

ELOM

WILLIAM H. DRINKARD

TOR*

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEWYORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

ELOM

Copyright 2007 by William H. Drinkard

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

A Tor Book

Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC 175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

www.tor.com

Tor® is a registered trademark of Tom Doherty Associates, LLC.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7653-1785-8 ISBN-10: 0-7653-1785-0

CIP DATA-TK

First Edition: March 2008

Printed in the United States of America 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my girls,
Genna, Casey, Marisa, Lit, Emmy, Sims, and Joleigh

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe more than I can ever say to my youngest daughter Casey, who challenged me to write this book, and to my closest friend John Ziegler, who read the first draft and pushed me to have it published. Special thanks go to Claire Eddy, my Tor editor and guiding light, who kept me on a straight and narrow path, and to her trusty assistant Kristin Sevick. To Tom Doherty and Patrick Nielsen Hayden of Tor, who gave me advice and a chance, I am forever grateful. Thanks also goes to my agent, Susan Ann Protter. Not to be forgotten is the encouragement of Charles and Sandy. And last, but not least, I thank Paula, without whose support—and collection of books on writing—this book could never have been written.

W.H.D

ELOM

One

At first, the appearance of the blood had startled Geerna; now she smiled to herself as she thought about it. It had been the number of days spanning the time between the risings of two full moons since the crimson liquid first trickled down the inside of her leg—a signal of the onset of her womanhood. The Earth Mother had touched her a second time with the Flowing of the Blood a moon cycle later; now, as she huddled in the Quarry Hut, she felt the uncomfortable wetness of her third Flowing of the Blood.

Her mother, Zera, had assured her the great Earth Mother, Shetow, would soon give her the blessed sign. Even with her mother's promise, it still frightened Geerna when she first felt the warm, sticky liquid and lifted her deer-pelt skirt to see the bright red symbol of the Earth Mother's Touch. To her surprise, her first thought was of pride in being Touched by Shetow before Kara, her closest friend. Geerna smiled and then yelled her good news to Kara before darting off to find Zera, who was digging up fresh kasa roots with the other women of the tribe.

Geerna's boyish looks were deceiving; her body, as yet, did not divulge the curves another cycle of the seasons would bring. Zera had assured her that as a young girl she too had been "as thin as lake-grass reed" and not to worry. Her mother's words comforted Geerna, for Zera's body had endured the birth of four children and her figure still rivaled that of an Earth Mother carving.

The front edge of a towering glacier filled the northern skyline; the stories of the Teller of the Tell said it had always been so. In the summers, Geerna often looked at her own reflection in the still waters along the edges of the small pools created by the runoff from the melting ice. Her reflection revealed an elongated, ash-colored face with hollow

eyes. The mangled locks of her profusive, ruddy brown hair overshadowed her thin young face. After seeing her reflection, she started pulling her hair together, allowing it to fall behind her back and spread out from a rawhide tie. As her hair cascaded down her back, it spread out as wide as her body when it reached her waist.

Geerna did not think of herself as young, even though the shape of her gangly body still betrayed the wonders of her gender. She had eagerly awaited the Earth Mother's touch, fully aware of the perils of childbirth and the harshness of survival that often claimed the lives of girls soon after the commencement of their Flowing of the Blood. She knew her mother's longevity was unusual. Geerna expelled a shallow breath and squeezed her eyes shut; *Blessed Shetow, Earth Mother, please grant me a life as long as my mother's*. Her eyes opened and blinked. Her life was about to change and she could not remember a time when she had not aided her mother's foraging for food to feed their family. Now she dreamed of her own children and the man who would be their father. Geerna winced; flashes of her own father's blood-splattered and battered body filled her mind. *Was it that long ago*, she thought? She realized his; and the too frequent deaths of the tribe's hunters, exacted a levy as severe on the tribe as the toll taken by women during the ordeal of childbirth. Life was hard for the People, yet Geerna was thankful to the Earth Mother for her precarious existence. Geerna knew Shetow had cast her special; once again, the lines of her face tightened, her eyes focused, and she felt that somehow the great Earth Mother would ensure her survival.

The last two days had been the most exhilarating time of Geerna's I brief life. Now she sat for a second night in the gloomy Quarry Hut, where all young girls stayed for four days after they finished the first part of the Quarry—the females' rite of passage ceremony. At dusk of the fourth day, and without the aid of any male, the adult females of the tribe would build a monstrous fire. Even a tiny twig added by a male toddler imitating his mother's actions would defile the ritual. Younger girls not yet Touched by Shetow were also forbidden from taking part in feeding the ceremonial flame. The ritual blaze would be lit from the tribe's Life Fire; a gift from Shetow, when She started a brush fire with a lightning bolt. Now, the tribe's Life Fire—their only source of fire—was a small, ever-burning flame nurtured and protected by the tribe's Medora. The circular stack of stones that would later restrain the Quarry Fire lay a short distance from a collection of squatty domed yurts and lean-

tos partly constructed from the bones and tusks of the mammoths the tribe depended on for many of its necessities.

The hastily built thin reed walls of the Quarry Hut could not support the massive weight of a mammoth hide and were instead covered only by loosely woven grasses between the saplings. However, the Quarry Hut was not meant to keep the biting wind from reaching its occupant; rather, it gave the young female a place to meditate and prepare herself for assuming her new role in the life of the tribe. The Quarry Hut signified the Womb of Shetow, the Great Earth Mother, and time in the hut offered an opportunity for reflection and growth. In two days, Geerna would step from the Quarry Hut a grown woman, and after the Ritual of the Washing, ready to pair with a male and strengthen the tribe by bearing children.

Geerna had much to think about during her forced, but welcomed, incarceration in the frigid confines of the Quarry Hut. After the days of snow, the flowers would bloom and then would be her Pairing with Yugadi, a young hunter of the Black Bear Tribe. Zeta said Yugadi would be a good protector and provider for Geerna's future children. After his and Geerna's Pairing Ceremony, by custom, he would leave his tribe to join hers. She had never spoken to Yugadi but she had seen him at a distance each spring when all the tribes along the Silver River gathered to celebrate the Renewal of Life and dance in the jubilation of surviving another winter. She twisted a lock of her long, tangled hair around her little finger as she remembered the last Gathering when her mother, face glowing, crept into their hastily constructed lean-to to tell Geerna she had arranged Geerna's Pairing with Yugadi. Geerna smiled at the thought of her mother's giggles and bouncing breasts as Zera recounted the haggling with Yugadi's mother before she once again drifted into the story about her own arranged Pairing with Geerna's father many Gatherings earlier. Geerna forced back a grin as she thought of the upcoming event—days and nights of dancing, the gyrating movements of tightly packed people matching the thundering rhythm from hollow-log drums seeking Shetow's blessing for the new Cycle of Life and for those Pairing at the Gathering. For a brief moment, she wondered why men danced in one group and the women in another, and then grimaced as she remembered females were chosen by Shetow to be the instruments of Her gift of life to the people; females were special. Geerna fought back leaking tears; she knew the dancing to the Mother of Life brought the power of Shetow to the People; the dancing made sure the People never forgot that only with Shetow's blessing could life continue—and then only through the wonders of the female body.

In an effort to shake off the relentless chill, Geerna concentrated on the warm memory

of her mother's milky voice. She closed her tear-swollen eyes as the remembrance of Zera's hypnotic murmur brought calmness and clarity to her jumbled thoughts. Zera had instructed her eldest daughter on the wonders of Shetow's world and the cycles Shetow used to govern over Her dominion—some cycles large, others small. Zera spoke of the journey of the seasons as a large cycle—from warm to cold, then cold to warm. In this cycle was the birthing of the herding animals: first, the great white snow elk, followed by the more abundant prairie buck. Zera had noted that even the cave lion bore her cubs the same time each year. With reverence, Geerna's mother often spoke of how only the birthing of the People's children and the calves of the mammoths moved outside this seasonal cycle. This she said was proof of the lofty position in which the Earth Mother held the People and the mighty mammoths. Geerna pulled her covering tight around her shoulders as she reflected on the Cycles of Life; events, Zera told her, that were especially important to the women. To signal a coming birth, Shetow broke a woman's cycle of the Flowing of the Blood. Although being Touched by Shetow meant womanhood, suspension of the Flowing of the Blood was a sure sign of the coming of a child. Geerna lifted her Quarry Mask to rub her dried lips, which resembled half-healed scars blemishing the ashen skin of her taut face. She nodded unconsciously; she knew Shetow had made her and the rest of the people special; unlike the animals, the People's young could be born any season during the Great Cycle of Seasons. Instead, Shetow had given them this special sign to let the People know when they could expect the birth of a child. With quivering lips, Geerna forced a smile, a sign Zera said Shetow would give her soon after her Pairing with Yugadi.

Eerie shadows cast by the moonlight invaded the solitude of the hut. Geerna could hear the night sounds, which fell on her attentive ears like sweet music. Each sound generated memories of her childhood; a childhood she was now preparing to leave. She reached for an upturned tortoise shell for a drink of water; a fragile film of ice covered the liquid's surface. Her mother had carefully cleaned and then bleached the shell in the sunlight to give her daughter a container to hold the water. The water Zera brought each day to refill the tortoise shell was the only sustenance Geerna could receive during her time in the Quarry Hut. The Medora told Geerna the fasting cleared both the body and mind; however, nagging hunger was a regular companion to Geerna and the other members of the tribe. She pulled her arms close to her chest and pressed her hands against her flat belly; the

growl in her stomach was no stranger. She bit her lower lip and spoke a few words of praise and thanks to Shetow; it was the hard times that made the spring Gatherings and the Renewal of Life celebrations so joyful.

The Medora had placed a woolly rhinoceros hide in the Quarry Hut so Geerna's naked body could endure the relentless assault of the frigid night air. Geerna began to shiver uncontrollably and buried her head under the hide to warm herself. The thick hide was stiff; having been salted down and scraped but not tanned; its pervasive odor forced her to stick her nose past its gathered edges to breathe. The ochre mud the women smeared over her body at the end of the first day of the Quarry ritual dried during her first night in the hut. She ran her right hand down her left arm, feeling the scaly texture of her crusty covering, which felt like the knurly bark of the ropper tree. While giving her a sense of comfort, the unfamiliar layer also awed her. The rough casing coated her entire body; Geerna felt she possessed a second skin—an additional layer of protection against the hardness and dangers faced daily by the members of the tribe. Heavy tentacles of matted hair and mud hung from her head. A Quarry Mask was her only clothing and that was purely ornamental. The headdress consisted of a rawhide string circling her head with fur-covered strips of hides from seven different female animals hanging from the portion of the rawhide covering her forehead. The strips hanging from the Quarry Mask obscured her face and blended with the mud-hair ropes dangling from her scalp. She would remove her mask after her pairing but would keep her hair rolled in mud-caked ropes for all the cycles of the seasons Shetow blessed her with the Flowing of the Blood.

The mud's earthy stench again prompted Geerna to remember the chants the women of the tribe sung during the first night of her ceremony: the Tell of Shetow—the Earth Mother, giver of life, and ultimate source of all sustenance. Geerna's astute and nimble mind raced as she watched the moisture from her breath freeze on the coarse hairs of her rhinoceros-hide blanket. Her body made a sudden, unexpected jerk; she would soon be a vessel holding a life the Earth Mother would place in her belly. A sense of belonging filled her heart and for the first time the true power and meaning of Quarry Ceremony became clear to her. The tribe's women—like their mothers before them—used the Quarry to ensure the new female members joining their group understood their

new place in the life of the tribe.

Her breathing slowed. Geerna knew the order of the ritual by heart. At dusk of the fourth day, five women from the tribe would come and lead her to the Quarry Fire. She closed her eyes and tried to envision how she would feel when, for the first time during the ceremony, she would stand nude before all the gathered members of the tribe—male and female, young and old. The hypnotic drone of the Teller's Tell of the Quarry resonated in her mind. Geerna could almost see the tribe's Medora, aided by the four oldest women in the tribe, lifting a large conch shell and pouring water from the Silver River over her shoulders. As the sheets of cold liquid flowed down her shivering body, the caked earth would once again turn into grimy mud before sliding from her body. Geerna recalled the Quarry Ceremonies she had attended as child: as the mud washed off, a slick coat of dark red blood would appear as another layer, beneath the mud, completely covering the young female's body. During the first day of the ceremony she had learned about the Taking of the Blood, blood given by each adult female in the tribe, squeezed from tiny cuts made with a ceremonial flint flake, and collected in a seashell from the distant shore of the Unending Waters at the mouth of the Silver River. Geerna drew in and let out a deep breath; washing the mud off—Shetow's own substance—would represent Geerna's birth as one of the Earth Mother's own.

Geerna began to rock her body in an effort to stave off the creeping numbness slowly spreading over her body. Like countless times before this moment, she tried to blot out the growing pain by focusing on the events that would culminate the most important moments in her life. Encircling Geerna's Ritual of the Washing, the balance of the tribe's womanhood would chant and rock side-to-side as they watched the timeless ritual. Geerna knew the chanting and dancing were as important as the washing, for it made Shetow take notice of the great event—Shetow would know Geerna had joined the ranks of Her chosen. Geerna remembered the mystery in her mother's look as she explained how each of the Medora's exaggerated movements represented an indispensable part of the rite—motions depicting the ordeal and splendor of birth and life. The washing would strip off the fusion of mud and blood leaving her naked before the tribe—people she had known all her life. Geerna blushed at the thought, it would be the last time any male, besides her Pairing Partner, would ever see her completely

nude. She thought of her wifyur, the short-reed waist apron worn by all mature females, her mother had finished crafting the day before the tribe's Medora came for her. The people wore little clothing away from the chill of winter, but females, after their Quarry Ceremony, always wore this sign of their devotion to the Earth Mother. She brushed the tips of her fingers against the tender skin along her neck and arms. At the end of the washing, the last layer, her bare skin, would display a change since the time three days earlier when the male and young female members of the tribe had seen the Medora take her by the hand and lead her to the congregation of awaiting females. Now across her face and down her shoulders were tattooed rows of black dots, a sign of her womanhood and fertility, and in the eyes of the tribe, she knew, an enhancement of her female beauty.

Geerna opened her left hand. There lay the small ivory carving of the Earth Mother given to her during the first night of the ceremony. The figurine was crude, but to Geerna it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. The carving plainly depicted a pregnant woman with enlarged breasts and a protruding belly out of proportion with the rest of the body; her hands and feet were small, almost indistinguishable. Geerna realized the carving had taken the Medora, using only brittle flint flakes, many days to fashion. This ivory symbol of Shetow would always be her most precious possession. All the other girls she knew received woodcarvings of Shetow. Geerna smiled; the ivory carving confirmed it. For the Medora to take such pains for Geerna's Quarry Ceremony verified what many in the tribe had been whispering, she was to become the aging Medora's apprentice. The thought of it brought as much excitement to her fluttering heart as her thoughts of Pairing with Yugadi. For the next few cycles of the seasons she would be trained in the ways of the Sisterhood of the Medoras—the guardians of the Truth of the Great Earth Mother and protectors of the tribes' Life Fires.

As the moon rose to take command of the heavens, the music of the night softened. Moonbeam shadows slowly altered as the moon crept across the star-packed sky. Geerna had never been alone, not like this. She became a little fearful. *Not the response of a girl about to become a woman*, Geerna thought to herself. She bit her lower lip as she concentrated on the events of two days ago. It was a night that would, she knew, always stay fresh in her mind—the beginning of her womanhood, the night she learned the mysteries of the Great Earth Mother. She knew she was blessed; the Earth Mother had touched her inner spirit, she could feel the change deep inside.

Without any warning, her concentration was broken. For a moment, she felt

disorientated; a hint of vertigo made her place a hand on the ground to keep from falling over. Then a warm, yet somehow silent breeze blew through the hut.

No, she thought to herself; it was not because the wind was still; there was no sound. The stillness confused her. Was this another part of the Quarry? Who among the People could cause such a thing to happen? It must be a sign from Shetow, yet she had never heard of anything like this from the women of the tribe, not even a whisper. She remembered the Teller of the Tell once spoke about a time when Shetow took one of the chosen to be with Her, to help look after the People—but the Tell said that occurred many Tellers in the past.

Suddenly, the night sky became more brilliant than the noonday sun. The unexpected change in illumination hurt her eyes. Squinting, she looked through a distortion of tears trying to see what was happening. The hut started to shake violently. She knew the flimsy reed walls could not endure such punishment; Geerna sensed the hut was about to collapse. She fought back her rising fear and tried to control the pounding in her chest. As the hut crumbled around her, she stepped through a breach in the buckling reed wall. Instantly an even brighter light focused on her. The dazzling light brought waves of comforting warmth. She felt herself begin to float and rise from the ground as the woolly rhinoceros hide slid from her shoulders. Blinking back the tears and controlling her fear, Geerna looked into the brightest part of the light—the point to which she was being drawn. The light lost a sliver of intensity as the resonance of an oscillating hum increased.

Out of the confusion, her mind cleared. She was to join Shetow. She was truly a chosen one. With the ivory figurine tightly clutched in her fist, her crossed arms pulled tightly to her chest, Geerna disappeared into the effervescent glow.

Two

But if you are correct . . . that could mean the destruction of Elom . . . the end of the People," Nomee exclaimed. "Geerna tells us in the mnemonic verses of the Shetow-ka this time would come," the old woman responded as she settled back in a rickety chair at the short side of a triangular wooden table. "The drak's announcement of the pending Second judging is unexpected." She bit her lower lip. "We are surprised only

because we became complacent; we relaxed our vigil." The old woman shook her head. "None of us thought the prophecy would be fulfilled in our lifetime."

"Berkana, what are we to do?" Ura, a younger, but still silver-haired woman asked.

"We will do." Berkana cast a stern gaze to muzzle the rumble in the room. After a few last whispers, the other women yielded to the old woman's glare. "We must make ready," she said in a softer, more deliberate tone, "for what we and our predecessors have been preparing for all this time. We must find the best among us and pray they are good enough. That their Traits are strong and their wits sharp." She brushed a strain of white hair from her face. "The fate of our people rest with our selections." The twenty-four women in the gray domed chamber found their places at the hand-hewn table that had served them and their predecessors for ages untold. The women were clothed in the same bluish gray robes they wore when not performing their ceremonial duties. One was young, many were middle-aged, a few were very old; all but three had a spark in their eyes and resolve in their voice.

"The People know nothing of Shetow's Second Judging," Bolanna, the youngest member of the group said, her voice faltering. "This will cause panic; Geerna was wrong to yield to the Multiped's insistence on keeping it from them." Her shallow eyes added to the ghostly look of her gaunt face.

A white-haired woman to Berkana's right rose slowly. "Medora Roo, may I?" The woman nodded towards Berkana, who returned the nod. She scanned the faces of the other Medoras but her eyes finally settled on their youngest. "Geerna's Sacred Words have guided us and the People through six Progressions, since the beginning of the Tell—the time when Shetow brought our ancestors to this planet. To the Medoras, Geerna gave the Shetow-ka telling us of our home world, of the events that transpired after she and the others were brought to Elom, also of the Multiped and of the prophecy of the Second Judging." She placed a hand against her chest. "To us, the Medora Council, Geerna entrusted this secret." The woman ran the fingers of her left hand through her thin hair. "Geerna knew, with time, the Tell of our ancestors being brought to Elom would grow dim in their minds. Now, six Progressions later, it's only a folktale."

"But Verna," Bolanna insisted, "Geerna and the Multiped should have included the prophecy in the Chants of the Sequa; it would make our task much easier."

Berkana rose to stand by Verna. "The burden of knowing of a coming Second Judging had to stay in the esoteric verses of the Shetow-ka, with the Medoras." She looked down a moment and unconsciously shook her head. "Sisters," she said as she lifted her face, "moments ago we discussed the fact that we thought the Second Judging would not happen in our lifetime. We twenty-four who have spent our lives reciting the Sacred Verses of the Shetowka, we who have—from the beginning of the Tell—been spared the force of the Mark of the Covenant's Inhibitors, have faltered and faltered badly." Again, the Medora Roo shook her head. "The People, distracted by the force of the Inhibitors and listening to the campfire stories cycle after cycle of the seasons, dismiss the story of Earth as a fable. And I fear part of that is our fault."

"Do you know who they are . . . I mean the ones who will represent the People?" Nomee asked.

"No . . . no, I do not know who we will choose. The Shetow-ka says the selection of those who will represent the People rests with us on the Medora Council; I only know we must pick our best." Her shrewd eyes narrowed. "Perhaps we should use the special gift Shetow blest the People with after the last Progression to help us choose. Surely, Shetow would not have given it to them unless She meant for us to use it."

"Berkana," said Reva, a red-haired woman whose face had lost its color. "Many of us have not recited the verses of the prophecy since we were novices." The woman searched the faces of the other women at the table, her frightened eyes begging for support. She lowered her eyes. "Why, when we least expect it?" she mumbled to herself. She lifted her waxen face, her distracted gaze finally focused on Berkana, "Why now, Medora Roo?"

"Moments of decision often happen when we least expect them. At least the Shetow-ka tells us the Multipled told Geerna the Second Judging would not occur before the People were ready." Berkana's eyes wandered for a moment before her attention returned to those at the table. Her face was drawn, her lower lip quivered. "Shetow must think us ready or She would not have demanded that the Second Judging take place now." Berkana felt an invisible pair of hands press against the top of her shoulders. *You must not show them the turmoil raging in your mind*, she thought; *you must not vacillate*. She took a deep breath.

"Four cycles of seasons ago, you elected me the leader of the council, your Medora Roo. The weight of your selection has never felt heavier, but I realize that you all feel the burden of this

revelation." She took a labored breath.

"The Shetow-ka tells us the People were judged during the life of Geerna, before the First Progression, at the beginning of the Tell . . . at that Judging the People did not find favor in the Eyes of Shetow. Geerna, our first Medora Roo, made a Covenant, through the Multiped, with Shetow so the People could have another chance, a Second Judging. After the conception of Geerna and Shetow's Covenant, came our Sacred Mark followed by the First Progression."

"But, Berkana," Tavanor said, "Geerna met with the Multiped, Shetow's emissary, countless cycles of the seasons ago. I thought . . ." Tavanor took a side-glance at the red-haired Reva.

"Well . . . I thought the Second Judging . . ." her voice fell to a whisper ". . . was many Progressions in the future."

"You are not alone," Berkana said. "The Tell of the Medoras says our predecessors suggest that very idea. By the Second Progression, many in the Council felt the imminent danger to the People had passed, believing the Second Judging would not happen in their Progression. As the relentless cycles of the seasons went by, the fear of a Second Judging faded. Our sisters believed if the People joined them in chanting the Sequa and following the laws it gave us, then everything would be all right. However, they . . . we . . . were wrong. The Second Judging is not something in our future—we must face it now"

"The Shetow-ka does not tell us why the People did not find favor in Shetow's eyes," persisted Ura, her voice cracking as tears began streaming down her cheeks.

Berkana turned towards the troubled Medora. "No, it does not, but Geerna, through the verses of the Shetow-ka, and Geerna and the Multiped through the Chants of the Sequa, have guided us in preparing the People for a Second Judging. You ... most of us"—Berkana moved her hands, indicating those in the room—"like many of our sisters before us, stopped worrying about the prophecy:" She shifted her body to sit straighter. "But, by Shetow's Grace"—her voice grew stronger--and even though we lost sight of the purpose for our sovereignty, the Medora Council continued to govern the People as the Shetow-ka instructed. I believe that is what matters; that we ruled by the edicts given us in the Sacred Words of the Shetow-ka. We made sure the People followed the Laws Geerna and the Multiped gave us in the Chants of the Sequa; we have accomplished our charge. We kept the People's part of Geerna's Covenant with Shetow.

By allowing the People a Second Judging, Shetow is now keeping Her part of the Covenant."

Verna smiled. "With the help of the Multiped, Geerna first composed the Chants of the Sequa to soothe the people; to calm them after the trauma of being plucked from Earth and then stranded on Elom. During the First Progression, when the force of the Inhibitors was the strongest, the People recited the Sequa, along with the Tell, around the campfires. At first, it held great sway with them. The need for soothing faded by the beginning of the Second Progression; now, four Progressions later only the Laws in the Sequa are of any consequence to them."

Most of the women around the table nodded.

"Medora Roo, tell us again what the drak told you," Tavanor pleaded.

Berkana's eyes cleared as she refocused her attention on those around her. "Yesterday, after the Pairing, it . . . the drak, asked to speak to me. I, of course, agreed. We came here to the Council Chambers. No sooner had we entered the room, when the drak said, 'the time for the Second Judging is near, prepare your best.' I was stunned. I was only able to ask one question as the drak turned to leave the room." No one moved; their eyes fixed on her. "I asked *if* the Second Judging would be before the next Gathering. The drak answered no, but said it would take place soon after that." The Medoras were silent. Berkana slowly lowered herself back into her chair.

"Could you read anything in the drak's expression?" Reva asked after a short silence.

Berkana's troubled eyes darted to her inquisitor. The Medora Roo showed no emotion; then her stern face melted into her first smile of the night. "I can read the expressions of a scaly fish better than I can read the feathered face of a drak." Nervous chuckles echoed off the chamber's walls.

"As we have been discussing, sisters," Verna said after the laughter subsided, "no one outside the Council has ever known about that part of the Covenant covered by the Shetow-ka foretelling the Second Judging, and the Inhibitors from the Mark of the Covenant have kept the People's curiosity and rebelling under control." She raised her eyebrows. "It may be prudent for us to keep this knowledge to ourselves. Geerna,

through the Shetow-ka, prepared us and our predecessors for this day." Her shoulders dropped slightly. "We can only trust that Geerna and the Multiped, through the Tell and the Sequa, also prepared those who we will select as our representatives for the final judging." Verna looked towards Berkana and then made a short bow before sitting down.

The Medora Roo pursed her lips as she gripped the back of her chair and again pulled her aging body erect. "The Shetow-ka prophesized the Second Judging would occur during the days of the Prime Progression. We are now many cycles of the seasons into the Sixth Progression, which now appears to be the Prime Progression. The Shetow-ka also tells us that in the later stages of the Prime Progression the effect of the Mark of the Covenant's Inhibitors would diminish."

"That would explain," Ura blurted, "why many of the People, especially the males, are so unsettled, almost rebellious."

"I thought," Reva said, her eyes welling with emotion, "that was a natural consequence of the cultural changes since the last Progression."

"Each Progression," Berkana said, "brought greater and greater sophistication to our culture; enormous leaps towards, it appears, the mental skills needed to face the Second Judging."

"Perhaps," Verna said, "it was Geerna and the Multiped's plan—with Shetow's blessings—for the Second Judging to take place before the order and stability provided by the Laws of the Sequa totally collapsed." She moved a hand in front of her face as if shooing away an invisible insect. "Geerna and the Multiped must have foreseen the time would come when, even with the Inhibitors, the men and women would not be pacified with hunting and creating art."

"Should we contact the others?" Verna asked, after a moment of silence, her eyes questioning.

"I have already released a messenger pigeon; they should contact us before the completion of another cycle of the seasons." Then Berkana's brow furrowed as she grasped the ivory carving hanging from a rawhide strip that encircled her neck. "Geerna knew this day would come. We cannot fail her or those she left in our charge." Her eyes moved slowly around the table *as* she studied each woman in turn. Brave women all, even

those who show trepidation, she thought. If she must decide those who would face the Second Judging, she knew she could not have picked a better group to help her. "We have one cycle of the seasons to select the ones who will represent us. The Council will meet every fifty days, as is customary. Before this council meeting is adjourned, we must develop a plan using our special Trait to select our representatives for the Judging; then, at the end of the next Gathering we will be ready to inform those selected." Again, she struggled to her feet. "Now, with the Grace of Shetow's Mark of the Covenant"—she lifted her left arm, revealing a purple circular mark on the inside of her wrist—"may we only choose those worthy of this vital task."

"Blessed be the Mark of the Covenant," the other women responded in unison as they raised their arms revealing identical symbols.

Three

Death was his only alternative. He was as prepared as anybody who had ever made the hunt, for only one in three men survived the encounter. By embarking on the hunt, Kalmar had committed to kill a cat or die in the effort. He had vowed, to himself; long ago, to one day face a cave lion. The skills learned under the Gray Beards' tutelage from the day he was pulled from his mother's nipple were about to be tested. In his excitement, he unconsciously bit his lower lip, causing blood to ooze into his mouth. With his attention focused on every movement and sound around him, the taste of the salty sweet fluid went unnoticed. What fate awaited him, only Shetow knew. Whatever his destiny, he longed for the serenity that either his death or the death of the great cat would bring him.

When Kalmar first sensed the cave lion's presence, Salune stood high in the warm noon sky. Now the sun would soon set; the coming of the twilight-of-night would force him to break off the hunt until the next morning. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple, Kalmar could sense the cat's presence. He did not realize, however, that the cave lion also sensed Kalmar's presence and was now stalking him.

The cave lion was the largest of the great cats, and with its curved dagger-like fangs and paws tipped with finger-length claws, was the deadliest predator in the valley.

An adult male's weight easily equaled that of any three of the tribe's largest and strongest hunters, and as Kalmar crawled along the foot of the cliff in an effort to stay upwind of his prey, he knew he trailed a young male. That morning he found the carcass of a young doe killed and partially eaten by a lone cat. Kalmar knew that female cats always hunted in packs and provided all the meat for themselves, their cubs, and the dominant male of the pride. The cat that caught the doe, Kalmar concluded from the skills learned from the Gray Beards, must be a young nomadic male waiting his chance to challenge an aging dominant male to head a pride. Both hunter and prey were young and Kalmar's only hope of winning the life-and-death contest rested with his intuitiveness and skill with a bow. All the cat's senses, other than one, were superior to his, and those advantages multiplied if Kalmar permitted the confusion of the night's twilight to fall before he was able to take his shot.

Only the bravest hunted the cave lion alone. His Medora said it was not being brave, for only the foolish were idiotic enough to face the almost certain death of such a match. Rarely did more than one in a generation make the solo hunt for the regal creature. Killing a cave lion brought a man the highest acclaim the People could give one of its hunters, and since Kalmar was of the Cave Lion Tribe, Kalmar's prestige would even be greater among the other males in his tribe—and it would not go unnoticed by the females.

The dancing shadows cast by the fluttering leaves tickled by the cool breeze kept his eyes jumping from spot to spot. The flickering sunlight creeping by the deceiving shadows looked like the flames of a partially obscured campfire. The surrounding boulders formed the walls of an imaginary Oonoc Lodge in his mind. He thought of the Cave Lion Tribe's Oonoc Lodge, with the tanned hide of the cave lion his grandfather had slain hanging above the stone hearth of the tribe's Life Fire. An anxious smile parted his lips; he realized the other males in his tribe believed he hunted the cave lion for tribal honor. However, he knew his duel with the cave lion was rooted far deeper than that; every day since a cave lion took his grandfather's life, Kalmar had known, in time, he too must face and kill one of the great cats. For eight cycles of the seasons, since the day of his grandfather's death, he had honed his hunting skills waiting for this day. He touched a fang in the necklace of cave lion teeth hanging around his neck, prized

mementos from his grandfather's cat. The collar of teeth was always with him, a constant reminder of his resolve to hunt the regal beast.

A screech pierced the silence of the still afternoon air. He looked up to see a split-tailed hawk flapping its wings as it flew towards the river beyond the tree line. The sight of the hawk was a good omen. His grandfather had once said the split-tailed hawk was the noblest of creatures and a sure sign of good luck. Kalmar's grandmother responded, after kissing her partner on the cheek, by saying he spoke about everything from his youth with a bias. Urga had been a member of the Split-Tailed Hawk Tribe until he paired with Kalmar's grandmother and left his own tribe to join her family and the Cave Lion Tribe. Shetow and Geerna's Covenant decreed that females were never to choose a Pairing Partner from their own tribe; instead, they were to select a male from one of the other tribes. Kalmar smiled; in less than three months, he would leave his own tribe to join the tribe of his female partner after their Pairing. The appearance of the hawk brought memories of Urga. His eyes sparkled; his grandfather must be looking out for him.

Kalmar stood up and let the straps of his hunting pack quietly slip off his shoulders. He gently set the pack on the ground and leaned it against a jagged rust-colored rock, being careful not to damage his reed flute, which protruded past the edge of the top flap. As the Gray Beards, a select group of the tribe's older males, had taught him, he noted the landmarks surrounding the location to make sure he could retrieve the pack later. He gave mental thanks to the Gray Beards who, through their Stories of Life, not only instructed him and the other young males on how to face the dangers of the hunt, but also in the ways of manhood. As he brushed back a troublesome lock of his long hair, he remembered the chuckle of one Gray Beard, who told his young charges the most important lesson from the Stories of Life was how to deal with females.

The disobedient strand of hair once again fell across his face. He reached down and untied a length of rawhide cord loosely attached to one of the shoulder straps. He ran it behind his neck and under his wavy dark brown hair and crossed the ends of the rawhide, forming a knot; then, with both hands, pulled the two ends of the rawhide tight. The last thing he needed was his hair dangling in front of his eyes obstructing his sight as he trailed his prey; being blinded for only a second could be fatal. As Saltine approached the horizon, its now feeble rays allowed the temperature of the

mountain air to cool; with only a single layer of soft buckskin covering him, the dropping temperature would soon chill him to a point of discomfort. He looked down at his hands as he rubbed them together, warming them as he worked out the stiffness accompanying the drop in temperature. The many cycles of the seasons of hunting under the bombarding rays of Salune had turned the color of his skin to a rich copper, which stood in stark contrast to his bright cobalt blue eyes. The cuff of his shirt hid most of the round Mark of the Covenant imprinted on the inside of his left wrist. Kalmar stretched and flexed his hands as he studied his long, strong, yet delicate fingers. His manly yet beautiful hands, his mother said, were the first thing a female would notice about him; however, it was his wide smile that he relied on to charm both sexes. His wiry body matched the slenderness of his fingers. His younger sister kidded him, saying his only flaw was his awareness of his appearance. The thought of her words sent a dull chill through his body; he did not think he was cocky. For a moment he lowered his eyes. If they only knew how bashful he really was; he felt people sometimes misread his zealous labors to overcome his shyness as brashness.

Kalmar refocused his attention when he again "sensed" the nearness of the cat. With only his knife, bow, and quiver of arrows, he renewed the hunt.

As he crept along the undergrowth, his sinew bowstring caught on the leafless branch of a juda bush. As he tried to back out of the snag, the branch snapped with an audible crack; the bowstring twanged as it pulled free of the broken twig Kalmar drooped his shoulders for an instant, and then, sensing he was not in immediate danger, shut his eyes to re-fix his concentration on the cave lion and away from his careless mistake. He noticed a clump of juda berries hanging on the bush. He picked one and popped it into his mouth. After squishing the berry with his tongue, he scrunched his face and spit out the rotten pulp. He sputtered a couple of times, then licked the back of his right hand before spitting, again trying get the last traces of the rancid taste off his tongue. After a deep breath, he resumed crawling around the bush, this time more wary of its grabbing limbs. The crack of the breaking branch and the twang of the bowstring would have given the cave lion a clear bead on its tracker. Kalmar knew he could not make these types of blunders and expect to live out the day. Pursing his lips, he concentrated on the fact that he was not hunting the elusive but docile prairie buck; no, his prey was deadlier than its hunter. He eyes darted to the horizon. Saltine would soon disappear; if the cave lion

was going to make a move, it would wait until the twilight-of-night. *I must make the cave lion come to me now*, he thought.

He stood and pulled another three arrows from his quiver. Then he reached in his pocket, pulled out three small pieces of coarsely woven fabric, and neatly folded each one twice. Using the arrows' sharp tips he pushed them, one after the other, through the first three layers of the cloths, but stopped when he reached the last layer, letting it lay over the points. He took a piece of string from the other pants pocket, cut it in to three pieces, and tied the last layer of cloths around the head of each of the three arrows. He checked the breeze one last time; the wind was still blowing into his face. Being careful of his bow as he held the three arrows in the same hand, Kalmar pulled the front of his pants down and urinated on the cloths tied to the arrows. Satisfied with his effort, he took the first arrow, nocked it in his bow, and pulled the bowstring less than full draw and shot it in a high arch to his left. The second arrow he shot to his front and the third to his right. If he was correct, and he believed he was, the cat was between him and where the arrows landed. He would use the animal's own superior sense of smell against it. With the breeze blowing from the direction of where the arrows landed, the smell of human urine should drive the cave lion towards him.

Kalmar re-nocked the arrow he had carefully chosen that morning. The bow had been handed down in his family for many generations, from one male to the next. He looked down the length of the curved, finely polished popela wood making sure it was not about to snag on another branch. He crept along the cliff face; straining to see in the failing light. All at once, a strange emotion flowed through his body—he was being watched. He often experienced a tingling sensation on the back of his neck that made him feel he was being watched, but this feeling was different. It was more of a feeling of being exposed; he felt naked and he shivered involuntarily.

The ragged cliff face lay to his left, close enough for him to reach out and press the palm of his hand against it. He pulled a second arrow from his quiver and gently stuck it—point first—into the soft, moss-covered ground. Then he repositioned his body, placing his back against the towering rocky surface of the cliff wall—with his rear secure, danger could only come at him head-on. Kalmar checked again to make sure his arrow was firmly nocked on the bowstring; then, he squatted, resting the hams of his legs on the heels of his feet. After a quick scan of the terrain in front of him, he slowly and quietly redistributed his body weight as he placed his right knee on the ground in front of him. Once his body was set, he instinctively repositioned the second arrow stuck in the ground moss. Kalmar made a mental check of how fast he thought he would be able to

reach, re-nock, and shoot the second arrow. After a moment's reflection, he pulled a third arrow from his quiver and stuck it into the ground next to the other arrow. He blinked, the chances of getting off a second shot were remote and the chances of a third shot almost nonexistent, but it still made him feel better knowing two arrows, lay in easy reach.

A pair of ants climbed the first arrow, their tiny antenna waving like a hunter's blade cutting through invisible underbrush. He knew the small insects offered him no danger. An anxious smile parted his lips; only in large numbers did this fearless fighter pose a threat. Leaning over, he gently blew the unsuspecting intruders off their wooden perch. He hoped his moment, with the cave lion occurred before the balance of the ants' scouting party located his pants leg.

His eyes searched the thinly wooded but rocky surroundings. He squinted trying to see in the shadows, which had grown longer and darker as Salune neared the horizon. Eeo, Salune's smaller binary partner, sat a hand's width higher in the red- and yellow-tinted sky, but its faint glow added little, if any, illumination. Kalmar's eyes gradually adjusted to the muted light in the shadows. He sensed the presences of something or some things. To his right there was a flicker of white, like the underside of a deer's tail or flutter of a snow owl's wings, and it grabbed his attention. Then, to his left, under the lean of two abutted boulders, he detected the outline of an object not part of the rocks.

It was the cave lion. The animal had apparently been watching him for some time. The cat's amber eyes seemed to glow in the dark even shadow of the boulders. Kalmar's body tensed. His lips curled faintly, his jaw moved to the side as he ground his clenched teeth. He stayed perfectly still as he stared at the cat. After a few minutes, his sight began to go black. He blinked to clear his vision.

"Nervous blindness," he said under his breath. "*Not now.*" He could hear his own rapidly beating heart as the blood surged through his eardrums. His chest felt constricted as if tightly wrapped by layers of thin fabric; he struggled to fill his lungs. The cave lion rose to a crouched stance and started walking towards him, its radiant eyes set on Kalmar. The great cat moved methodically, gracefully, with its gigantic head lower than its shoulders. Other than the rhythmic pounding in his ears every time his heart beat, the cat's low growl, amplified by its echo off the surrounding rocks, was the only sound. He knew he must wait until the cave lion was close enough to have a chance of hitting it, yet not so close he would not have time for a second shot if he missed with his first arrow. The decision was made for him when the cave lion suddenly broke into a run straight at him. For an instant, the animal's eyes fixed on him—fiery coals possessing a hypnotic quality. Then reality slapped him; in the time between heartbeats

and in one smooth fluid motion, he drew his bow, locked his right thumb under his jawbone, took aim, and released the arrow. The charging animal was now close enough for him to see the arrow hit the cat center chest—left of his aiming point. He had missed the heart, a killing shot sure enough, but one that would take costly seconds to bring the great cat down. Without thinking, and the cave lion only a few body lengths away, Kalmar, with reflexes perfected by many cycles of the seasons of practice, snatched the second arrow, nocked it in the bowstring, and then in one smooth motion drew and shot a second time. The second arrow hit its mark as the animal sprang, but the inertia of the massive creature carried it forward. As Kalmar jumped, in an effort to avoid the cat's attack, he caught a glimpse of the cat's haunting eyes an instant before the tips of the cave lion's claws raked across his left cheek. The massive blow spun him around, knocking him against the cliff face, and slamming the right side of his head into the hard stone. The force of the impact stunned him; his head began to spin. He fought to keep from losing consciousness as he slumped to the ground at the feet of the cave lion. The blow had knocked his breath out; he strained to breathe. He felt blood oozing from his wounds, which then trickled down his neck and under his buckskin shirt. The cave -lion struggled to its feet, roared, and, on shaky legs, walked toward him. The cat's chest was dark red where the blood from two arrow wounds matted in its thick fur. Everything around Kalmar seemed to slow down. Kalmar detected an overpowering perfumed scent; for an instant, he wondered if the blood he smelled was his own or the cave lion's. Amber flames in the cat's eyes seemed to leap at him. He felt for his knife but found the scabbard empty. As he fought to keep conscious, his sight faded. The cat sniffed him before licking the blood from the wounds across his face. The cat's abrasive tongue felt like hot sand pressed and then pulled across his sensitive skin. The cave lion's hot, pungent breath warmed his face. A paralyzing fear gripped him. He had always known that death was the likely outcome of this venture. A feeling of acceptance brought a strange calmness. "Grandfather, I did my best—" Darkness rushed in, smothering his thoughts as he felt himself slide into blackness.

The pointed bow of the small boat was barely visible through the mist as Kalmar pushed against the weathered long pole that he was using to move the short, narrow craft across the dark lake. Kalmar knew he was dreaming, yet the memory of the cave lion's warm breath against his skin had not lost any of its intensity. If the dream had not been the same one he had been having for the past two seasons, he thought, I would think the cave lion had sent me to be with Shetow.

Four

The intrusive croaking of the frogs interrupted Dera's concentration. Every time she seemed to have any clarity concerning her dilemma, some outside distraction caused her to fall short in her scheming. If she was ever going to deal with the situation, she must do it soon. Her puce lips quivered; the consequences of inaction were not acceptable.

She sat by a small brook that supplied water to her village. The brook flowed from a spring on the side of a hill before running down a draw, then made its way through a wooded area. She found comfort in the soft babble of the water as it stumbled over a line of smooth stones that formed a small dam across the bed of the brook. No matter how the events of her life were going, the gentle whisper of the flowing water was always the same—a sound of contentment and serenity. This was her spot; hidden from the view of anyone who did not know where to look to see her tucked away in the little clearing in the middle of the thickest part of the nutwood grove. She had sought solitude in the nutwood grove ever since she chanced upon the secluded spot as a small child. Her mother knew of her daughter's hideaway, but never broke the privacy of Dera's sanctum.

She sat on a log laying along the pool's edge, her bare feet dangling in the cold, soothing water. Tilting her head to one side, she peered through the magnifying liquid at her toes as she plunged them into the soft mud bottom of the pool. She pried her toes up through the doughy material, causing a swirling cloud of debris. The muddied water slowly floated towards the stone dam before spilling over the edge. Even though she had no purpose in stirring up the bottom of the pool, she closely followed the movement of the mud through the water. After the pool cleared, she once again scrunched her toes, causing a second swirling cloud to appear. She repeated the experiment until the twilight-of-night made it difficult for her to see the effects of her actions. In a few moments, she redirected her concentration to the echoes of a distant wolf's howling. She made a mental note of the time between the original yelp and the answering imitation. These mental exercises were a diversion against the building pressure she felt from the looming implications of her dilemma. No matter what the distraction, in a short time, her problem

always wiggled its way to the front of her thoughts.

Unlike those who knew her, Dera had never thought of herself as smart or wise; she realized she had more questions than answers. Now, with her Byrrac, Choosing, and Pairing not much more than two months away, uncertainty flooded her mind. As her quandary grew, she sought more and more the security and peace of her nutwood thicker, the one place she found the tranquility that eluded her everywhere else.

An overhead illumination grabbed her attention. She looked up and saw the two largest of Elom's four moons, Boboi and Quiron, commanding the night heavens. The clarity and radiance of the spheres in the cold, nocturnal sky calmed the turbulence racing through her brain. Her eyes widened as her murky thoughts cleared. She scrunched her face as she pursed her lips. Suddenly, she jumped up, brushed off her skirt, and hurried back to the village.