned. Kris gave a howl and reached for him—playful or trying to pull him down, Jema couldn't tell.

Rangi grunted and drove the heels of his hands at her sternum.

Kris teetered, hunched and came boiling back up, screaming and hurling her fist into Rangi's middle. He fell to his knees, hands down, sucking. Then he stiffened and twisted, striking Kris in the head. She collapsed like a doll stuffed with sawdust, spilling onto her side, rolling down the limestone shelves to the bottom.

Jema saw: Rangi had a rock in his hand.

Two boys cheered, but the hoots of the girls drowned

them out. Jema and the others were hurrying forward. A gash had opened in Kris' brow.

Rangi didn't care. He raised both arms, asserting his triumph.

Jema sank beside Kris, lifting her friend's head. The dark eyes flickered.

Pulling the blouse from her skirt, Jema pressed the cloth to Kris' wound. "What was that?" she shouted at Rangi.

"Don't ruin your shirt," Kris said.

"Bonehead," a girl snarled at Rangi. "It's a game," another assailed him.

"I guess I lost," Kris laughed, trying to raise herself.

Jema helped her up.

Then heads turned and Rangi's father appeared—Hunu the groundskeeper, striding toward them, face stern, with his nappy noggin and grizzled chin.

Hunu approached Kris and reached for her head. He held it in his chapped hands, touching her brow with his thumb, studying the wound with deep concern.

"It's nothing," Kris said.

Pate was by Hunu's elbow, shamefaced. Hunu turned to him. "Take care of her," he ordered.

Then Hunu headed for Rangi. Like a thundercloud rising above the jungle, he mounted the Palace, seized his son with a burly arm and dragged him wailing off the summit, cursing the boy in his native tongue. The two crossed the courtyard, headed toward Hunu's thatched hut.

Pate reached for Kris, but she shook him off. "I said it's

nothing.” She turned, following Rangi. “I’m going to kill him,” she swore.

Pate raised his brows at Jema.

No matter how angry Kris was, Jema knew, it wouldn’t matter. Kris thought about Rangi every waking hour. She went to sleep imagining she was in his arms. Her longing was a kind of furor, a mindless conviction, as if she was halfway to winning the boy with her pain. As if she was almost there.

On the steps of the Palace, boys bereft of their leader made half-hearted swings at each other, unable to duplicate Rangi’s fury.

Two other girls were at Kris’ hip. “Put a bandage on it,” Jema said softly. Kris nodded and strode away.

Jema glanced at Pate and started across the courtyard, headed toward the Governor’s villa, wondering if he would follow. He did. Then he moved beside her. The boys were dispersing now, like a school of tadpoles.

“The attraction isn’t equal,” Pate said.

Jema shook her head. “A rock.”

“He can’t help himself,” Pate said. “He has to win. There’s no rule he won’t break.”

Jema thought about how she might answer, wishing she had Kris’ courage. Then, inspired perhaps by Kris’ abandon with Rangi, she took a chance.

“You’re not that way,” she told Pate. And that was true. Though they shared their native heritage, the two boys could not have been more different.

She looked to see how her words had landed, disappointed

when Pate's gaze skittered away. He hadn't taken her words as a compliment. Was he hurt by them?

"Will Hunu beat him?" she asked.

Pate nodded. "He'll be angry with me too."

It was easy for Jema to imagine Pate being regretful or unsure of himself. But she had never seen him discouraged. Unlike the rest of them, he seemed immune to defeat. Being an orphan, she thought, had made him strong. And a little resistant, perhaps, to expressions of affection.

She had always been fond of Pate. They'd been friends since childhood. But her feelings about him were changing. "The attraction wasn't equal," Pate had said. And what about them? Something about Pate drew her. Whatever it was— He was shorter than Rangi, with a keener mind and private eyes. Not like the other boys, dopey and self-centered. But he was so much harder to fathom. I'm the one everyone likes, she reminded herself. But did that matter to Pate? He had a mind of his own.

Pate was watching her, seeing her thoughtfulness.

She smiled, a flash of affection. And then— All at once, she wanted to kiss him. To touch her lips to his for the very first time.

The impulse shocked her. I can be brave, she thought. As brave as Kris. She was attracted to Pate, in a way she'd never felt before. He seemed to understand that. He was raising his hand, perhaps to touch her shoulder. But the hand hesitated, paused in midair and returned to his side.

What did that mean? What should she do? Jema looked

away; then without even thinking, she lowered her hand to his and brushed his fingers.

A moment of great discomfort. When she looked, Pate's head was bowed. Then, as she watched, he turned away. The contact had been brief, almost involuntary. A harmless gesture—

But the mistake had been made.

Jema shivered and drew a breath. A cold breeze passed between them.

The season was changing. In the jungle, it was never as cold as it was in the capital, but you wanted a fire on chilly nights.

"We're loading the grates," Pate said.



Jema stood before the full-length mirror in her room, smoothing the shoulders on a dress made in a foreign land, white with blue piping.

Outside, with the others, things were clouded—doubtful, uncertain. But here, in front of the silvered glass, everything was as clear as could be. The reflection revealed her true nature. And Jema liked what she saw.

Good fortune had blessed her with taste and a copious wardrobe, but her real advantage was the sparkling personality that winked through her poise and gestures and her shifting expressions. Only Kris saw all of her. But everyone whose eyes fell upon her found themselves smiling. At fifteen

years, her manner was coy and enticing. Her hair was fine and scarfy, and silvery blond, and when she guided it over her shoulder—as she did now—it caught people’s eyes. She was special, they all could see that. They didn’t need to speak to her—from a distance, they knew. Jema communed with her reflection, play-acting, posing, trying on one look after another, assuring herself that she was, indeed, unique. And the disappointment with Pate faded.

She turned from the mirror, passed through the French doors and stepped out onto the Flying Terrace, gazing at the settlement, set like a jewel on the ridge, with the jungle around it. On either side, the greenery sloped steeply down, tangled and thick. One side faced the capital, impossibly distant. The other side faced the native lands, a wilderness that for generations had protected settlers from the warring tribes.

The settlement’s two villas, of similar design, faced each other across the courtyard, with the huts, shelters and outbuildings crowded at the wings’ extremities. The dwarf rail line, like a wayward liana, wound from a wood lot, past the livestock pens, around the orchard and gardens, with a loop that ran for miles through the jungle on the native side of the ridge. Jema and her parents called their villa “home” every summer, and Kris and her parents did the same.

The Chancellor and the Governor had been friends and political allies before the girls were born. They’d purchased the property together, for themselves and their wives, during their rise to power. Every summer, as heat descended on the capital, the men handed their authority to deputies and retreated

to their private world, forgetting the duties of state for a while. When they were young, the girls had argued about which was more powerful. Kris contended that her father, as Chancellor, was a national leader; Jema argued that the Chancellor was appointed, while the Governor of the largest province was elected and had a mandate from the people.

It was just youthful quibbling. On the estate all the men were important, and the women too; every summer, the pieces fit together. Some were employed full time, others were only with them during the holiday. The class distinctions that prevailed in the capital were ignored, and all were treated as equals. For the solstice, Kris' mother hosted the annual garden party, which the residents greatly enjoyed.

But the holiday spirit had ended three months before. Unrest in the capital protracted their summer stay, and then a smoldering insurrection had forced the two leaders and their wives to return, along with some of the staff. Men cleared the overgrown trail for the horses and wagons, hacking vines and branches with machetes, building rafts to ford the rivers, and the caravan departed. Fourteen children and a dozen adults remained. During the month now passed, there had been no communication. The Governor's words still echoed in Jema's ears. "You'll be safer here." How close to the conflict were they? Had they been taken captive? Were they even alive?

She descended the tiled stair, seeing Kris crossing the courtyard from the Chancellor's villa. Jema spent her evenings there, in her friend's home. "Don't worry" was the last thing Jema's mother had said.

At the bottom of the stair, she took a floret of rata blooms from the vase and snapped the long stem off.

Jema met Kris on the outdoor walkway. Her forehead was bandaged, and the flesh around it was rosy and puffed. "I love that dress," Jema said, placing the rata stem behind Kris' ear so the spray hid the bandage.

"I should know better," Kris laughed and took Jema's hand.

The two girls started down the colonnade together.

"A hundred years ago," Kris said, "his relatives were eating each other."

"I walked back to the villa with Pate," Jema told her.

"He really likes you."

"I'm not sure," Jema shared her doubt. "Maybe a little."

"A lot," Kris said. "He's just shy. In a good way, not like Rangi."

"I can't tell what he's thinking."

"Do you want him to kiss you?" Kris asked.

Jema laughed and nodded.

"Put your lips close to his," Kris said, making a spout of her mouth. "If he asks if he can, say 'yes.' He might not ask. He might just do it."

Kris slowed and stopped. She looked around them and lowered her voice. "When people kiss, sometimes they play with each other's tongues. I've been reading about it in one of Mother's books."

Jema stared at her, and Kris stared back.

"I'm going to do that," Kris said.

"I am too," Jema agreed. They said things to each other they wouldn't say to anyone else.

"Boys don't know a thing about love," Kris said. "It's up to us. We have to get them going. Kissing is just the beginning." Her eyes glinted like the Governor's razor. "If you let Pate kiss you, he'll want more."

"I'm not ready for that," Jema said.

"I am," Kris replied.

Hurried steps sounded behind them, and a voice called out. They turned to see Ry-Lynn approaching. A big girl of fourteen years, with sandy hair and a triangle chin.

"It's your best friend," Kris smirked.

Ry-Lynn waved some papers before her. She wanted to be close to Jema and often imagined she was.

"Look," Ry-Lynn exclaimed, wiggling in front of Kris, presenting the papers to Jema. "Answers to next week's test," she beamed. "Wyatt copied them for me."

Jema returned the smile. Wyatt's mother was their teacher. Wyatt, it seemed, had succumbed to Ry-Lynn's requests.

"He's very upset," Ry-Lynn laughed. "He's such a good boy."

"Thanks," Jema said.

"History," Kris sneered.

Ry-Lynn folded the papers and put them in the placket pocket of Jema's dress. Then she stepped aside, and Jema and Kris continued down the colonnade.

The boys' shouts reached them from the woodland beyond, with Rangi's foremost. Whatever punishment he'd received was behind him.

As they approached a vine-covered outbuilding, a small fist knocked on the window. "Keep walking," Kris said.

Jema saw Melody through the pane, her nose pressed to the glass. "Jema, Jema," the little girl cried. Jema halted.

Mr. Trett, Melody's father, appeared behind her and raised the sash. The estate manager was a calm bald man who knew the ways of adults, in addition to the workings of water pumps and boilers, the tallies of foods and supplies, and the logic of all things mechanical and precise. It was a marvel to Jema that Mr. Trett could bear the burden of domestic order for so many. Before the Governor and Chancellor departed, they'd given him full charge.

Melody reached her arms out. "Can I come?"

Kris shook her head.

"Of course," Jema said. The little girl had an Asian look, with black hair and secluded eyes. She was five, liked to feed the lambs in the paddock and take care of her doll, and she craved time with the older girls. Jema circled her waist and pulled her through the window.

"It's not your responsibility," Mr. Trett said. But Melody was an only child, the youngest on the estate; and Mrs. Trett, being the Chancellor's assistant, had left with the caravan. In the office with her father, Melody was a constant distraction.

"I'm going to see Hunu and Caaqi," Jema told her.

Kris groaned.

"I want to pet him," Melody said.

"You're coming with me." And Kris led her away.



When Jema arrived at Hunu's hut, Pate was straddling the weathered bench, chopping wood with a hand ax. He paused, and for a moment she was startled by his look, deep and private, only for her. She allowed herself to bask in his attention, letting him see how glad it made her. Was he sorry he'd recoiled when she'd touched his hand? Jema turned her head.

Hunu was cutting up fruit with an oversize blade. He was wrinkled and graying but still very strong. She could see the tautness in his neck and the force in his strokes. There was a bucket of nuts on the ground by his boot.

As she approached, Hunu lowered the large blade.

"I fished this out of my trunk this morning," he said. "I thought, 'It was made to be used.'"

Jema could tell he was wading into one of his stories.

"It's a spearhead," Pate said, stepping beside her. "It belonged to a chief."

"One of my kin." Hunu motioned Jema closer, kneeling and turning the blade.

It was tarnished, mottled with circlets and trimmed with a silver edge.

"He used it in the tribal wars," Hunu said.

"Cannibal wars," Pate nodded.

The island's native history, and the legacy of cannibalism,

had exerted its fear and fascination on Jema from an early age. The stories raised questions about the human family, about reckless and bloody impulses that had threatened once and might threaten again. Matters that shouldn't be forgotten, puzzles that must be solved.

Hunu's brow rumped. "At dawn, the chief wakes them. 'Start up your ovens, boys. We've a long day ahead.' When a warrior falls, they hack him to pieces and have him for lunch. Then they return to battle." He saw Jema's reaction and laughed.

She laughed back. Pate touched the blade.

There was something about Hunu and his stories that made it easy for them to be together. Jema wished it was like that when she and Pate were alone.

"It speared men," Hunu said, "and eels too. The chief had a taste for both, so they mingled the meats and baked them together. It remembers." He put his thumb to the silver edge and closed his eyes, as if the blade had its own desires and he could discern them. "It's not living now," he said. "But once it was."

Hunu loved the past, and so did Pate—not the pale history that Wyatt's mom taught—but the past that was part of the jungle, dense and lush and wet, where light rarely reached the forest floor; magic was everywhere, everything had an attraction or repulsion to everything else; a delicious place, but terrible too; a place where people might go mad, reverting to a savagery they had never successfully shed.

Pate didn't know who his father was. Hunu had adopted him and raised him and his true son, Rangī, on stories about their native past. The other kids ignored the old man, but Jema found him endlessly interesting. From the Flying Terrace, she would watch him grooming the light-splashed arbors, repairing fences, oiling the axles of the Royal Express, knowing that he carried the jungle inside him, wondering what part of the magical realm he would unfold next. War camps and shelters, grisly middens, rings and pits for divine frenzies and ritual beheadings— No one knew the full extent of the island's mysteries, Hunu said, its haunted recesses, its undreamt-of creatures— The jungle's far reaches were still unexplored.

Caaqi shrieked.

"I think our bird's hungry," Hunu said.

He nodded, set the spearhead aside and rose. The old man circled the hut and loosed the latch of an open-air shed. When he returned, he was holding a large wooden cage before him. Through the bars, Jema could see the wild parrot gripping the gnarled branch it used as a perch.

The bird stooped his head, as if peering at her beneath some barrier. He was fourteen inches in height and his chest, like his back, was lapped with chocolate scallops. When he unfolded himself—as he did now—his underside was woven like a basket with scarlet and gold. He threw his head back, fanning his tail and spreading his wings.

"Caaqi," he rasped, with a voice like Hunu's.

Jema clapped her hands. Pate laughed. The bird's black eye gleamed.

Every summer, like all the kids, she'd heard parrots calling from the jungle, and from time to time she'd spotted one winging through the crowns of the trees. But she'd never seen one up close. A month before, the day after her parents left with the caravan, Hunu had found the wounded bird in the woods, in a net of emerald ferns. One of Caaqi's wings was bloody and limp. Hunu built the cage, and they'd nursed him back to health. Jema came every day to help, and the visits seemed to fill the void of her parents' absence, along with bringing her closer to Pate.

"Tribute," Hunu said, nodding at the fruit board and the bucket of nuts.

Pate grabbed the offerings. Jema crept forward till her face was a foot from the bars. Caaqi's claws were the color of bone. His eye was a convex night with a geometry of stars, and as she watched, rays flashed and speared, connecting the stars to each other.

Pate pushed cracked nuts through the bars. Caaqi hopped down from his perch and retrieved one with his claw. He lifted the shell, toes on either side, like the Governor holding a goblet.

"His wing's healed," Hunu said. "He's ready."

Caaqi peered over his goblet at Jema. "Ready," he rasped. Then he pecked the shell, removing the lobes of nut.

Hanging from the peak of the cage, Jema saw, was a large

magenta flower shaped like a trumpet, its flared mouth down. It had a powerful fragrance.

Hunu touched the flower's stalk. "The tribes called this Caaqi's Breath. It's always in bloom."

"Even in the winter?" Jema asked.

Hunu nodded. "The trick is finding them. I came across it in the forest this morning. It's a sign."

"Of what?"

"It's time to release him," Hunu said.

Jema wasn't sure what that would mean for her and Pate. The parrot seemed woven into the new magnetism between them.

"Caaqi won't forget us," Hunu told her. "He knows who we are. He has many ways to reach us. When your thoughts are drifting, he might land on your shoulder. When you're asleep, he might fly through your dream. When you're in the forest, he might emerge from a cloud of Caaqi's Breath pollen."

Jema could see the golden powder on the trumpet's anther. She imagined a billow of glowing dust filling the air, sifting around her.

"Caaqi brings change," Hunu said. "That's what they thought. Some find victory. Some find love. Some lose their senses."

The language Hunu used was turning the parrot into a creature of fable. Caaqi's head turned down, accepting the role it seemed. Jema imagined his proud silhouette plummeting through the roroa boughs, underwings flashing, batting

and cupping as he called her name. The silhouette reached with its claws and settled on her arm.

“Master of the past,” Hunu said. “A fiery protector. Author of love and bloodshed—the things that frighten us most.”

I’m not frightened of love, Jema thought. And then—

A rasping scream made her jump.

Caaqi’s head had turned. He was staring at her single-eyed. Between the bright spokes, stars pricked and glittered, a cruel hunger fixed on her with such force that she felt herself falling and reached out her hand. Then, as quickly, the fierce zodiac was drowned in black, and Caaqi was just a parrot again.

Jema picked up a wedge of fruit, licked the juice that ran down her wrist and pushed the wedge between the bars. Caaqi took it, crushing, swallowing.

The parrot blinked, gripped his perch and rocked forward, clicking his beak. Was he about to say something?

“The cage is a jail to him,” Pate said.

“You can’t keep parrots long,” Hunu agreed.

For a moment, Jema thought he’d said “parents.”

Footsteps were crunching the gravel. Jema met Pate’s eyes, but she couldn’t tell what was behind them. Pate turned and she followed his gaze.

Rangi appeared on the path, swung the gate back and strode toward them, swatting bugs, sweating and wiping his brow with his shirt.

“Cannibal tales?” he said with a note of scorn.

Jema saw Hunu’s expression sour.

"I love them," she said, speaking loudly enough for the graying father to hear.

Rangi rolled his eyes. "He makes them up while he's trimming your hedge."

Hunu faced his son, wincing, feeling an old wound. "Don't you have something to tend to?"

Caaqi seemed engaged with the conflict, edging closer on his perch, tilting his head toward Rangi in what seemed a gesture of encouragement.

Jema looked at Hunu, but the groundskeeper had already lifted the cage and turned, starting back to the shed.



That night, the two girls dropped off quickly. Kris was a sound sleeper—the rigors of being Kris demanded relief. Jema woke before dawn beside her best friend, with a strange feeling. She'd emerged from a dream both alarming and rapturous. She was standing in a clearing surrounded by giant trees, a place of foresight and magic, alone in the darkness. Her child's self was dribbling out of her middle and down her front, soaking into the jungle floor. And as that familiar self disappeared, in its place, a newer, more exciting self lifted up, fountaining into her body, glittering in every corner. This luminous self was someone she barely knew.

Jema rose and put on her clothes. She could smell the sweet odor of roroa, and as she passed the leaded windows, she saw flames in the fireplace. With the first chill of fall,

they'd let it burn all night. She left the Chancellor's villa quietly, found her way along the hedges to the low stone wall and opened the gate. The sky was thick with stars, and the winking lights prickled her arms.

Hunu's hut came into view. She approached it with soft steps, imagining the old man and the two native boys asleep inside. When she reached the shed, she touched the door, opening it slowly.

The fragrance of the trumpet reached her. She could see the ghostly bloom at the top of the cage. The scent was so fresh and potent, it seemed to bear you away—to some other time, some other place. Was this how you felt when the golden pollen of Caaqi's Breath was sifting around you?

She could hear the parrot rustling. He knows I'm here, she thought.

"Caaqi?" she whispered, rounding the cage.

A starlit eye blinked from the gloom.

Why had he fallen from the sky, she wondered. And why so close to her villa? Did he have some purpose? Was he there for a reason?

A fiery protector. Author of love and bloodshed. Could he read her mind? Could he feel her secret desires?

If Caaqi had some understanding of the new self releasing inside her, perhaps he had come to father her future, to do what the Governor had done for his little girl.

A laugh left her lips. What was she thinking?

Jema stood in the darkness eyeing the bird's silhouette—his feathered crown and his crescent beak.

After a time she retreated, returning the way she had come, though she didn't feel at all like the person who had passed that way a short while before.



At dawn, before Kris and the others were stirring, Jema crossed the courtyard, entered her villa and found her way to the Governor's study. The shelves on all sides were loaded with books, many first editions signed by the authors. The books always gave her comfort, as she felt her father's presence among them. Some who addressed him by his title thought him teachy, so when she called him "Governor" it amused them both.

She pulled one of his favorites from the shelf, sat in her father's chair and began to read. An hour later, sunlight appeared in the transom window and she hurried upstairs, recalling it wasn't a school day. After washing she selected a dress of green chiffon, and when it was on, she turned in front of the mirror thinking of Kris, wanting to share the strange dream with her. The dream and her encounter with Caaqi.

She found Kris and the girls at the table in the coppice, sitting in the shade, jabbering while they thumbed through a half-dozen magazines taken by Kris from her mother's closet. Jema started toward her, but Kris was immersed, so when Ry-Lynn waved, Jema sat on the bench beside her.

"I love you in green," Ry-Lynn said, smoothing Jema's collar.

Jema smiled and sniffed the air. “Limes,” she guessed. Ry-Lynn was a medley of scents—berries and plums one day, citrus the next—whatever was ripe in the orchards tended by her mother. Finger, Ry-Lynn’s kid brother, tugged her dress and moaned. He was too young to play with the boys. Ry-Lynn tousled his hair. “Go sit by the tree.”

“I want to look like her,” Dee said, pointing at an open magazine.

“You already do,” Ry-Lynn observed.

Dee was thin as a sapling. Once shy and demure, something had happened that summer. On her fourteenth birthday, she was overcome by self-loathing. Dee was starving herself.

“This one looks like your mom,” Venus said, smiling at Jema.

“She does,” Jema agreed. “I like her necklace.”

“She went crazy,” Kris said. “She died in a sanitarium.”

Venus sighed, as if the sad end was her own.

She’s carrying such a heavy load, Jema thought. Poor Venus wished she was tall, but she was short and pudgy. She had a pug nose, which she wished was pointy. And being eleven, she wished she was older. When she ate something sweet, she wished she could stop. She wished she had Dee’s discipline and Kris’ grit. By the time she reached Jema’s age, Venus had told her, she hoped her failings would be behind her.

Jema rose, looking to Kris, wanting to call her aside. But her friend was absorbed by the images on the well-worn pages. Glamorous and coy, frozen in youth, dazzled by sun and floodlight. Could your life be that full, your waist that small?

Kris was as blinded by hope as any of them. Jema recalled her dream, doubting that Kris would understand.

She turned, stepped toward the tree and sat down beside Finger.

He snuffled, squirming closer, leaning his head against her shoulder.

“Give it time,” Jema said.



The children gathered in the Chancellor's villa for lunch and again for dinner, summoned by the clanging of the cook's copper bell. Pate missed both meals. Jema heard he was in the woods with Hunu felling trees, so when dinner ended, she followed the narrow-gauge rails away from the settlement, listening for the loco. Its rumble and squeal had a home in her heart.

The Governor, whose love of trains dated back to his boyhood, had built the dwarf rail system for his own entertainment. He would dress in outdated garb and play engineer, one hand sounding the whistle, the other on the throttle, pulling a single passenger car. Over time as more track was laid, he thought the Royal Express could have practical utility, so three flat cars were added and a long loop was laid into the unlogged native jungle.

Jema heard the chugging and the little loco appeared, sparking and creaking, cab red, roof green, rounding a curve. She could see Hunu through the glass and Pate beside him,

feeding wood to the boiler. On the first flat car, logs were piled. As the loco reached her, Hunu waved and Pate jumped from the cab, landing on the rail bed and skipping up beside her. The second flat car passed, and Jema saw the carcasses of lambs recently slaughtered. They still had their fleece, and their heads were turned, so their fate wasn't obvious. They might have been enjoying the ride.

A sweet perfume reached her, the sun on young wool, and then the resin scent of hewn logs on the third flat car as it passed. An odor of grease and boiler smoke rose from Pate's dungarees. The dream of a new self seemed to have sharpened her senses.

The train vanished around the bend, and its sounds faded. They followed the tracks, walking in silence. There wasn't much space between them, but Jema felt it keenly. She longed to take Pate's hand. Twilight was settling over the woodland on either side. A small hedge of luminescent maruna began to glow.

They reached the depot, crossed the courtyard and entered the Great Room of the Governor's villa. A few of the kids were mingling there, as they often did at the end of the day. When Rodney saw Jema, he approached with Snugg beside him. The two boys were best friends and an unlikely pairing: Rodney immense and powerful for his fifteen years, while Snugg was delicate, almost elfin.

"The fire's dying," Rodney complained. "Snugg is cold."

Jema laughed. "You might have added some wood."

On the stone apron of the fireplace, there were sections

of log and a hatchet and splitting stump. Pate set to work, and the wood flew apart, clattering on the stones, the bright salmon-orange of the roroa laid bare.

Jema retrieved the fly-aways, filling her arms and setting them on the scorched apron. In the throat of the fireplace, a gray mound of ashes was still smoking, sending tendrils into the blackened flu.

It happened quickly, like a trap being sprung. Pate tipped the split logs together, leaned forward and blew on the ash at the center.

Jema heard an explosive *pop*, felt a searing heat as the fireball bloomed and the eruption rose. It seemed to rush through her, as if she and Pate were the wood, and the fire was pulling them with it, through the dark tunnel and into sky.

Creosote came loose, crashing onto the grate, flaming gold, tumbling over the apron and the parquet floor.

Pate's eyes flared, reflecting the glow. "Leave," he muttered, and then he was shouting, "Get out, get out." But his words were masked by the roar of the venting.

Jema grabbed Rodney's shoulder and Snugg's hand. "Fire," she cried, and the kids in the Great Room bolted as one through the giant doors chanting, "Fire, fire!"

Outside the villa, Pate scanned the courtyard. Jema saw grownups emerging from huts and outbuildings in response to the cries.

"We need Hunu," Pate said.

She turned to look. The air above the villa chimney was blurred and smoky.

Could it be stopped? Wyatt's dad appeared, hurrying forward, waving his hands. Then Mr. Trett with Melody in his arms, and Hunu barking orders and pointing.

Where the chimney emerged from the roof, Jema saw, the mossy shingles were steaming. Low flames appeared, attacking the bricks—the channel that had imprisoned them for so many years.

Wyatt's dad was unspooling hoses. Others clanged forward, arms full of buckets. Mr. Trett sputtered self-accusingly: the chimney hadn't been properly cleaned that fall. The adults were in motion; but the fire, it seemed to Jema, was moving much faster.

The roof flames rose. Spirals of sparks were caught by the breeze and scattered downwind, some falling on the arbors and winking out, others landing on thatched roofs and limestone tiles.

Through the melee, Jema saw the hut where Ry-Lynn lived burst into flames. The children were gathered now in the courtyard before the Governor's villa, watching. Dread appeared on Pate's face and horror on Snugg's.

A line of adults formed, and they began passing buckets of water to each other. Rangi waved his arm to the boys. "Come on," he shouted, but none moved to help.

Mr. Trett lurched toward them with Melody on his hip, looking for the first time like he was not in control. He thrust Melody into Jema's arms. "My doll, my doll," the child cried. "We'll find it," Jema assured her. The air around them was thick with smoke.

“All of you,” Mr. Trett ordered the children, “into the coach house.”

Why there? Jema thought.

“We can carry buckets,” Rangi protested.

“You’re coming with me,” Mr. Trett barked.

He led them at a run, yelling and herding the group toward the small stone building, and when he reached it, he slid open the metal door and motioned them in.

“Stay here. Don’t leave,” he directed. Venus was wide-eyed, gazing numbly at the mowers, shovels and rakes. “Understand?” Mr. Trett pointed at Kris, giving her the fault if any disobeyed. “I’ll be back,” he told them. Melody’s cries rose to a siren-howl as he closed the door.

Jema scanned the group, counting heads. All fourteen of them were there.

Rangi sat on a harrow. Finger knelt by his shin. “They treat us like babies,” Rangi grumbled. “No one lets me do anything,” Finger said.

The coach house had two dusty windows. Kris, Jema and a couple of the girls crowded around one. Melody was shaking in Jema’s arms, tears washing her cheeks. The adults were carrying a ladder and a big canvas.

“What are they doing?” Kris wondered.

Pate came up behind them. “Trying to choke the fire,” he guessed, peering through the window.

“We could be helping,” Rangi growled. He was up now, headed toward the other window. “That won’t work,” he said, looking out. “They’re too late.”

Maybe he's right, Jema thought. The Great Room was on fire. There were flames in the windows.

"You don't know," Wyatt said, swinging away from the glass, pulling his visor down.

Kris gripped Jema's shoulder. "He's climbing the ladder."

When Jema turned back, she could see Hunu halfway up it with the canvas over his shoulder. Another man was behind him trying to help, wrestling with the load.

"That's my dad," Ry-Lynn said with a tremulous voice. "My dad's with him."

Jema could see the two men mounting the eaves near the flaming chimney. Pate had fallen silent, watching with a new apprehension.

"The roof's on fire," Rodney mumbled in disbelief.

Hunu stood on it now, crossing the blazing shingles, as sure as he was when he padded through the garden, a profusion of flames growing around him.

The roof was burning, Jema thought, and the two men were adding their weight to it. She could see them approach the chimney, struggle to open the canvas, each gripping a corner like two women hanging laundry out to dry.

Rangi had bowed his head. Jema saw him raise a trembling hand and put it over his eyes. Despite the contempt and resentment, Hunu was his father.

As she turned back, the wind snapped the canvas away. Then the unbelievable happened: the burning circle of roof around the chimney, on which the two men stood, collapsed. Ry-Lynn's dad was sucked into the hole. Hunu clung,

swinging in the gap, arms burning, his hair and face too. A breathless moment, then his grip gave and he sank into the blaze.

It was like a hole had opened inside her. Jema felt Pate shudder, and she moved closer, hugging Melody tightly, the warmth of the little girl's body between them. Caught in her own shock at Hunu's loss, she could barely imagine Pate's and was unprepared when she felt his arm circling her waist. *He needs me*, she thought.

Ry-Lynn faced the window, eyes wide. Her mouth opened, but no sound emerged. Rangi turned away, stepping to a dark corner, like a child who'd been reprimanded.

"What happened?" Finger asked.

Outside, the roof of the villa continued to collapse, triggering explosions that sent glowing detritus in every direction. The thatch of the schoolroom was burning. The roofs of other cottages glittered with embers and tufts of fire.

Pate raised his head. Jema saw him face Rangi, and their eyes met. For a moment, the rivalry seemed to dissolve. Then Pate's nose twitched.

He turned, searching, fixing on the near window's corner. Hay stacked against the outside wall of the coach house was smoking, and the smoke was seeping through the jamb and beneath the door, collecting around their feet.

"We've got to get out of here," Pate said.

Rangi straightened, nodding. Venus coughed. As the kids watched, the smoke rose to their knees. Kris stepped toward Rangi. He strode to the coach house door and slid it open.

Snugg looked alarmed. "Mr. Trett said—"

"Forget that," Rangi snarled, grabbing Kris by the arm. Ry-Lynn was sobbing. "What happened?" Finger insisted.

Pate urged Jema toward the door. For a moment, she imagined the Governor had paused and looked south, seeing the smoke leagues away.

Snugg was coughing, and Wyatt and Venus, and Rodney too.

"Hold hands." Pate spoke calmly, as if panic would use the last of their air. He clasped Jema's hand. She took Ry-Lynn's, and Ry-Lynn took Finger's. "Don't let go," Pate said.

"Follow me." Rangi reached for Kris, got hold of her wrist and dragged her through the opening. The others followed, hands linked.

Outside, breathing was easier, but what Jema saw was so much worse. Flames were everywhere. Most of the huts and cottages were burning. Through a drifting smudge, she caught sight of her home. The upper story was a snapping inferno, and the lower was curtained with scarlet and gold.

Rangi led them across the moss-mortared pavers to the slanted door of an underground cellar. But the door was padlocked. The smoke was swirling, embers falling through it. Pate shouted to Rangi and pointed. "The train." The two turned together. The Royal Express car wasn't made of wood, Jema thought. And the depot was brick, with a rocky barricade around it.

Rangi nodded and waved to the others, and they started for the train. Melody's face was soot-stained and striped with

tears. She couldn't stop crying. Jema held tight to Ry-Lynn, and behind Ry-Lynn was Finger. Suddenly, with a poignance that would haunt them later, Finger yowled like he was wasp-stung and shouted, "They need our help." He tore free of his sister and raced back across the courtyard.

Ry-Lynn whirled and went running after him, and Jema followed, holding Melody close. Glimpses of Finger came and went as smoke from the burning villa roiled over the courtyard. Were others behind them? Jema couldn't tell. Finger disappeared in the smoke. Melody began to cough, and then Jema did too, but she continued forward, eyes streaming. She lost sight of Ry-Lynn, then stumbled over her, huddled on the ground, choking and struggling for breath. Jema, cradling Melody, tried to help Ry-Lynn up, and then Pate grabbed them both, hurrying them back across the courtyard, toward the train and safety.

Wyatt emerged from the smoke and reached for Ry-Lynn. "The grownups will find him," Wyatt told her. The chain of kids was moving again, blundering through the smoke like a blind worm. Jema was breathless, but Pate was pulling her. They crossed the railroad tracks.

Rangi reached the Royal Express and opened the door of the passenger car. He and Pate urged the others in, helping the smaller ones up the steps. Jema climbed aboard with Melody in her arms. She collapsed in a seat, and a few moments later Pate sank beside her. When the others had boarded, Rangi joined them and closed the door.

Jema drew deep breaths, trying to calm herself, looking

around. The fanciful decor was jarring—the brass fittings, blue velvet curtains and upholstery woven with lianas and ferns. Many birthdays had been celebrated here, with cake and punch for the kids in the moving car, while the Governor manned the loco.

Whimpers, coughing, sighs of relief— Then they crowded the windows.

The settlement was a bowl of fire. Nothing else moved; no man or woman, no child or animal—only leaping flames and boiling smoke. The blaze was consuming Hunu's hut, Jema saw.

Rangi was counting—eleven, twelve, thirteen. A kind of responsibility had descended on him. Jema saw it, and the others did too. Despite his swagger and malice, he was a leader.

"We're all here except Finger," Rangi said.

Ry-Lynn sobbed, "I should have hung on to him."

Rangi collapsed on a seat by himself.

Kris was still standing. Jema looked at her. "I need to be with Pate."

Kris nodded. "I'll bunk with Ry-Lynn."

"I'm hungry," Venus whined. Dee squeezed the younger girl's shoulder. "You can be with me," Dee said, lowering herself. Her slight body took little space on the seat.

Through the window, fire lit the darkness. Ash was falling like snow. The night, Jema knew, would be cold and they had no blankets. Pate rested his head on her shoulder, and a few minutes later, he'd closed his eyes. He seemed restless at first,

adjusting and twisting. Was he as troubled as she was, thinking about the fire they'd birthed and the deaths it had caused? She stroked his hair, and his agitation seemed to subside.

What were the grownups doing, she worried. She would never see Hunu again, or his hut, or the parrot he had meant to release—

Melody squirmed in her lap for a while longer, then she too was calm. Finally Jema closed her eyes. Respite came quickly. Lulled by the crackling of flames and the thud of timbers, she slept like she was under a spell.

A dream— Jema entered it running, as Finger had run into the burning. A dream of the past, of a paradise forgotten, revived and returning. Her father was in the Great Room, her mother in bed; and in the study she was curled in the Governor's chair, thumbing the pages of a first edition. Hours came and went, days and years—

Was she still dreaming, or had she emerged from sleep? Jema felt or heard something that caused her to wake, or imagine she had. She raised her shoulders and parted her lids, or imagined she did. She turned and peered through the Express car window and saw something that couldn't have been real.

Amid the shifting tapers of flame, giant columns of smoke were rising, thick and dark, like the bars of a cage. And in the sky above, a great winged creature was soaring, finally set free. His wings were wide, with chocolate feathers and ragged edges. As they batted, they flattened the petering

blazes, but the Great Caaqi paid no mind. He cared nothing for the Governor's villa or what remained.

Jema saw the great parrot's head and his crescent beak. The black in his eyes dissolved, showing her his excitement and pride. It was as if he knew some wish of hers, some secret desire that not even she was aware of. That's why he'd come. That's why Caaqi was here.

He tilted his wings, he lowered his head, gliding toward her.

Closer and closer— Until his looming sucked the breath from her lungs, until his furious wings rocked the car, until the scream in his throat drowned her own.

Caaqi's cryptic eye blackened the glass and Jema sank down.

Much later, in the hour before dawn, she could hear a steady rain falling.

To Jema, still half asleep, the rain brought peace. Caaqi had passed. The burning was over. With a power gentle but conclusive, the water's long diagonals cleared the smoke and silenced the hissing remains.

2

The windows of the train car were fogged and glowing with pink light. The drumming of the rain had ended. Jema raised herself, feeling the weight of Melody's shoulders on her middle. Pate was huddled beside her, eyes closed but stirring. In the night, his hand had fallen on her breast. Jema lifted it off and smoothed her front.

Other eyes opened. Snugg, Ry-Lynn. Dee looked gaunt and unrested. The thirteen were stretching and straightening, staring wordlessly at each other.

Rangi twisted his head on his neck. Jema looked at the door of the car, remembering him closing it. The grownups don't know we're here, she thought. Wyatt blinked at her beneath his visor. Rodney frowned. Jema worried about the adults. Had they found an unburnt roof to bed down beneath? Or sought shelter in the forest?

Melody raised her head. "I'm hungry."

Mr. Trett, Jema thought, would be worried about his daughter.

The passenger car was brimming with silent dread and speculation. The enormity of what had happened was too much for any of them.

Rangi swore and stood. "Let's have a look."

He marched to the door and opened it. Feeling the nudge of cold air, Jema helped Melody to her feet. Then Pate and the others stood as one and filed out of the car.

On the ground was a windrow of soot and ash that the rain had washed from the car's roof. Rangi led the group past the loco and across the tracks. Before them, the sun was rising over a steaming ruin. The summer estate was a blackened crater, with the charred remains of the villas on either side. Amid heaps of timber, roof spans and scorched plaster, a mangled passage or a crumbling wall appeared. The outbuildings were blasted caves, puddles and pyres of smoldering ash between.

Kris scanned the ruins. Jema could see the fear in her eyes. There were no adults in sight.

"They're looking for us," Venus said.

Wyatt turned, and so did Ry-Lynn, gazing at the vestiges of their homes.

"We're safe," Rangi bellowed. "We're here." He listened for a response.

No one answered.

"Wake up, will you," Rangi demanded.

No movement in the courtyard or at the jungle borders, no movement in the smoky waste. The char was so bright after

the night's rain, it looked painted with black lacquer.

"Please," Snugg cried out.

"Father?" Wyatt swept the smoking grounds.

Jema thought of her parents, in the capital or wherever they might be. They would have no way of knowing what happened. Rangi was striding toward the remains of the Governor's villa. She followed, and so did Pate, with Melody between them. The others were moving too.

When Rangi reached the portico, he stopped. All that remained was the stony threshold. You could see through the villa now—pillars of blasted brick, knee-high vestiges of interior walls. The stair leading up to the second floor was intact, but everything around it was gone. Beyond the blackened spars, the forest was visible, as green as ever.

Pate was peering at her. Jema met his gaze. They had started the fire, she thought. And the blaze had destroyed the Governor's dream, a paradise for them all—destroyed his dream and released a fury no one could control.

The image of Caaqi returned, flying over her burning home, great wings fanning. What was the parrot now but a looming sense of misfortune?

Rangi backed up, grabbed a charred timber and thrust it into the smoking rubble by the villa entry. He dug for a moment, then raised his head and ordered others to follow his lead. Pate nodded to Jema and stooped for a beam. He seemed to understand what Rangi was doing. Jema let go of Melody's hand and found a timber for herself. Others stepped forward—Kris and Dee, Rodney and Snugg.

As Jema shifted a crumbling rafter, exposing live coals, she remembered Hunu and Ry-Lynn's dad on the roof. The grownups had gathered here to help the two men. Ten feet away Rangi grunted, lifting a short span of rail and two steps of a ladder. Pate and Ry-Lynn, Snugg and Wyatt—they were all digging now, pushing charred wood and burnt plaster aside. Rangi seemed fiercely determined. Then he shrank back.

"Corpses," he said.

The word shook Jema. She followed his gaze.

Arms, a leg, Mr. Trett's face, blackened and torn.

"Don't let her see," Pate hissed.

Jema hurried to lead Melody away, while Pate made herding motions to Kris. She responded, turning Venus aside.

A dozen retreating steps and Jema looked back in time to hear Rodney shout. Snugg was holding in both arms what appeared to be a dressmaker's blackened dummy. The sight bristled the hairs on Jema's neck. The dummy's head had hanks of blonde hair—Snugg was holding his mother.

Rodney hurried toward him. Snugg seemed not to see him or anyone else. He was dragging the dummy, stumbling, sobbing and incoherent. Only after he'd fallen did he loose his hold. He jumped up, slapping his smoldering pants and howling while his mother's body smoked in a wallow of charred debris.

Others were stepping forward, calling for their parents as if they might be roused. Dee staggered among the steaming pyres. Wyatt tightroped over a ruck of beams. A grim chorus

rose as one after another discovered a body or a blackened limb.

It was clear now what had happened. Beneath the remains of the Flying Terrace lay the grownups' crushed bodies. When it collapsed, it had buried them all.

Pate lifted his timber. "Finger's here," he said softly, eyeing Ry-Lynn. "He was trying to save your father." Pate's voice was steady. Once-orphaned already, he seemed immune to feeling the same grief as the others.

With a choked sob, Ry-Lynn hid her face. Bones, cooked flesh, charred skulls— For Jema, the calamity was inconceivable. Had they all perished on the threshold of her home?

Dee was given the task of tending to Melody, Venus and Snugg, at a good distance. Rangi ordered the rest of them to carry the remains, like blackened firewood, to a garden at the courtyard's edge. There was shock and revulsion, weeping and muzzled terror. Pate did what he could to keep them calm. Jema, despite her horror, bore her share.

The baked limbs and body parts were light and odorless. A surprise, how easy it was to lift and carry them. It was as if the adults had never been flesh and blood; that, instead, it was only the kids' ideas of them that had given them substance. As if their parents had been ghosts waiting to vanish.

Were there none who'd taken shelter elsewhere on the estate or out in the woods? As the effort wore on, the grim answer seemed to settle itself. It was midafternoon by the time they had exhumed the last of the Terrace and gathered all the

dead they could find. They stood together then, facing the piled parts.

It was Rodney who posed the question of what they should do next. No one had a good answer.

Grimy and downcast, the band retreated across the court to where Dee was huddled with the youngest. Melody and Venus were hungry, she said. No one else was, but if they were going to survive, they had to consider what they might do for food. Kris suggested they look in whatever remained of her villa's kitchen.



Beth was mature for twelve, thoughtful, earnest and independent—qualities Jema had often admired. Beth was athletic too, and she defined herself by what she could do. Her brother, Brice, was thirteen and not at all like her, except for his curly red hair. He was reserved and tentative, nervous about expressing himself. When the group reached the Chancellor's villa, Kris asked Beth and Brice to lead the way, as they knew the kitchen far better than she. Their father—who'd departed with the caravan—was the villa chef.

The kitchen tiles had been fired twice—once in years past, and once the previous night. A tangle of copper pipes lay burst and melted in oily puddles. Flames had consumed the pantry and the food stored there. Dried meats and cheese, grains, breads and jams, bags of sugared fruit—all hopelessly charred. But Brice pointed at a cabinet intact at the rear, and

when Beth opened its scorched door, they found a half-dozen jars of gourmet treats: candied Verner's nuts, pickled fern heads, wren eggs in brine. Snugg opened the jars. Melody fished out a fern head, Venus wolfed the nuts, while the older kids watched.

"Snacks," Rangi muttered.

When Melody had swallowed the last of the fern heads, she licked her fingers and peered at Jema. "I lost my doll," she said.

Pate straightened, glancing at Rodney and Wyatt, and facing Rangi. "We need to check the meat lockers," he said. "Let's do that now."

The four boys left the others in the kitchen. They returned an hour later with a grim report. They had started at the butcher's hut, looking for the slaughtered lambs, and found them all in a blackened heap. The lockers nearby were burnt to their foundations, along with the large stores of meat inside.

The group absorbed the bad news. Then Rangi motioned to them.

He led them through the ravaged den out into the Chancellor's garden, where they seated themselves around the pool, with the scorched exotics drooping over them. The sun was sinking behind the western hills.

"We're here on this ridge," Rangi said, "with no adults and no help near. The only transportation we have is a train that goes in a circle."

"We're dead," Ry-Lynn said.

“Finished,” Wyatt bowed his head.

Rangi huffed, “I’m not saying that.”

Jema put her hand on Wyatt’s shoulder. She’d never seen him so agitated.

“I’m still hungry,” Venus whimpered to Dee, and she began to cry.

“We’re not going to starve,” Rangi said. “Not right away. There have to be things we can salvage, things we can use to take care of ourselves. Are you listening?”

Kris nodded.

Jema looked from face to face. “We can,” she said, “I know we can.” For all their differences, the kids were close. They’d been schooled together, they’d played together, they’d lived on the ridge together for many summers. The class line the grownups drew between the Governor and the gardener was, for most of the kids, a band of shadow that came and went.

“Our job right now,” Rangi said, “is to find whatever we can. We’ll work in three teams,” he said. “You four, with me. You’ll go with Kris. The rest follow Pate. We’ll make a pile,” he said looking over his shoulder, “by the Royal Express.”

Jema turned to Melody. “Will you help?”

Melody nodded.

Rangi eyed the horizon. It was growing dark. “We’ll start at dawn.”

“We should do something about the grownups,” Rodney reminded them.

Dee stayed in the Chancellor’s garden with Melody and

Venus. The rest of the band returned to the charnel pile. As Jema approached, it seemed that color had disappeared from the world. There was only the settlement's blackened crater and a pewter sky.

When they reached the dead, Pate grabbed a board and used it to raise up earth and ash, which he scattered over the charnel. The others followed his example, doing what they could to respect their elders and to hide what couldn't be hidden.

The mound of burnt body parts, even with soil on it, was terrible to behold. When they'd done their best to cover it, the boards fell from their hands and the kids, except Rangi, knelt before it and wept. He scowled and walked back and forth like he was whetting himself for a scuffle, hips black from brushing against burnt debris. He paused beside Ry-Lynn, and Jema heard him mutter, "I didn't think Finger would do that."

Jema knelt beside a visored Wyatt. His chest heaved with sobs, hands covering his eyes. She wanted to console him, but she didn't know how. Snugg was curled a few feet from his mother.

I'll remember this, Jema thought, for the rest of my life.

When the grieving was over, the kids walked alone or with an arm around the shoulder of another, heads bowed, a defeated army in retreat. A breeze wuffed in Jema's ear, as resonant as the Governor's voice, with its cadence of empathy and care; and a moment returned—the moment in his study

when, sadly and softly, he looked into her eyes and said: “I won’t always be here to take care of you. Someday you’ll be on your own.”



They woke the next morning, formed their teams and wandered the ruins, digging and lifting, batting objects free of cinders and coals, scavenging what they could. They found food in a few dwellings—dried, cured, tinned or boxed. In a half-burnt outbuilding, they found blankets and sheets, and a bundle of towels. There were tools in the gardener’s shed, and picks and shovels; from the huts they took cups and bowls, platters, spoons, forks and knives, and some cookery too—iron skillets, pots, ladles and grilling stakes, shears and spits, and a mechanical fire striker.

Pate and Rangi went to search Hunu’s hut. Pate asked if Jema could come, and Rangi agreed. Their first sight of the modest dwelling damped their hopes. Little remained.

Among the ashes of his father’s workbench, Rangi salvaged some saw blades and drills. Hunu’s machete was good as new, and Rangi slid it through his belt. Beneath a span of charred roof, Pate found the chief’s spearhead. “The old fool,” Rangi muttered. “Keep it,” he waved the relic away.

Jema thought of Caaqi. Had the parrot been incinerated in his cage? Had he somehow escaped the flames? She looked at Pate. He was wondering too.

The three took the path that skirted the hut. Rangi used

the machete to chop away the charred door of the shed where Hunu had kept the parrot. Jema bowed her head, fearful of what she might see. A single feather rose with the flying wood and fell to the ground by her foot, chocolate, untouched by flame. She stooped to retrieve it, and as she rose, she saw that the shed was empty, or almost empty. All that remained was the floor of the cage and the burnt stubs of the bars. No beak, no talons, no blackened body. No other trace of the bird at all.

She glanced at Pate, unsure whether to feel relief or fear. Had an earthly parrot been freed by the blaze? Or had the “author of love and bloodshed” been set loose on some frightful errand? Hunu’s words seemed to rise like smoke from the ashes around them.



By late afternoon, many of the huts and outbuildings had been sifted. It was then that Kris, weak and anxious, led the girls through the bedroom wing of her home. It was a maze that only she could traverse. Jema held her hand, following close.

Nothing remained of Kris’ bedroom. Her parents’ room, too, was mostly destroyed, but parts of her mother’s wardrobe and vanity were intact. The photos, muzzed by smoke, were still on the walls—glamorous shots taken before Kris was born. Jema imagined the woman in her white robe, leaning back in the white lounge chair in a spotlight of patio glare—colorless, except for her emerald eyes and the orange

drink she held in her hand. She would jiggle her cubes as she spoke. Even anaesthetized, she retained her sharp opinion of others.

Her dresses hung in orderly lines, undamaged. Venus squealed to see the sequins and scales, the spangles and creped silk. The slacks were pressed; robes and shoes; and her makeup too. Kris unhooked the mirror from the wall. It was scorched around the edges, and the glass was cracked.

In a nearby vestibule, flames had consumed a collection of hats. They were shriveled and charred; and with them, a mask for a costume ball. Its painted parchment had vaporized, leaving only the wire mesh. When she raised it to her face, Kris seemed to be peering through a spider's web. She passed it to Jema. Then she ducked beneath a masonry arch and opened the liquor closet. No sign of the fire there. Kris had snuck a few samples in her mother's absence, but the closet was still well-stocked. The bottom shelves were loaded with the magazines they all prized, disclosing the torrid romances of actors and actresses.

"We'll take these, won't we?" Venus said, reaching for one.

She opened the cover and turned the pages while the girls crowded around. The celebrities were as sleek and charming as ever. Some of the paper was brittle, flaking around the edges. A wistful smile reshaped Venus' pout and her sooty cheeks.

There was a drawer of ladies' fans, hand-painted; a lace parasol; and a brass bell the woman rang at parties to signal courses or scheduled events. Dee raised it and tinkled, and the girls laughed.

“It’s all ours now,” Kris said. “I’m going to share it.”

After the girls had hauled the booty to the scavenge pile, Jema handed off Melody to Beth and returned alone to her ruined home.

As she crossed the threshold, she remembered the day her parents departed. It would be nice, she’d thought, to be without all that badgering for a while. Her bedroom on the upper floor was gone. But her play space downstairs in the Governor’s study still had its easel, and the table and chairs. They were black now, as if her old life existed in a shadow world. Using a plank to rake through the ashes, Jema found a doll from years past: a native warrior with a topknot, a hooked nose and a drum in one hand. His brown skin was worn, but his face was unburnt. When she chucked his chin, he gave a mechanical laugh, a jarring reaction to the damage nearby: all those books, all those words.



At sundown, the search was over. The kids gathered by the Royal Express. Beth and Brice selected food from the collectings, while Pate devised a functioning oven using a bucket and timber tails. Rodney had found a tarp, and he and Rangi covered the scavenged haul.

Beth and Brice’s father loved his job, and they had learned a lot from him. When he left with the caravan, they’d wanted to take his place in the kitchen, but Mr. Trett wouldn’t have it. Now was their chance, and they fussed between themselves

about this and that while the others shared their discoveries.

“Show them the casting,” Venus said.

In response, Kris lifted an object she’d taken from her mother’s boudoir—a porcelain of an antique couple seated at a cafe table. The man was dressed for hunting, with a cap, vest and rifle; the woman wore a veil and raised a wine glass. Melody drew close and touched the porcelain dress.

Rangi lifted a globe of white marble, weighing it in his hand. When he tipped it up, Jema recognized the bald-headed visage of a long-dead president. For years, the bust had glared at her from the Chancellor’s mantle.

“When will we leave?” Venus asked.

Rangi shook his head at the question.

“We’re going back,” Venus looked at Kris, “to the capital.”

“How do you think we’d do that?” Kris sighed.

“There’s no way to ford the rivers,” Wyatt said. “We’d need rafts.”

“And horses,” Pate added.

Snugg looked at Jema. “They’ll come back for us.”

They were all thinking of the Governor and the Chancellor.

“I’m sure they will,” Kris said.

Rodney put his big fingers to his lips. Venus blanched, Melody wilted; Jema knelt and pushed the warrior doll into her arms.

“We haven’t done badly so far,” Rangi said, facing Pate.

“We may be alright on our own,” Pate agreed.

Beth continued stirring a pot, blindly. The thirteen absorbed the idea. Kris glanced at Jema with daring in her eyes.

"We need a leader," Kris said. "I nominate Rangi."

Rangi inclined his head, acting like her words made no sense to him.

"Yep," Rodney concurred.

Snugg was quick to join in, and so was Venus. Jema, realizing they'd been waiting for such a thing, added her assent. Then the rest, Pate included, affirmed the selection.

Rangi nodded slowly, pondering his assignment. It seemed to Jema that he was taking the group's confidence to heart.

When Beth and Brice had finished, they all sat on the railbed beside the loco, and the two served a stew made from food in cans and jars. They passed the steaming bowls around and the kids ate their fill, except Dee.

"You have to eat," Kris said.

"I can't," Dee replied.

Melody lowered the doll's chin, and the warrior laughed. The kids joined in.

When the meal was over, they climbed the steel grate steps of the Royal Express single file. In the humid and stuffy car, the kids reclaimed their seats and did their best to bed down, leaning together or curled tight. Jema and Pate slept with Melody across their laps.

For hours Jema felt buffets of wind. Or was the charging warmth Pate's breath in her ear? She dreamt he was near, she

dreamt he was far. He was moving before her through a jungle, and she was trying to catch up. He was high above her in a tree; and she was below, straining to see. He was in a world apart, the way only an orphan could be. Would she ever understand him?

She did now, in a way. Her home was gone and so were her parents.

It was the two of them, Jema and Pate, throwing in with each other. I'm lucky, she thought. I trust him. I could go on a long journey with Pate. Then she thought, We are on that journey.



At dawn the band visited the paddock. Pate had voiced his concerns about the ravaged meat lockers, and he wanted to see what remained of the flock. They found a dozen sheep and half as many lambs. The sun's rays strafed the animals' backs, and the steam rising from their woolly bodies made a golden corona, as if they were already roasting on a grill. The kids pressed their faces to the wire fence, hands clutching the welded squares.

"These won't last us long," Brice observed.

"There's meat out there," Pate said, gazing at the estate's green border.

Snugg, distraught and distracted, called for his mother. The cry carried across the pasture and into the jungle, and

the contrast between the boy's yearning and the trial to come caught Jema's heart. She looked at Pate. He felt it too.

They walked through the vegetable gardens and orchards, pressing Ry-Lynn for answers. Her mother had been the arborist. "Nothing's changed for them," she said quietly. "They'll keep producing."

"There are edible things in the forest," Beth pointed out. "Bloodstalk and fawn bread. Clack nuts too."

Then Kris raised the question of shelter. "We can't stay in the train."

"I like it there," Venus said.

"You're short," Wyatt grumped. "The rest of us can't lay down."

Rodney agreed. "There's not enough room."

"We'll live in the jungle," Rangi told them.

Venus stared at him. Dee made her eyes wide but didn't speak.

After they'd put some food in their stomachs, the group considered the problem.

Below the ridge the jungle was tiered, tall roroas with mid-story trees layered beneath, and a cover of shrubs and ferns crowding the earth. Only the train tracks breached the native side, but on the capital side a path led through the forest, and there were places the kids had played. With Rangi in the lead, they descended to have a look.

The stands were dense and shady, the majestic roroa rising around them, massive in girth and perfectly straight. The

trunks were rugged, with platy bark stained by lichen and shelved with fungus ears that often circled a tree to its top. Branchless for most of their height, in the upper reaches the roroa released emerald clouds, millions of tear-shaped leaves. The understory was crowded with saplings and sinuous vines all woven together, a myriad windows of green glass leaded with branches black and gray and the color of brick. As the kids reached the end of the path, a flock of birds rose from the weft, hovering above them. Rangi halted, the others gathered around and the birds descended, disappearing back into the bush.

“Somewhere in there,” Rangi pointed.

The kids looked at the green tangle, trying to imagine.

They continued forward, winding between the giant trunks, through fern beds and bogs, pushing vines and creepers aside. Jema was frightened at first. The forest is swallowing us, she thought. Melody gripped her hand, snuffling while the breeze *whished* through the branches. Jema looked back, glanced at Pate, then faced forward again.

After a stretch of what seemed aimless wandering, Rangi halted, turning, looking around. “Not a bad spot.”

“It’s flat,” Kris said.

Pate nodded. “We’d be out of the wind.”

“We’ll cut down some trees,” Rangi proposed, “and make a roof to put over our heads.” He spread his hands, palms up, imagining rain.

“No walls?” Dee asked.

“We have to get tougher,” Rangi said.

Kris shook her head. “We’re not going to live like savages.”

Rangi bristled.

“Does anyone know how to build a house?” Wyatt said.

There was silence. Melody burrowed into Jema’s thigh, whimpering. Jema could feel the tremor in her hip and the bones of her leg.

“I have an idea,” Ry-Lynn muttered. There was something about the others’ dread that seemed to shake her out of her own. Her mother had been proficient on the loom, she reminded them. Ry-Lynn knew a fair bit about weaving. Her idea was to make shelters out of branches and vines.

“We could cut off branches,” she explained, “bury the ends in the ground and tie them together at the top. Then we’d weave vines through them.” They could use Verner’s Coil, she said, pointing at a skein nearby. “It’s strong and it grows really fast.” The leaves were tough and it produced no fruit, so the shelters wouldn’t be pecked by birds. And the pink flowers would brighten the shelters in the spring, assuming they were still alive.

Ry-Lynn looked at Kris.

“I like it,” Kris said.

Pate thought the idea might work. “If we padded the insides with moss,” he said, “it would keep the warmth in.”

How long could they live in the shelters? Jema wondered. How much time would pass before her parents returned?

Rangi was silent. He seemed glad for Ry-Lynn’s solution

but was annoyed, Jema saw, that the idea had come from someone else. He reasserted his command by assigning tasks.

Rodney and Wyatt returned to the salvage pile, and once they had tools, the kids began. The boys cut down branches and the girls stripped off the leaves, and together they secured the butt ends in the soil and tipped them together. Pate cinched the joining with a length of vine. Working on the shelters helped to diffuse their fear and blunt their grief.

In two days they erected frames for three shelters in a line, then they added a fourth and fifth on either side. It was a peaceful spot, Jema thought. And there was a window of sky downhill.

On the third day, they began stringing Verner's Coil, planting the root end of each in the ground and weaving them through the frames, leaving an opening to come and go. Weaving the vines was a painstaking task. The old Ry-Lynn was back—she bossed the job harshly, impatient and particular, carping nonstop. But the result was a good one: the windings were tight and flawless. Despite her insults and Rangi's bluster, a feeling of kinship fell over them all. Beneath the roroas' filtering crowns, the light on their faces looked different—softer, gentler. They might have been cherubs in an antique painting. Melody was, for the first time, not clutching anyone's hand.

It took two days to gather moss and dry grass to line the walls and floors. Completed, each shelter looked like a dust devil with a minaret top, an apt impression given the speed with which they'd been assembled.

Rangi staked out bathrooms nearby, pits covered with fern fronds. He announced that a rill downslope would be their water source, and he made Rodney “Hauler.” At the end of each day, Rodney would refill a barrel with pails they’d found in the gardener’s shed. After that, Rangi told each of them where they would sleep. “These shelters are for the girls,” he said. “Jema and Melody will be here at the rear. Kris will be by the opening.”

Once he’d made the assignments, the kids started back to the Royal Express to gather up their things. Jema walked with Kris. Her best friend was near tears.

“He couldn’t have put me farther away from him,” Kris said.

“It’s not you,” Jema replied. “He’s separated Pate and me too.”

“He didn’t have to do that,” Kris said.

“No, he didn’t,” Jema agreed.

But they’d chosen him as their chief. What complaint could they make? Kris squinted, watching Rangi leading the gang up the trail.

Before they bedded down that night, the leader addressed the group.

“We have to take care of ourselves,” Rangi said, “and there aren’t any grownups to tell us how. We’ll need rules to live together,” he said, “and we’ll have to obey them. Everything will be shared.” He looked at Kris. “We’re all equal now.”

Dee raised her hand. “I have to go. Can I use the bathroom?”

Beth waved. "I have to go too." She followed Dee.

Venus shouted, "I'm coming," and headed after them.

Rodney and Snugg were assigned to a shelter with Pate. Rangi had Wyatt and Brice with him. Jema coaxed Melody through the entrance of their shelter. Then she stood there alone, watching darkness settle over the jungle, imagining her father in another world wishing the best for her.



The establishment of the forest camp went smoothly. Pate turned a straight branch into a shaft for his cannibal spearhead and used the weapon to slaughter two of the lambs in the paddock. They set a small amount aside for the evening meal, divided the rest into rations, wrapped them carefully, and stored them in a crate below ground. Then they talked about what they might find in the wild. The chefs had depended on fish and elk, and Rodney's dad had led trips to lower elevations to hunt and net them. In the jungle, there were eels. They lived in the streams, and traveled through the woods in wriggling droves. "Ick," Venus said. "Count me out," Wyatt agreed. Jema remembered the time Hunu caught one. Glossy and black, and thick as a man's leg, eels had been part of the native diet in ages past.

Pate and Wyatt felled trees and Brice collected boughs, stocking a woodpile for the oven and a friendly fire around which they gathered at night. Beth and her brother cut

Whistling Reeds that grew along the edges of a nearby stream. Their father had used the reeds as skewers for grilling.

Ry-Lynn oversaw the gardens and orchards, and Snugg and Rodney helped with the harvests. Rangi knew how to drive the Royal Express, so they used the train to move fruits and vegetables to the head of the footpath leading into the forest. Ry-Lynn led forays into the jungle as well, where Jema and Melody helped her collect fawn bread and roroa jam. The bread was a fungus that rose from tree bark in spongy sheets when it rained. In places, it shrouded trunks and branches. Roroa jam was sap that dripped from the trees' trunks. It was sweet and tasted of vanilla and almond. A treat could be made with fawn bread and the jam spread on top, a remembered comfort they all enjoyed, even Dee. It rained every day in the midafternoon, a chilly event now that fall had descended. But not so chilly that, when they were dirty, they couldn't stand in the downpour to clean themselves and use salvaged towels to dry off. At night Melody took care of her warrior doll, feeding and comforting him. They knew she'd fallen asleep when the doll's mechanical laughter stopped.

Despite their new home's many blessings, the question of meat cast an ugly shadow. "The poor things," Dee lamented. She'd developed an affection for the sheep. Everyone else thought the grilled meat was tasty, but they were going through it quickly.

Three weeks after the erection of the shelters, Pate slaughtered what remained of the flock. And three weeks after that,

Beth told the group over dinner, "That's the last of the ribs and muscle. It's fatty stew from here on. And there's not very much."

"Elk. Boar and wallaby," Rangi nodded, pointing through the trees. "It's a grocery out there. Rodney and I are going shopping tomorrow."

Brice gave a rousing shout.

"Does he know what he's doing?" Jema said.

"We'll find out," Pate replied.

The next evening, Rangi and Rodney returned empty-handed. The latter sat silent while Rangi recounted exciting chases, near catches and unlikely escapes. The stories sounded like nonsense to Jema. Pate shook his head and laughed.

Aside from fears of starvation, Jema saw, most were struggling with their new existence. Putting the grownups out of their heads was hard for Snugg and Wyatt. Venus seemed to imagine the fire was a punishment she'd earned for bad behavior. Kris had mixed feelings about her parents. She missed them, she said, but she couldn't help feeling that they'd abandoned her. Jema thought about the violence in the capital. Had the insurrection been quelled? Maybe her mother and father were on their way back.

Rangi fought his doubt with defiance. "It's chance," he told them one night around the fire. "And a good chance, at that. You'll all feel better when there's plenty of meat." He kicked off his shoes. "They're falling apart," he complained. "I can't hunt in those things."

“I could try to repair them,” Ry-Lynn offered.

Jema looked at Pate. “I don’t think the problem with the hunt is his shoes.”

Two days later, after eating the last of the sheep for dinner, Rangi called for a celebration. They had their own tribe now, he said. “We’re surviving without the grownups. Working together, respecting each other.”

Jema was stunned. He wanted admiration. He wanted to be recognized as a leader. But he didn’t understand the responsibilities. Or he didn’t care. She was seated beside Kris, and Kris was watching him too, but she seemed unbothered.

Rangi spread his arms. “I say: let’s loosen up. Kris found poison in her mom’s closet. What do you think?”

Wyatt whooped, taking the cue.

“I’m for that.” Kris lifted her chin. “Let’s get bashed.”

“Without food,” Jema muttered, “we won’t survive.”

“Stop worrying,” Kris told her.

Jema turned to Pate, who was standing behind her. He inclined his head as if hearing a familiar sound. “We’re all feeling danger,” he said.

The bottles appeared and liquor was poured into cups. When Jema heard the twist of the caps and the unchaste gurgles, she remembered Kris’ mom. The odor of liquor mixed with the woman’s perfume was a combination as pungent as manure. A few kids sampled the stuff and found the taste harsh. But they did their best to down the drinks with showy zeal.

“I think,” Kris waved her glass at the group, “we need some new rags.” And she directed Dee and Ry-Lynn to haul out the trunk in which she’d stored her mother’s clothing.

Kris selected a fur stole for Beth and a wrap for Dee. As the two put the attire on over their grimy clothes, Kris had Ry-Lynn set up the scorched mirror and the girls took turns posing, arranging and rearranging, admiring their reflections. The glass had spoking cracks, and the pieces were loose, so as they mugged and strutted before it, parts of their bodies came and went.

Rangi dashed more liquor into his cup, raised the bottle to Beth and strode toward her. She accepted a cup, took a swallow and began to cough. Wyatt laughed.

For Jema, Kris picked out a white blouse with ruffles and a black shawl.

Jema stepped forward reluctantly and tried them on. Maybe Kris was right, she thought. Nice clothing always lifted your spirits.

For Ry-Lynn, Kris selected what looked like a naval officer’s jacket with brass tassels and epaulettes. For Venus a cape, and a striped scarf for Melody. For herself Kris chose a long purple gown, sequined and shimmering.

Venus looked at herself in the mirror, lifting the wings of her cape and eyeing Kris in the fractured reflection. “What was it like being the Chancellor’s daughter?” she mused out loud.

Rangi was entertained, and so were the other boys, Pate included. The costumery seemed to draw them together. Rangi faced Jema and approached her with an empty cup.

She watched him fill the cup to the brim, and she accepted it from him without objecting. They were carrying a heavy burden. Perhaps it would be a good thing to lighten it.

"The boys too," Kris shouted. She retrieved a fleece vest and handed it to Rodney.

He put it on, but it was so small he couldn't move his arms.

Dee hooted and pointed, and Venus joined in. Kris handed a floppy hat to Snugg.

Jema took a sip—she didn't like it—then another sip—she didn't like that either. Then she closed her eyes and downed the whole glass.

Rodney looked ridiculous—a trained bear in a wool vest—with Snugg prancing beside him like a dwarfish clown.

"And for our leader," Kris shouted, "something special." She pulled a pair of white silk pajamas from the trunk, along with a golden scarf. Kris held out the garments to Rangi, who surprised everyone by roaring his approval and hurrying to accept them.

Jema saw Pate by the fire, wearing the black wire mask. As she watched, he tipped a bottle, filling his cup. She hurried toward him, spreading her shawl as she closed the distance, encircling Pate's head in a dark cocoon and kissing his lips.

A cheer sounded. Did Pate like this, she thought, as much as she did? Over his shoulder Jema saw: she wasn't the only one giving way to her impulses. Ry-Lynn whispered in Wyatt's ear, squeezing his shoulder. Snugg's eyes were glued on Beth. Venus, knowing Rangi was watching, twirled before the mirror, mak-

ing eyes and mouths; and then Rangi stepped closer and faced the glass, beholding himself in his white pajamas.

Venus applauded. Others joined in.

Rangi motioned Kris toward him so the shattered reflection could capture them both. "My purple queen," he said. She beamed and bumped her hip against his.

Even Melody, it seemed, felt seduction in the air. She'd found a tube of lipstick in the trunk and was painting her lips with it.

They looked like a theater troupe, jabbering and skipping around the fire. Rangi sauntered among them like a sultan with Kris on his arm, the happiest Jema had ever seen her.

Rangi halted and raised his face to the jungle canopy. Then, in a public way, he removed his pajama top and stripped off his shirt.

What is he doing? Jema thought. She marked again his muscled shoulders, the chest of a man—broad, native and coppered. The others were seeing it too.

"A physical test," he announced, lowering his gaze to scan the group. "And a test of daring too." He pointed at a nearby roroa. "We're going to climb that tree, using its ears."

Kris stared at him. Dee looked confused.

Was he serious? Jema wondered.

The semicircular fungi at the base of a tree were often as wide as a man was high. As the trunk tapered, the ears grew smaller, sprouting at regular intervals around it like a spiral staircase. Rangi pulled off his pants and undergarments.

The band was struck silent. "Look at that," Kris said.

Perfectly naked, Rangi strode toward the trunk. Melody hid her face, Venus was plum-eyed. Then Rodney laughed and stripped off his clothes, and Brice did the same. It wasn't lust, Jema realized. The nudity expressed a spirit of freedom and the flouting of rules.

Pate stepped forward, removing his shirt. Jema followed him.

Rangi cried out, boosted himself onto the first ear and swung to the second, using a long stride, gripping the bark with both hands. Kris was hurrying toward the base of the tree, still in her regal purple. Rodney, Wyatt and Brice, all naked, were right behind her.

Had Rangi done this before? A thrilling feat, but a dangerous one. The steps weren't all firmly attached. Fallen ears were littered around the feet of old trees. He moved to the next ear and the next—up and around the massive trunk, leaping from ear to ear. Then a second cry sounded. More than a cry of triumph: it was a summons.

Kris was at the foot of the lofty roroa now. Rodney, Wyatt and Brice were approaching, and so was Pate. Jema hurried after them. As she moved, the sun's fanning radials shifted, and where the raying gold passed through a gap in the aerial vault, she saw a creature perched on a branch. A large bird in silhouette.

Caaqi is here, Jema thought. Or was he? There were many parrots in the jungle. Still, the silhouette seemed like an omen. If this was Caaqi, why had he come? Had he been watching them?

Kris threw herself at the giant trunk, leaping, ascending its ears, repeating Rangi's moves. And boys followed behind her—Rodney, then Wyatt, Brice and Pate.

Something terrible is going to happen, Jema thought. She halted, open-mouthed, heart missing its beat.

Rangi was halfway up now. Ry-Lynn was cheering him on. Venus clapped, frightened for him but greatly impressed. The others followed, with Pate at the rear. Come down, Jema thought. Come down, come down—

As the ears grew smaller, Rangi's pace quickened. He circled the trunk again and again, approaching the top. Cold drops were falling on Jema's face. Melody was at her knee, hanging on. She lifted the child in her arms, feeling the wind rising.

Rangi reached the top and circled his arm, rounding up the storm. Kris rose just below him, clasping his waist, looking up. What did she want of him? Recognition, Jema thought. And then, to the surprise of all who watched, Rangi put his arms around her, drew her up and put his lips to hers, wobbling drunkenly all the while, risking a plunge at any moment. The kids were shouting and laughing, and then the storm burst and rain poured down.

Rangi was descending, and so was Kris, gown soaked, hair lashing. They passed Rodney, who was zippering up with Wyatt and Brice behind him. Pate was last. All were naked and glistening, climbing quickly.

"Is Pate safe?" Melody asked.

Jema was mute, watching his every move. He was approaching the tree's top.

Rangi reached the ground and raised both arms, striding forward, victorious. Venus cried out and sent him a swooning look. Kris followed behind him, dragging her drenched gown.

Wyatt and Brice were descending now, and so was Rodney. As Pate reached the roroa's top, one of the ears broke loose and he lost his footing. He hung for a moment, legs dangling as the rotten fungus fell to the forest floor. Jema cried out, Melody raised her hand, trying to help. Together they watched Pate wrap his arms around the trunk and slide till he reached the next ear. At the same time, the sky grew darker. Then a flood was released, and water came down in a heedless torrent.

Pate disappeared. "Where is he?" Melody fretted. Jema didn't reply.

And then the rainy curtain drew back, and they saw him descending. The ears' upper sides were concave, and they trapped water. Jema could see a splash with each step he took. The ears were overflowing, turning the tree into a spiral fountain.

Lightning flashed over the sealed canopy. Pate was descending through the downpour like a hero in fable, while the thunder sounded and the wind shook the branches. Wyatt, Rodney and Brice had reached the bottom and were leaping after Rangi.

It seemed impossible Pate would make it down, but he did. As he reached the earth, a cheer went up. And then he was reeling, laughing and stumbling toward her. Jema received his embrace, with Melody pressed between them. She kissed his brow, his cheek, his lips, and all around them the wind howled and rain fell in cracking sheets.

High in the jungle's crown, backlit by a luminous web, Jema saw the great parrot spread his wings and go sailing through the storm, as if his mission—whatever it was—had been fulfilled.



The next morning, the sun found its way back to them. The ears on the trees had pools clear and fresh, so the kids removed their clothes and climbed up to bathe in one or another. The boys were at the far end of the grove, the girls by the shelters.

Jungle birds, brightly colored, came to bathe with them, alighting on the rims of ears, hovering among them, diving and bobbing, threshing crystal beads from their wings. The kids were sober now, and none the worse for their spree—but rather nerved and encouraged by it. The sun shone on clean faces, on warmed backs and limbs, and their expressions of cheer and satisfaction filtered through the camp and into the jungle.

That afternoon Pate and Jema went for a walk. They were

both barefoot. Pate had a red scrape on his shin from the broken ear. Jema's hair was clean but tangled. She'd bound it up with a short length of vine. With Kris' permission, she took the lace parasol with her.

"It was a relief," Jema confessed, "to forget about whether we're going to starve."

"Rangi eased the pressure," Pate said. "But we have to do something. Soon."

She felt like a foolish child, with her dreams of romance, and the suspicions, bred by Hunu, that some mysterious power was circling around them.

"When you were climbing the tree last night," Jema said, "I thought I saw Caaqi nearby. On a limb. Watching." She looked in Pate's eyes. "It frightened me."

Pate said nothing.

"And—" Jema pursed her lips.

"And?" he prompted her.

"I thought I saw him the night the villas burned down, flying over the fire." Jema sighed. "Strange ideas."

They stepped into a clearing where the sun shone through.

"Is he threatening us?" Jema said. "Protecting us? Is he watching us, even now?"

She let the parasol sag onto her shoulder and scanned the treetops.

The jungle was just a jungle. There was no sign of Caaqi.

Pate's blue eyes fixed on her. "You're beautiful," he said.

She smiled and laughed, rotating the parasol.

Then she stopped, faced him and used her free hand to remove a leaf stuck to his ear. She had always hoped the two would fall in love.

Pate drew close, and his kiss had a warmth and depth she'd never felt before.

3

*J*ema stepped through a break in the foliage and Pate followed. The camp's shelters came into view, and then the smoking firepit with the kids squatting around it.

Another six weeks had passed. Repeated attempts had been made to find game, without success. And maintaining the gardens and orchards proved harder than they had imagined. The beds needed fertilizer, Ry-Lynn recalled after a wave of wilting; then a blight struck the trees. It was winter now, not as cold as in the capital, but chilly still, especially at night. Many of the wild foods in the forest had vanished. The band was hungry and weak. There was only so much fawn bread and jam they could eat.

There was talk of leaving. With the cold, Wyatt pointed out, the rivers would shrink. They might not need rafts to ford them. Rangi gave Rodney his machete and sent him down the trail toward the capital. Rodney returned two days

later, torn up by thorns. He hadn't reached water. The track was grown over. "It's impassable," he said.

The sun had descended, and the tribe was hugging the fire.

As Jema approached, she saw Rangi on the far side of the pit, flanked by Kris. Kris used every pretext to be close to him, but she wasn't getting the attention she craved. Alone in their shelter at night, Jema tried to cheer her up. But the attempts seemed only to hurt their friendship. Perhaps the hunger and cold was straining that too.

"Where were you?" Rangi demanded of her and Pate.

Pate, now accustomed to the leader's bile, ignored him.

Rangi motioned for them to sit, then he scanned the faces and drew a breath, steeling himself.

"I'm making new rules," he said, "and we're all going to follow them. The boys' only job is to hunt and bring back meat." He waited for the boys to nod. "The girls will take charge of everything else. They'll harvest what they can from the farm and fields. They'll do the cooking and take care of our shelters." He paused.

Jema waited for her friend to object, but Kris was nodding. Before the villas' destruction, Jema thought, Rangi's volatile temper and his appetite for rebellion made him the first to be punished and the last to obey. Things were different now.

"If a boy kills an animal," Rangi said, "one we can eat, he'll be honored by all, myself included. He will eat first, before the rest of us. The girls will serve him."

Again Jema looked at Kris, expecting some resistance.

“That’s right,” she said. “Whoever brings meat, we’ll serve him.”

Wyatt drew his visor down. Snugg elbowed Rodney. The boys had spent the past week fashioning weapons, binding blades onto hafts and poles to make knives and spears. Brice had whittled a club from a fallen bough. Beth had sewn together bedrolls and tarps for the hunters, using sheets and blankets they’d salvaged.

“We’re leaving together,” Rangi said, “and we’re not coming back empty-handed.”

“You’re in charge while I’m gone,” Rangi told Kris.

“We’ll light a big fire,” she said, “when you return.” Kris faced the girls. “We’ll start gathering the wood right now.”

A nice gesture by Rangi, Jema thought. It was good to see Kris exercising her authority, even if it was to serve Rangi’s requests. Kris assigned tasks to each of them, and the girls set to work, clearing ash from the pit, gathering kindling, grabbing fallen branches and dragging them closer.

The boys left a few minutes later. Jema and the others paused in their work and watched as the hunters ascended a slope single file, turned along a streambed and vanished into the jungle.

Just before Rangi disappeared, Venus waved at him and blew him a kiss.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Kris demanded.

“He can’t keep his eyes off me,” Venus replied.

Kris' face froze. "You're pathetic," she said.
Venus was mute. Her lips were trembling.
"You've frightened her," Jema told her best friend.
"Good," Kris said, staring back, anger roiling in her green eyes.



Four days later, the boys returned. Beth saw them approaching, and a shout went up. Kris retrieved the fire striker and summoned the girls to the pit.

None of the boys spoke. They trudged into camp with their heads down, except for Pate, who eyed Jema with tenderness, happy to see her. Rodney's shirt was muddy, Wyatt's pants were torn at the knees. What had they caught, Jema wondered. Were their packs laden with meat?

Kris motioned and the girls followed behind her.

She hailed Rangi. "Success?" she asked.

He didn't reply. He strode past her without a word. None of the other boys volunteered anything, but Jema could tell from Pate's stoic look that things hadn't gone well.

"Wyatt saw a warty boar," Rangi said. "Brice clubbed a bullfrog."

He jabbed his machete into the ground outside his shelter, while the others removed packs and set down their weapons. One by one, they disappeared into the huts.

Kris seemed to forget herself. Her shoulders sagged and the toughness leached from her face. She approached Rangi's

shelter, dropping to her knees by the entrance. She was silent for a long moment, then she began to speak.

"We're all worried," Kris said. "We're all afraid of what might happen to us."

She was trying to comfort him, and when he didn't respond, she tried harder.

"You're our strength," she said, mixing her own insecurity with the welfare of the camp. "You're the one we need."

The girl who so often harangued others for being weak was mawkishly so, and when Jema looked around her, she could see that Kris' weakness was shaking the girls.

Rangi barked an order at her. It was liquor he wanted.

Without rising, Kris nodded to Ry-Lynn, who hurried to the trunk to retrieve a bottle.

Jema glanced at Beth, and the two motioned the others away. Jema picked up Melody, who was oblivious, tending her doll, smoothing his topknot.



An hour later, their leader emerged from his shelter.

The girls, with Jema's guidance, had lit the wood in the firepit. Pate, after washing his face and hands, had joined them, and so had Rodney and Snugg. The sky was gray, and they were gathered around the flames, huddled in blankets.

Rangi tramped to the pit with the empty bottle in his hand, glaring, indignant. He hurled the bottle, and it shattered on a rock. Kris stepped beside him.

“Get away from me,” he snarled.

A spiteful sound emerged from Kris’ lips. Wyatt stood and so did Pate.

“What good are you?” Rangi looked from Kris to Jema, including Dee and Venus in a sneer of dismissal. “More mouths to feed.”

Kris threw herself at him in what Jema thought might be the start of a forced embrace. Then Kris’ arm came around, slapping his face.

Rangi shook off the blow with a derisive laugh. “They could strip for us,” he grumbled.

To the surprise of all, Snugg laughed back.

Dee’s jaw dropped.

“What do you say?” Rangi challenged Rodney.

Seeing it was expected of him, Rodney laughed, and then Wyatt and Brice.

Pate edged beside Jema and took her hand.

“You’re a beast,” Kris told Rangi, flush with contempt.

Rangi’s eyes sparkled like broken glass. He laughed again, but this laugh was strained. His gaze darted among them, as if they were all his accusers. There was no sound now but the fire crackling. Jema looked at Pate. Melody was no longer tending her doll. She understood what was happening.

Rangi lifted his chin. He raised his hand and combed his fingers through his hair, reassuming the mantle of leadership.

“I’ve been easy on you,” he said. The words left his lips slowly, his eyes narrowing like some malign presence was

ripening inside him. "What happens if we're starving? There have to be rules."

Silence.

"If someone is going to die," Rangi said, "they must be eaten before the meat spoils."

Venus gasped.

"Get out," Ry-Lynn said.

"It's you we should eat," Kris told him. "Go back to the jungle. Cannibal." She spoke now as the Chancellor's daughter. Jema could hear that, and so could the others.

"I'm in charge," Rangi said, "and according to me—" He stopped, seeing the reaction to his tyrant words. "This is a democracy," he allowed. "We all have a say." He looked at the boys. "Am I right?"

The boys nodded as one.

"All in favor of eating the weak before they spoil," Rangi said.

The boys raised their hands. Then, as one, they burst out laughing.

Beth looked at Brice, disbelieving. Melody began to cry.

"We're not voting," Kris spoke for the girls.

Rangi stared at her. "You're soft," he said, "but you'll be tasty."

The boys found that funny.

Jema caught Pate laughing with the rest. When their eyes met, the laughter froze in his throat.

Rangi seemed to relent. "I'm fooling with you," he told

Kris. "Everyone's scared. I'm just trying to lighten things up. Come on. We'll all go for a ride on the Royal Express."

"Count me out," Kris said.

"Don't be like that."

"I have no interest in your amusements," Kris said.

Rangi turned to Jema. "What about you?"

"We'll come," Pate answered for both of them.

At his words, Kris faced them with a blazing look.

Pate bowed his head, as if to ward off her wrath. "The Express may remind us of happier times."

Jema was speechless. She had never seen hatred for her in Kris' eyes. What had for so long been a vital sympathy and kinship seemed to have vanished.



The red loco was waiting, patient as a horse. Behind the depot was a shed full of wood cut to size and stacked. At Rangi's direction, they loaded the fuel box and kindled the fire, and with a belch of gray smoke the loco puffed to life. Dee didn't think her stomach could stand the ride, so Jema left Melody in her care. With Pate and the others, Jema climbed into the passenger car. Rangi yanked the steam whistle, and when he opened the throttle, the Royal Express shuddered and began to move.

They left the depot on a curving descent, picking up speed quickly. Jema opened her window and put her head out, seeing the tracks raying ahead, bright as mercury. She'd never

driven the train, but when she rode in the cab with her father, she saw what he did. The controls were simple—there was a throttle and a brake. The throttle was a stick that rose from the floor, the brake was a grip that stuck out of the dash. Between the Governor's feet, there was a silver cylinder loaded with sand. When rain slicked the tracks, he released the sand to make the wheels grab.

The kids opened the windows, and as the train raced down the slope, sun lit the boys' faces and the wind blew back the girls' hair. Jema felt the joy and camaraderie that had so often prevailed on the Governor's rides. As the wheels passed over the rail gaps, a *clack-clack* sounded, recalling the Solstice Party with napkins flying and teacups rattling.

But this was no party, and the Governor wasn't in control. Rangi was driving, and through the car's forward window, Jema could see him tipping from a fresh bottle. The train was speeding toward the foot of the viaduct bridge, where the suspended tracks crossed a deep canyon; and then they were shooting across it, seeing the jungle on either side. With exhaust trailing back, the loco trundled around a cutting, skirted an abutment and zagged up a hillside. Then the track's radius shrank and the grade fell.

The peaked mouth of a tunnel appeared ahead. The Governor called it "The Soprano's Gullet," but as the loco drew closer, the entrance looked more like Caaqi's throat. The shells of his beak were open, and they were plunging into a black screaming of wheels and rails.

Jema held her breath and reached for Pate's hand. Was

he as fearful as she was? Did he feel this sense of fault and wrongdoing, that they'd made some grievous misstep, committed some crime and were all just waiting for the sentence to be pronounced?

When they returned to camp, Rangi sank to his knees and retched into the fire. The other kids watched in silence. He rose and wobbled to his hut, and for a moment, Jema felt sorry for him.

That night, the group went without dinner. Jema took Melody's hand and led her to their shelter, and Pate went with them. As they passed a roroa, Jema saw Kris leaning against the trunk with her arms folded across her chest. Jema slowed, seeing the embers of her friend's eyes through the shadows.

"Enjoy the ride?" Kris spoke in a low voice.

"I'm sorry we went," Jema said.

She waited for Kris to reply, but there was only silence.

Pate urged Jema forward. When they reached the shelter, he stooped to embrace Melody. Then he rose and kissed Jema goodnight, telling her that he was going to wake early the next morning and leave the camp without saying goodbye.

"The hunting party," he said, "took orders from Rangi. I have a different idea."



Two days later, just before dark, Jema was with Beth preparing fawn bread. The kids were despondent and listless, hashing over how much longer they could survive on their

dwindling stores and what they were gleaned from the forest and gardens. Jema had told them why Pate had vanished, and there were speculations about where he'd gone and what he intended. But no one, including Jema, knew.

It was Beth who spotted him approaching the camp, on the track that descended from the ridge's spine. When Jema looked up, he was carrying his spear in one hand and supporting a log on his back, draped across his shoulders like an oxen yoke. Hanging from the log were four limp eels, each staring skyward, black-skinned and shiny, their bodies so long the tails dragged on the ground. The eels' heads were triangular and they joggled, mouths gaping, teeth bared.

Jema shouted and ran to meet him, adding her strength to his, lifting the weight from his shoulders. He winced as the burden left him. Beth was hurrying toward them, and Ry-Lynn as well.

"Your back must be raw," Jema said.

Together the girls lifted the log, and with Pate's help they carried it into the camp, bounty swinging, the eels' eyes rimmed with gold. Jema touched one. The black skin was slimy.

Rodney and Snugg came running. Kris hurried forward, with Venus behind her, eyeing the frightful catch. In moments, they were gathered around.

"Where did you find them?" Rodney asked Pate.

Venus tapped an eel's head with her finger as if to wake it.

Jema could see Rangi between two shelters, his face turned their way, watching. He took a few strides toward them, then

halted. Jema clasped Pate's arm, but the next moment Rangi turned and headed into the forest.

Beth urged the group toward an altar of planks that she and her brother used to prepare food. There, the eels were unbound from the log and stretched out.

Snugg frowned at the creatures, uncertain if they could really be eaten. He'd been gnawing on bitter lettuce and bloodstalk, a wild herb that natives had used to paint their faces, and his fingers and teeth were stained red.

Beth pulled a large butcher knife from a bucket and approached the altar holding it point up. "How should I do this?"

Pate regarded her. "Take out the parts you don't think we should eat."

She nodded, set the blade behind the head of the largest eel and pressed down. The blade didn't break the skin. She leaned forward, put her full weight on it and the blade sank. The severed head fell to one side, and the body of the eel began a slow writhe.

Ry-Lynn shrieked, Venus jumped back. Snugg moved closer to the eel's head, looking into its glassy eye. Beth gripped its body and used her knife to split it in half. Jema drew beside Pate, circling his waist with her arm, unconcerned about what the others might see or think.

Dee was hurrying forward with Melody. Wyatt and Brice came too.

Kris faced Pate with a grudging look. "The girls will serve you," she said.

“I don’t want that.”

“It’s what we agreed to,” Kris said.

Pate looked at Jema. “What do you think?”

Jema answered Kris. “I think we should eat together.”

Kris sneered, and once again Jema saw the roots of hatred. There was a barrier between them now, and it transformed whatever Jema might say or do into something Kris found demeaning, something that further threatened their friendship.

The moon had risen above the treetops when they sampled the eels. They were gathered around the fire, pulling pieces of greasy meat off the skewers and putting them between their lips. The taste was new for all, as eel wasn’t eaten in the villas or in the cottages either. Jema chewed slowly.

“How did you catch them?” Snugg asked.

Pate swallowed. “With a length of vine bound to the end of a branch. I used a green thorn for a hook. Stuck a big cricket on it.”

Skewers were roasting over the coals, and the Whistling Reeds shrilled while the meat squirmed and spit.

“The hardest part,” Pate said, “was pulling them out. They’re heavy. They’re strong and they fight. Those teeth are as sharp as carpenters’ nails. As soon as I got one onto the bank, I stabbed its head with my spear.”

Ry-Lynn looked at her skewer and cleared her throat.

Venus pointed. “It’s Rangi,” she said.

They turned to see their leader stepping toward them. Jema glanced at Pate. The kids rose to their feet.

Rangi surveyed the group, sniffing the smoky air.

“Good work,” he nodded to Pate. “At least we won’t starve.” The recognition came with a proudful smirk, implying that Pate was attracted to lowly tasks and suited for them.

“Eels will do,” Rangi said, “until we find better.”



It had rained the night before. Heads of wheel moss had soaked up the water, and the climbers binding trunks and branches looked like wet rope. The roroa roots, shiny and cinnamon red, twisted through the sodden mulch.

Jema and Pate, following the tracks of the Royal Express, had reached the start of the viaduct bridge. A cool mist rose from below. The drop seemed immense. The rails were slick, the crossties slippery. Pate reached in his coat pocket, pulled out a piece of dried eel and handed it to her. She took a bite and handed it back.

“Careful,” he said, eyeing the earth beneath their feet as if saying goodbye to it. Then he started across the bridge, walking between the rails. Jema followed, taking quick steps without looking down.

“He’s a child,” Pate said.

His harshness surprised her. But Pate was right, she thought. If they were going to survive, they had to grow up.

“We have to be more like you,” she said. Pate was shorter than Rangi and not outspoken the way a leader must be. But he was more of a man.

For two weeks, Pate had hunted eels for the group. With

plentiful meat and the girls attending to things in camp, Rangi and the boys had devoted themselves to hauling wood and riding the train. The girls could hear the rumble and puff, and the piping whistle; they would catch a glimpse of the loco through a gap in the foliage and see the boys sparring on a flat car as the train wound its way through the trees.

She paid them little mind. Her heart was full of Pate, and her head was crowded with thoughts, daring and urgent—thoughts that came with an exhilaration like the one she felt now, midway across the viaduct bridge, suspended in space. The dark wall of the canyon appeared. Ferns battened the rock with green ladders all the way to the bottom.

The jungle and its wildness seemed irreparably far from the Governor's villa and her younger self. And the capital seemed even farther than that. What had happened to her parents, she wondered. Were they even alive? How long would she remain in this untamed place? What was possible here? What did she want? Who was she really?

Whatever her new life might bring, she wanted Pate to be close to her.

When they reached the far side, he stopped and turned. He saw the look in her eyes, and because he was Pate, he could sense her thoughtfulness and her deep regard. He drew closer and put his lips to hers. In the private warmth, their tongues touched. Pate pressed his hips against hers. She could feel the hardness between his thighs.

"Look," Pate said.

He turned and pointed, and Jema saw it.

Beyond the bridge moorings was a roroa grove, and at its center was a lit clearing. And on the border of the clearing was a hollow with an arbor of Caaqi's Breath. Its magenta trumpets were unmistakable.

"It's time, Jema." Pate spoke softly. "This is the place."

"You've been here before?" she asked.

Pate shook his head.

The place, she thought. "For us," she murmured.

And she gave him her hand.

He took it without a word and led her toward the arbor.

The quiet was broken only by the snap of twigs and the crush of leaf litter beneath their feet. She was nervous, yes. But confident too. The grove seemed woven with magic.

It was like a Great Room erected in a time primeval, before there were people. A hushed place where sunlight slanting through the green vaults set insect swarms whirling. Great pillars towered on either side, and before them, the bower of Caaqi's Breath was like the entrance to a cave: a comber of green loomed above, with dozens of trumpet blooms hanging down.

Magenta, the color Jema loved as a child. She would rise early to see the sky full of it when the sun was still hidden beneath the horizon. As she grew older, the color retreated to the back of her mind. But the memory was there and so was the fascination.

The soil of the grove was soft with moss and the flesh of rotting giants.

They halted at the threshold of the trumpet bower. The flaring mouths glowed where the sun edged them. The protruding anthers were powdered with gold.

The sight of that powder— For a moment, Jema imagined Caaqi emerging from a cloud of it, while the glowing dust sifted around her.

Pate pointed at a nest of twisted grasses. She gripped his hand tightly, and they crossed the threshold together. When they reached the grassy spot, he knelt and she settled beside him.

“Is something wrong?” Pate said.

She met his gaze. He could sense her hesitation.

“Caaqi brings change,” Jema said, remembering Hunu’s words.

Pate drew his jersey over his head. “Some find love,” he nodded. “Some lose their senses.”

Jema let him unbutton her shirt. “He’s here in the jungle. Watching us.”

Pate touched her sternum. He smoothed his fingers over her shoulder.

“He’s more than a bird,” Pate said. “He was circling over the stream where I caught the eels.” He drew her gaze to the trumpet blooms, then he kissed her cheek.

His gentleness calmed her.

They lay down, and pencils of light beamed into the bower. One of them ticked across Pate’s brow, making time slow. But though time seemed to lag, Jema’s heart beat faster. Above

them, the mouths of the trumpets flared and the golden dust was drifting down. And then Pate's eye was giant and close.

Jema held her breath.

Light was dripping from the ovate leaves, slowly, like oil. The trumpet fragrance was suddenly strong, from the heat of the day or because the pollen was thick. Could the magenta blooms feel her desire? Could they hear Pate whispering to the magenta inside her?

There was nothing to fear. Jema felt that surely. Faith in Pate filled her heart. She was held in warm, irresistible arms. Love embraced her, raw and overpowering. The boy you were meant for, the one you needed, the one you can't stay away from and can't live without—

A scream close by. Jema froze.

He's found us, she thought.

She could hear the beat of his wings, then over Pate's shoulder she saw him, swooping beneath the roroa crowns.

He showed his chocolate back as he banked, circling the clearing, head turned down. Come from a distance—

Pate had paused. "I'm here," he whispered.

The great parrot broke out of his circle, tilting and gliding toward them: two cockles and a cusp, his brows and nose; fog streaming back from his crown; wing fingers strafing the moss and the moldering soil.

Caaqi heeled abruptly, underwings flashing red through the winking pollen, settling on a branch above them—cheeks gold, dark widow's peak, black eyes peering down.

"Ready," the parrot said in a crackling voice—a rendition

of Hunu played on an old phonograph. He rattled his wings, epaulettes bristling. Then he fixed on Jema, and his black eyes hatched; in their depths she saw stars and glittering spokes, and his violent nature came boiling through, filling the space between them.

Pride, rage, passion, necessity— While Caaqi squawked and screeched, the frame of leaves around him shifted forward and back, as if about to consume her. Then, with a loud *cuck*, his thoughts emerged like the seed at the center of a nut that's been cracked.

She heard Caaqi speaking to her, speaking as the Governor might. As literate as her father, and his tone was as lofty. But his words were strange, so very strange.

Tricks and temptations, traps and lies— All the sly poisons and the brutal ones too: the degraded, the lewd, the maimed and useless; and the envied prize, my reward for the victors. Jema—

The Great Caaqi's eyes pinned and dilated. He can sense my feelings, she thought. He can read my mind, feel my desires.

All this will be yours, very soon. For the fearless: no craving held back, not a covet passed by. For the fearful: shock and dismay. Look, look— You can see them hiding, watching from loop and crevice: nightmare-rooted, eyes of doom, faces of jungle rubber, crooked and stretching.

What was the wild parrot telling her?

Pate's chest was heaving. He gasped in her ear. His whole body was clenching.

Caaqi whooped and whistled and beat his wings, then he

burst into cackles as if recalling a joke.

Pate bit her neck and hid his face in her shoulder. His breath, no longer a fury, began to slow.

What have you done? Jema thought.

She put her arms around Pate and met Caaqi's stare.

Who are you? she said.

The parrot didn't reply.

What's in our future? Jema insisted.

Caaqi spread his wings. *Chaos*, he answered. *Disorder and strife. Mobs and murders. Bloodshed and war.*

Our lives will be threatened, Jema thought.

They will, Caaqi replied.

You're frightening me, Jema thought. *Why are you saying these things? I'm just a kid.*

Not anymore, Caaqi said.

With that, he launched himself into the air. Jema saw the scarlet beat and felt the crazed bird trail his claws through her hair.



It was dusk when Jema woke. She opened her eyes, and Pate was beside her.

The terror of Caaqi's presence was still with her. She wondered how much of what she'd heard and felt had been real.

Jema sat up. There was a smear of blood on her thigh. She put her fingers to it, feeling the wetness.

Pate knelt beside her in the dimness, retrieving his clothing. Things seemed different, but not in a way she expected. He touched her once, twice, maintaining the link between them. But as he drew his pants on, he said little. Like he was having a conversation in secret with someone else.

She gathered her garments and dressed herself. Then she rose, dizzy, unsteady. Neither regret nor shame troubled her, but she felt cheated. Why had Caaqi appeared when he did? In the midst of love, what need was there of a message so dire?

Pate edged closer. He had two chocolate feathers in his hand, tokens the parrot had left behind. He tied them to the haft of his spear below the blade. Then they stepped out of the bower together and started back.

When they'd crossed the viaduct bridge, Jema paused and turned. The canyon was in shadow now, and so was the grove and the clearing. The bower of trumpets was barely visible, a passageway through the eye of a needle.

Pate reached for her hand. She saw the affection in his eyes, but it did little to allay her dismay and confusion. Why had Caaqi brought pleasure for him and dark prophecies for her? She wanted to share the parrot's inscrutable words, but they were jumbled and fading.

"Did you hear Caaqi speak?" she asked.

He looked up, scanning the canopy. Did he think the parrot was following them?

Pate said, "I heard him screaming."

He had satisfied his desire, Jema thought.

“Are you my wife now?”

She didn’t know how to answer his question. “We can’t tell anyone,” she said.

Pate seemed uncertain whether she was talking about what they had done or the appearance of Caaqi.

When they reached the camp’s border, he halted.

“There’s hunting to do,” he said.

She nodded. It was hard not to cry.

He kissed her goodbye, and she stood there watching until he’d disappeared through the trees.

As she approached the branch-and-vine shelters, she pictured herself high above, looking down. She saw a young woman approaching others, hesitant, torn, unsure if she still belonged to the clan. She wished she could tell Kris what had happened, but it was easy to imagine the resentment her friend might feel. And Ry-Lynn and Beth and Dee—certainly not. None of them would understand. Would they sense her mood and guess what she’d done?

That night, Jema dreamt of her father. She was living in the villa, and the Governor had never left. He watched her grow older, but he himself didn’t age. Years passed, many years, until Jema was as old as he was. Old and wise. And as she aged, the Governor’s speech slowed and his movements too, until finally he was perfectly still, frozen in time, turned to porcelain like the casting Kris took from her mother’s boudoir.

The next morning, Jema woke with a strange conviction: her parents weren’t coming back.



Pate's eel hunting continued, and the life of the camp began to circle around that. He delivered animals to Beth who carved them up. Rodney and Snugg harvested what they could from the forest and surviving gardens. Brice and his sister cooked and Venus served. After each meal, Dee cleaned up. Was she sampling the scraps? She wasn't eating with the rest of them.

In the evening, their erstwhile leader would retire to his shelter. Jema and the rest saw Venus carrying food to him—two skewers of roasted eel on a bed of leaves with fawn bread and clack nuts. Her steps had a bit of pomp, and she wore a solemn look. She would kneel at the entrance to Rangi's hut and call to him. A hand would emerge through the hanging vines, and she'd pass his dinner in. Her behavior incensed Kris, who seemed unaware that Venus was emulating her servility. Venus competed openly now for Rangi's attention, acting stupid and incapable around him. Jema tried to calm Kris, but Kris wouldn't have any of it. There was too much humiliation for her to admit to.

All of the kids showed their immaturity by taking Pate and the eels for granted.

With the need for nourishment met, Rangi's interest in survival waned, and the disregard spread to the other boys. When he wasn't inciting some contest in the woods, their leader was driving the Royal Express.

The train had practical functions. The circuit it made through the orchards and gardens allowed them to move their paltry harvest closer to camp. But increasingly, it was used for sport. The boys competed for the privilege of stoking the firebox. It was supposed to be loaded half full, but Rangi had them pack it to the top so the loco ran red hot. The girls could hear the whistle screaming and see the train careening through the trees.

One evening when the boys were late to return, Ry-Lynn said what Jema and others had been thinking. "That's not work."

"They're acting like fools," Kris agreed.

"What will happen," Dee said, "if they get hurt?"

When the boys returned to camp, Kris confronted Rangi.

"The train isn't a toy," she said.

Rangi raised his hand and combed his fingers through his hair, as if to show her how luxurious it was. She waited for him to speak, but the silence drew out.

"No more joyrides," Kris said.

"You know better than that," Dee chimed in, speaking to Wyatt.

Jema saw Wyatt's lips purse. He looked troubled. He had been a good student. She'd sat next to him in class, and she respected him.

Wyatt faced Rangi. "The Governor had rules."

Rangi smiled. "Are you going to tell on us?"

The boys found that funny, and so did Venus.

Wyatt blushed and looked down. Jema felt his defeat, and

with it the defeat of Kris and the girls. Would things have gone differently if Pate had been present?



Snugg's scruffy stubble was filling in. Pate had a beard now, and so did Wyatt and Rodney. The dark mat on Rangi's face made his skin seem darker, and he looked like he'd grown in size: his shoulders were thicker, his chest wider, his jaw more pronounced. When they were children, Jema had never feared him, but things had changed. Rangi was a man now, and he had a new meanness.

She was thinking of this as she helped Ry-Lynn cut the early spring greens. When she looked up, she saw Beth and Venus running toward them.

"We were with Melody," Beth said, "in the forest, gathering firewood."

A chill rose up Jema's spine.

"She was between us," Venus explained. "We turned away and—"

"The ferns were over our knees," Beth said. "We thought she was playing with her doll or taking a nap."

Kris and Ry-Lynn hurried forward with Dee behind. Rangi and the boys saw the girls gathering and headed toward them. At the same time, Pate emerged from the forest, wearing a packboard with eels strapped to it. When Jema raised her arm, he read her urgency, unslung his burden and sped down the path, spear in hand.

Rangi got the gist from Venus and addressed the group. "We'll walk in widening circles, calling her name," he said. "Where did she disappear?"

Beth and Venus looked at each other.

"We got lost," Beth confessed.

"I saw you leave camp," Pate said to her. "You were headed west. The terrain descends in that direction." He spoke gently, calmly. "Were you walking uphill?"

"I don't think so," Beth answered.

"We'll make a net to catch her," Pate said. "We'll spread out in a line."

Venus turned to their leader to see what he thought. Rangi shrugged.

"I'll be in the middle," Pate said. "Kris, take the left wing. Rangi, the right."

The girls followed Kris, while the boys aligned themselves on the opposite side. Then Pate motioned the group forward.

They walked slowly, calling. From her place between Kris and Dee, Jema saw one and another of them drop out of sight and reappear. Was Melody backed against a log or nestling in a hollow?

They entered a dark wood where the trees were immense. Their calls continued unanswered. Dee looked fearful. She was whispering Melody's name. Beyond the dark wood, the ground grew spongy. Water bled from the moss at every step.

Rodney halted and called for the others to join him. At first Jema thought he'd hurt himself, but as the group

gathered around, she saw he was holding the warrior doll. Rodney handed it to Pate, as if the doll might hold clues only Pate could divine.

“She’s getting tired,” Jema guessed.

Pate broke from the group, walked a few paces and knelt. Jema followed him, and as she drew closer, Pate rose with a chocolate feather in his hand. He handed it over to her, and she eyed it carefully, touching the vanes with a trembling finger.

Pate met her gaze, then he lifted his face, and she did too, scanning the canopy. The day was ending, sparks of the declining sun winking through. The burning villa, Jema thought. The friction with Rangi. The tension in the camp mounting daily. It seemed that misfortune, having found them, was following them now like a wild animal that, having fed once, returns wanting more.

She looked at the feather. Please help us, she thought.

Pate was directing the group, re-forming the line. “Slower,” he told them. “Keep together. If we don’t find her by dark, we’ll camp and start again at first light.”

The sinuous line resumed its march. As they covered the ground, the night came to meet them.

“Here,” Kris cried.

The twilight seemed to shine more brightly at her shout, then faded completely.

They all stumbled to where Kris was crouched at the edge of a stream.

Melody was curled on the bank, dirty and disheveled but unharmed, relieved to see them. They all spoke reassuring words to her. Pate handed her the doll, which she grabbed and held to her chest.

“Look at this,” Ry-Lynn exclaimed.

She was standing by the stream bank, peering down. A swarm of eels was visible, holding steady in the current, their undulating backs above the surface, teeth glowing silver. Jema looked up. A crescent moon had appeared through a break in the canopy, and on the limb of a tree high above the stream, she saw a familiar silhouette. Melody was by Jema’s leg. As Jema lifted the little girl in her arms, Caaqi spread his wings and departed.

“Why did you leave?” Jema whispered.

Melody’s lips trembled. “I want my mommy.”

Jema sobbed despite herself, hugging the little girl. “I’m your mommy now.”

Pate led the group back through the forest. He halted in a glade where giant sword ferns grew. He told them they would sleep beneath the ferns in case it rained, and the group made beds in the loam as he directed. Jema stretched out facing him, with Melody between them.



Rich Shapero's novels dare readers with giant metaphors, magnificent obsessions and potent ideas. His casts of idealistic lovers, laboring miners, and rebellious artists all rate ideas as paramount, more important than life itself. They traverse wild landscapes and visionary realms, imagining gods who in turn imagine them. Like the seekers themselves, readers grapple with revealing truths about human potential. *Beneath Caaqi's Wings* and his previous titles—*Dreams of Delphine*, *The Slide That Buried Rightful*, *Dissolve*, *Island Fruit Remedy*, *Balcony of Fog*, *Rin*, *Tongue and Dorner*, *Arms from the Sea*, *The Hope We Seek*, *Too Far*, and *Wild Animus*—are available in hard-cover and as ebooks. They also combine music, visual art, animation and video in the TooFar Media app. Shapero spins provocative stories for the eyes, ears, and imagination.