

# The Curve of the World



## Advance Praise for The Curve of the World

“Vonda takes us from the known world, a world with known dangers and known comforts, into the unknown, the wild but civilized West. As she herself looked ahead to the journey from life into death, she opens to us a world filled with unrealized possibilities. This is a marvelous book of the civilizations that could have been.”

—Eileen Gunn, author of *Stable Strategies for Middle Management*  
and *Questionable Practices*

“*The Curve of the World* is full of daring, and rich and rare invention, but feeling true, as far as can be known, to the mysterious, apparently/ probably women-centered, ancient Minoan culture. I loved the giving of beautiful gifts, between chance voyagers meeting on the ocean. So much better than mere trade. A wonderful book.”

—Gwyneth Jones, author of *Life and Bold as Love*

“A vivid, luminous novel. As Minoan traders travel the ancient world, McIntyre brings to richly imagined life six distinctive cultures of antiquity, all touched with magic. The characters are so real that I could see, feel, even smell them, and I passionately wanted each to succeed at their various quests. *The Curve Of The World* is a wonderful capstone to a storied career.”

—Nancy Kress, author of *Observer*

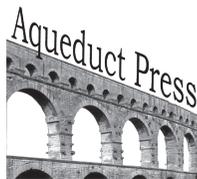
“I loved this book! It’s a glorious adventure with a heart as big as the world! Iakinthu Gephyra is a diplomat, trader, explorer, and the ‘bridge between people’ who strives to understand and accept cultures that are not her own. To find the family of her adopted child, she sets forth on the most difficult voyage her people have ever undertaken, sailing beyond the Sunset Sea and across the Nameless Ocean. A fascinating exploration of culture, family, and identity, about finding your way and discovering where you belong.”

—Pat Murphy, author of *The Adventures of Mary Darling*  
and *The Wild Girls*



# The Curve of the World

Vonda N. McIntyre



Seattle, WA

Aqueduct Press  
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This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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In Memoriam  
The Chimacum People

## Publisher's Note

*The Curve of the World* is Vonda N. McIntyre's final novel. When she died in 2019, the manuscript was complete. Judging by the file name, the manuscript she left was in at least its fifth iteration. She bequeathed it to Clarion West, an organization dear to her heart, and Clarion West hired agent Jennie Goloboy to represent the novel; Aqueduct Press acquired it through her.

Not all readers will realize that the publication of a book involves more than simply printing copies of a manuscript accepted for publication. At every stage, the author engages in a collaborative process that aims to make the author's work the best that it can be. And so, once Aqueduct decided to publish Vonda's novel, we knew that we would need a writer to stand in loco Vondae to engage in that process. Clarion West hired the highly accomplished Nisi Shawl to do just that.

The collaborative process in bringing *Curve* into the world principally involved four people: Nisi Shawl, Debbie Notkin (whom Vonda wished to copy-edit her book), Kath Wilham, and me. Kath made the first pass, correcting obvious typos and marking the ms with queries in the margins anent variant spellings, inconsistencies, and occasional awkward diction. I then did a thorough line edit and raised more questions, the sort I would ask any author, some of which I knew would require judgment calls, and addressed Kath's queries. Nisi then addressed my line-edits and our queries as well as adding new queries before sending the file back to me. Throughout, Nisi and I had numerous Zoom conversations to supplement the discussion taking place in the manuscript's margins. When we'd resolved most of the issues raised in the queries, the file went to Debbie Notkin, who copy-edited the manuscript and contributed to the discussion in the margins as well as a few new queries. Nisi then addressed Debbie's edits and comments, had another discussion with me on Zoom seeking to resolve the remaining unresolved queries, and sent the file on to Kath for typesetting.

Our concern throughout was to be as faithful as possible to Vonda's intentions. Nisi's constant goal was to preserve Vonda's voice, while my primary concern was determining which stylistic prose habits in the ms were tics (i.e., scaffolding for the writing process that needed to be removed before publication), and which were intentional. This was particularly tricky

for me because the narrative form and style of *Curve* mark a departure from the standard narrative forms and styles dominating fantasy and science fiction, which meant that some of those stylistic habits preoccupying me were likely intentional. All such calls ordinarily would be made through author-editor discussion.

The four of us have done our best to serve the novel as well as to preserve Vonda's voice and intuit her intentions. This final work by Vonda is bold, confident, and innovative, helping us to imagine what humans from a spectrum of cultures can be to one another. It is my pleasure to be publishing it.

L. Timmel Duchamp, December 2025



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I  
Home Waters

# Chapter One

In the full of the Moon, a fire blazed between the horns of the mountain. The Moon rose over them in a night sky black and clear and deep, and paved in stars. The fire's sparks reached to join the gleaming path.

A branch exploded in the flames, spraying a shower of embers. The embers died, their sharp smoke drifting into the soft, warm air. The adults gathered, circling the fire, carrying armsful of golden lilies or sprays of lavender. Their long, tiered skirts and bare feet brushed the ground. Sealstone bracelets and gold earrings caught the starlight, the firelight, the light of the Moon.

The moonlight wove silk around the deep cleft in the mountainside and clothed Rhenthizu in silver as he stepped from the cave.

Iakinthu took Rhenthizu's hand and drew him into the circle, into the center, into the light. The boy gripped her fingers but followed without hesitation, his natural dignity obscuring his apprehension. He held his head high. The silver of the Moon gave way to the gold of firelight against his skin. His scalp was shaven, except for his long straight child-locks; his hair never would form proper curls. Spots of scab covered his knee, like any boy's; a scraped knee hardly counted as a blemish, compared to the scars on his back from the bad times before he became Iakinthu's given child.

Iakinthu brought Rhenthizu to the Eldest Daughter. The daughter's companion snake coiled around her arm, curved toward the tempting heat of the fire, returned to the secure warmth of her body. Its tongue flicked; its scales glimmered in starlight.

Iakinthu and the Eldest Daughter smiled at each other, sharing their joy. The Eldest Daughter kissed Rhenthizu's forehead. One of her sisters brought an ancient nipped ewer with a bird-woman's head, painted with flowers. The Eldest Daughter accepted it reverently and raised it above the boy. Iakinthu helped her tilt it. Oil infused with lavender and gold dust gushed from its mouth, releasing a sharp resinous scent. The oil ran through Rhenthizu's child-locks, down his cheeks, onto his shoulders, down his chest and his back, over his sex. Firelight gleamed on his skin, reflecting from the flecks of gold, anointing him.

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Iakinthu guided him to face the fire. He gazed into it, hypnotized by the ceremony, the blaze, the night's breeze. Breaking his stillness, he leaned toward the fire and flung an offering into it; the tiny clay sculpture vanished into flames and ashes before Iakinthu could make out its shape. She should leave him the secrets of his deepest wish, but Rhenthizu was her given child, and she wondered what he most desired.

He straightened, squared his shoulders, and drew his hand from hers. He was ready.

Standing behind him, Iakinthu drew a new obsidian knife from the sheath tucked into the cincture of her skirt. The black blade held an edge so sharp it gleamed transparent gray.

Carefully, delicately, Iakinthu grasped the end of Rhenthizu's forelock and drew it taut. He arched his neck, tilting his head back so she could reach him. She shaved the forelock close, careful of his skin. The knife parted each strand of hair with barely a touch. His forelock came free. She flung it into the fire. It sizzled and disappeared, leaving only its sharp scent.

She shaved his other child-locks. When she finished, the Eldest Daughter smiled again. All the adults together gave a single, quiet sigh. Iakinthu threw the knife into the fire; it stuck upright, reflecting the flames, unchanged.

Rhenthizu faced Iakinthu. Sleeping in the mountain, joining the adults, surrendering his child-locks, he had taken up the rights of a young man.

Each of the adults crossed into the circle to kiss Rhenthizu on his forehead and fill his arms with lilies. He accepted their blessings, his eyes shining.

Approaching him last, Iakinthu drew him down and kissed his forehead. The perfumed oil, warmed by his skin, touched her lips with the essence of lavender.

When did he grow taller than I? she wondered. I knew he was taller than I—did I think of it before this moment?

"You're my family's given child," she said. "Before I give you back to your mother, I give you back to yourself."

She kissed him again.

The ground trembled. The hollow of the mountain held the rumbling of the earth, concentrated it, extended it with echoes. Iakinthu imagined her feet sinking into the ground, steadying her. She dreaded another strong earthquake, the cruel disruption of the land, thunder and lightning out of nowhere, out of the ground where it never belonged. Sometimes, to this day, she lay waking in the dawn light and thought she felt the quivering of the world.

The trembling subsided with a final sharp shake. Iakinthu rubbed her arms, chilled despite the warmth of the night.

Rhenthizu stared at the cave, his eyes wide and horrified. Lilies spilled from his hands. Iakinthu touched his cheek and turned him to face the fire again.

“Our mother’s companion is angry,” whispered the Eldest Daughter, gazing toward the cleft in the mountainside. “Angry that you’ve joined us instead of him.”

The shock left Rhenthizu’s face, and he smiled.

“Go ahead,” Iakinthu said. “Go down the path, and we’ll follow. Your friends are waiting.”

He gathered the lilies in one arm, touched his fist to his forehead to salute her, then wiped the oil from his brow. She stepped aside, opening the circle for him. He stepped over it and strode away, all apprehension and anticipation. Streaks of golden oil gleamed along his back, obscuring the scars. He vanished into the darkness. Lilies scattered after him, bright against the ground.

The adults danced around the fire, faces raised to the glow of the night sky.

Iakinthu and the Eldest Daughter shook the ancient ewer over the fire. The last drops of oil popped and smoked; Iakinthu wafted the scented smoke around the Eldest Daughter, around her own face, toward their dancing companions. When the scent faded, the Daughter lit new torches.

The dance ended.

Kilinkizu, as familiar to Iakinthu as a granddaughter, yet unfamiliar in her skirt and tight open vest, her palms patterned with henna and her ears and cheeks bright with rouge, slipped from the group of dancers. She poured water onto the fire. Smoke and steam billowed; the fire died. When the air cleared, Iakinthu glanced into the ashes. In and around the firepit lay hundreds of small sculptures, some roughly made, some exquisite, whole and new or ancient and broken: tiny bulls, lily flowers, oil flasks; a sculpted hand or foot, a leg, an eye, each a wish for help, for wealth, for health. Rhenthizu’s offering tumbled indistinguishable among them. A million shards of burned terra-cotta, crumbled, shattered clay, bits of cracked bronze, small solid puddles of gold and silver, spread across the firepit, the remnants of timeless ceremonies and private meditations.

The wind rose, swirling puffs of dust, clinking together bits of burned clay. The adults hurried from the cleft of the horns of the mountain, for the wind could quickly turn cold and relentless. Slipping into their sandals,

Iakinthu and the other companions of the Eldest Daughter entered the shelter of the cypress forest. The treetops whipped and whined.

The Eldest Daughter slipped her hand into Iakinthu's and squeezed it gently. She put aside her aspect and once more became Iakinthu's young friend Maranti.

"A good sign," Maranti said.

"The earthquake?"

"His anger. It was a sign that Rhenthizu is a good man. Can he draw a good man to his bidding?"

"It was only an earthquake," Iakinthu said. "Can an earthquake decide if Rhenthizu is a good man? Only Rhenthizu can do that."

"You're so admirable," Maranti said. She laughed. "And such a radical!"

"I say what I see."

Behind them, Maranti's companions laughed and chatted and spun in final echoes of the dance. The torches sparked and smoked; the wind threw moving shadows far down the path.

"I wish I were still a young woman new-made," said one of the companions. "Just for tonight."

Maranti giggled. She never giggled in her Eldest Daughter state. "I wish I were, too," she whispered to Iakinthu. "I'd be waiting with the rest at the foot of the path."

"Join them," Iakinthu said. "You'd honor Rhenthizu. He might please you."

"A year ago..." Her voice trailed off wistfully.

A year ago, she had been only Maranti; a year ago the Idaeans ended their mourning for the death of the previous Eldest Daughter. To take the ancient one's place, they chose Maranti, a new-made young woman herself.

"May I run around in the fields at night, as Eldest Daughter?" she said. She plucked at the highest flounce of her skirt, a purple deeper than wine, and chose a trivial reason to remain behind. "I might spoil my skirt, after you went to such trouble to bring me Egyptian linen."

Iakinthu smiled to herself. Maranti was very young to be Eldest Daughter, the youngest in generations. She had reason to protect her dignity. But she should keep her right to pleasure.

"You may leave your skirt in my care," Iakinthu said. "And your snake. As to running around in the fields at night, with a young man new-made, who has more right than Eldest Daughter?"

Maranti hesitated. Kohl enlarged and brightened her dark eyes; her flush lit her goldstone complexion. She giggled again, handed Iakinthu her companion snake, and fumbled at the complex knot of her girdle. Iakinthu

handed the ancient nipples ewer to Kilinkizu, let the snake coil around her arms and over her shoulder, and helped Maranti take off her skirt. She drew out the hairpins and the long strand of freshwater pearls that Aranthau had brought from Hind. She let Maranti's hair fall loose and long down her back. In loincloth and jacket, her hair curling and streaming behind her, Maranti ran down the trail, as sure-footed as a young agrimi.



Dawn brightened the inner windows of the light-well and the wide unshuttered outer windows, reflecting white from the walls of Kunusu, the harbor-on-land, the great labyrinthine building that stored the year's harvest, sustained the community's artisans, and gave focus to the celebrations of the seasons.

Iakinthu's family held an apartment in the land harbor. The plaster walls displayed the accomplishments of generations. In the luminous liquid light, Iakinthu imagined that the painted figures moved and played, the lily buds opened and bloomed, and she danced again with bulls.

She lay wakeful in her bed, pleasantly cool beneath a light cover of fine linen. All around her, the members of her household slept and sighed, snored, softly farted. Nearby, Kilinkizu pulled the bedclothes over her head, covering her unusual light brown hair, hiding her eyes from sunrise.

Neinthi's little Phialta climbed down from the children's pallet, scampered across the floor, and clambered into bed with Iakinthu for his morning cuddle. She stroked the soft stubble on his scalp between his child-locks and put her arm around him; he snuggled close, smiled blissfully, twined the long plait of her hair in his fist, stuck his thumb in his mouth, and went soundly back to sleep.

The door creaked open. Rhenthizu slipped into the sleeping room, bringing with him the heady scent of lavender oil and sweat, of meadow and cedar forest. Bits of leaf and grass and dirt clung to him. He closed the door. When dawn light fell on his face, his expression of wonder and joy reminded her of her own rite of passage. It reminded her of the following spring, too, when she was a young woman new-made, and she waited with the others of her age at the foot of the pathway, eager to welcome childhood friends to adulthood.

She wondered if Maranti had found him.

Rhenthizu silently crossed the floor, moving easily between the pallets in the dim light. He knelt beside Iakinthu and touched his fist to his forehead. Rouge and kohl smeared his face, his throat. Iakinthu raised herself on one elbow and leaned over Phialta to kiss Rhenthizu's cheek.

“You’d better wash before you sleep.” She smiled. “Could leaf mold in bed be comfortable?”

He brushed at his shoulder. Bits of dirt and broken leaves scattered to the floor and stuck to his fingers. “Did I notice it, in the meadow?”

“It’s different, in the meadow.”

He rubbed both hands over his shaven scalp.

“Will you grow your hair?”

“Maybe I will.”

“You begged to, when you first came to us.”

“I remembered...when I was little...we all had long hair. I thought... my—” His voice dropped to a whisper. “— Could my father recognize me if I had only child-locks?”

Iakinthu shook her head fondly. She was glad Rhenthizu trusted her enough to talk about such a delicate subject. One of Rhenthizu’s strange ideas, left over from his distant home, was that his father could recognize him at all. That any sire could recognize any child as his own, for certain sure. Though they cautioned him about giving offense to others, her family tolerated his strange ideas as they would tolerate the strange ideas of any given child. Besides, her family sprouted radicals, like Iakinthu herself, every other generation.

Can anyone call me a radical, though, she thought, when I offer to fulfill an ancient tradition for my given child, whatever the cost in time, and danger?

Phialta snuffled again in sleepy protest; Iakinthu lay down so the child could snuggle; she pillowed her head on one arm. With her free hand she brushed away a bit of broken leaf from Rhenthizu’s shoulder. The musky scent of sex and the tang of lavender oil clung to him. Beneath the stronger scents, Maranti’s rose perfume graced his skin like gold dust.

“What would you say to this person, if you saw him?” she asked. “What would you say to your mother?”

He hesitated. “How can I know? I barely remember them. Can I let myself believe I’ll ever see them again?”

“Have I ever broken a promise to you? I’ve promised to give you back to your mother.”

His life would have been easier, Iakinthu thought, if he had been stolen away much younger. If he had been stolen as a baby, and rescued as a toddler. Would a baby fight so hard against captivity? Would a baby be beaten and scarred?

Perhaps it would, she thought; why would his captors hesitate to strike a baby, if they would strike a boy? She rejoiced in the capture of every pirate boat she had taken, every pirate crew her companions had destroyed. Who knows what the pirates might do to a baby? They had left the captured boy scarred. They might have given the infant death.

“You’ve told me only truths,” he replied. “And you gave me back my life.”

“You’re a young man now,” Iakinthu said. “I think of you as my own, but you’re my given child. My obligation — my wish — is to return you to your born family. To your mother.”

“Can she be alive?” he said softly, more to himself than to her.

“Of course she could. She must be younger than I.”

“It’s so far.”

“It’s far. But, Rhenthizu, you made the trip. It’s a long voyage, but —”

“It was horrible,” he said. He shivered suddenly, though the day already promised to be bright and hot.

Iakinthu drew him toward her, moving herself and Phialta over to make room for him.

“The dirt...” He said. “The leaves...”

“I’ve had dirt and leaves in my bed before,” she said. She laughed at his shock, laughed at his surprise that she might ever have dashed naked through the woods to tumble in breathless passion among leaves or new grass. She had made love in many places besides her bright private chamber. Of late, her private chamber had lain empty. Aranthau, her companion of many years, was away, and she had been too busy to choose a casual lover.

The sleeping room was a place for companionable huddles, for cuddling, for sleeping with a lover after making love, even for sleeping alone. Rhenthizu, Iakinthu thought, needed a cuddle.

Rhenthizu crept in beside her. Phialta, who adored him and followed him around and imitated his every move, snuggled contentedly between them.

“It was a horrible voyage,” Iakinthu said. “Of course it was. You were with horrible people! But the return — with friends, with me, with my companions, in *Flying Fish*... Difficult? Perhaps. But horrible?”

“Could I retrace the voyage?” he said. “Did I ever know what land we were in, what rivers we crossed?”

“You lived beyond the Sunset Sea.”

“Yes. And the land beyond the Sunset Sea is too wide to imagine. So many different people live in it — can I even remember the villages I passed through? How will we find my born family, among so many?”

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He had come to her naked, lacking any talisman naming his mother or any bit of jewelry she could trace to his distant village, as in a fireside story. He had come to her with only the scars on his back... And the languages he spoke.

"By your languages," she said. "The people beyond the Sunset Sea speak different tongues — are they any different from the people of the islands and the people of the mainland? Do you remember Uinithi?"

"Of course. I followed Uinithi around like a puppy. You and Uinithi were the only people who learned my language."

Iakinthu switched from Idaean to Rhenthizu's boyhood language. "Uinithi, my given child, returned to the Maisusutha and promised to search for people who speak your language."

"In my village, the sun set in the Untamable Ocean!" Rhenthizu exclaimed. "All the way around the world!"

"Halfway," she said, smiling. "To the other side, indeed." She stroked his shorn scalp. "You're my given child. It's proper for us to accompany you to your born family, your born people, so they may see that we love you and value you. So we may share their pride in you."

He drew his eyebrows together, uncertain. Iakinthu wondered if he would tell her his true wishes, or try to please her. His diffidence flawed him; he lacked the proper arrogance of youth, and that distressed her.

"Would you be angry," he asked, "if I decided to remain a member of your family, and stay on Fair Island?"

"Angry!" she exclaimed. "It's my dearest wish that you return to us, to become Gephyra between your people and Idaeans."

"Everything's different," he said. "Did it seem real to me, before last night?"

"Everything's different," she agreed, "when you make the passage from boy to young man new-made."

"And so we must make the voyage," he said.

"Yes, she said. "We must."

All around them, her companions and the other members of her household were stirring, waking, yawning, leaping up.

"Go to sleep," Iakinthu said gently.

She slipped out of bed, bringing Phialta with her.

"Rhezizu!" he said, protesting.

"Let your brother sleep, my dear," Iakinthu said. "And Rhenthizu will see you later. Go to your grandmama, now, and ask her for milk and honey."

She gave him an easy push in Neinthi's direction; he scampered off toward his grandmother, who was just beginning to stir.

Iakinthu put on a loose robe of pleated linen. The Egyptians had some good ideas about clothing, about comfort.

Iakinthu's stomach growled; she wanted milk and honey, too. She drew the bedclothes up around Rhenthizu's dirt-smudged shoulders, tucked him in as if it were yesterday and he were still a boy, and stroked the stubbly place over his ear where she had shorn away his child-locks.



Thick, sweet honey melted into sharp, cool yogurt. Iakinthu liked the way the textures separated and then combined on her tongue, the sweetness dispersing the tartness as the honey dissolved. She sat in a camp chair on the balcony, eating breakfast. Phialta chewed on a chunk of fresh bread, honey smearing his cheeks. Nearby, Kilinkizu grilled cheese on the brazier.

The sun rose higher, leaving the deep balcony in shade. The sky glowed such a transparent blue that Iakinthu imagined she could see the stars beyond the color, like fish in clear water.

Kilinkizu brought her bits of cheese. The burned brown grill-marks still smoked. Iakinthu picked up a morsel, juggled it cool, and bit through the chewy surface. She savored the salty, slightly greasy taste.

"Thank you."

Kilinkizu touched her fist to her forehead.

A messenger came running in, child-locks flying, her short kilt tucked up around her brown legs.

"Iakinthu Gephyra," she said, breathless, "will you bathe with Eldest Daughter?"

"I will," Iakinthu said. "Will you share our breakfast?" She gestured to the yogurt, the honey, the cheese.

The messenger swirled her finger through the honey, sucked it off her finger, grabbed a slice of cheese with her sticky hand, bit into it, mumbled her thanks around the mouthful, and ran away to deliver Iakinthu's reply.

Iakinthu rose, stretched, and strolled from the shaded balcony to the dim sleeping room. All the pallets had been rolled up and put away except the one where Rhenthizu lay.

She wondered what Maranti—Eldest Daughter, the messenger said, bringing an invitation of official importance—wanted to tell her. She wondered what had happened last night.

In her household's bathing room she splashed warm water on her face and washed away the last traces of rouge and kohl.

The drain ran slow, leaving streaks of black and red in the ceramic basin. Kunusu was old; the new hot-water reservoirs sometimes overwhelmed the drains of the harbor-on-land. The enormous black pots, squatting on the reinforced flat roofs, soaked up sunlight and dispensed hot water direct to the basins and baths. They saved many fires and much carrying of water. The younger people thought hot running water as ordinary as cold, but Iakinthu still considered flowing hot water a luxury.

I am old-fashioned, she thought, smiling to herself. An old-fashioned radical.

When Iakinthu came out of the bathing room, Kilinkizu waited with a good flounced skirt and an open vest, and the silver mirror in its padded cloth bag.

“Let me help you dress, Iakinthu Gephyra,” she said.

“My dear, do I need help to put on a kilt?” Iakinthu wished Kilinkizu would stop trying to serve her. Kilinkizu was a member of her household, an adult with the honored status of given child, a numerator whose knowledge benefited Iakinthu’s family and the whole community. Yet when Iakinthu served her in turn, Kilinkizu grew shocked and unhappy.

“You’re going to see the Eldest Daughter!” Kilinkizu exclaimed. “How can you wear a kilt?”

Iakinthu put the mirror away without taking it out of its covering.

“How can I look at myself when I’ve been awake most of the night?” She smiled and took the skirt from Kilinkizu, shook it, and refolded it into the clothing trunk. She chose a kilt instead, one painted with red leaves and yellow lilies, and her second-best closed jacket. Ever since she had borne a child, she had found the closed jacket more comfortable than the formal open vest, which she thought more suitable for a woman of Kilinkizu’s age.

“It conceals your beauty,” Kilinkizu said.

Iakinthu took Kilinkizu’s hand, pressed it to her breast, pressed it to her lips.

“If I dress formally, I’ll be late. Should I put on clothes I’ll only take off, to bathe with a friend?”

“Your position —”

“My dear one, my position is secure. If I wear homespun instead of Egyptian linen, will people say, ‘Look at Iakinthu — she must be poor?’” Iakinthu smiled, for she had been a part of Idaeian politics since long before Kilinkizu came to her family, since before Kilinkizu was even born.

“They might.”

“They say, ‘Look at Iakinthu. Does she adorn herself?’ They’ll say, ‘Her people eat well, her people have good clothes, her people live well.’”

“They might think we’re rustics, with no one to serve you.”

“They’ll think I’ve taken up the habits of pirates, if I treat you as a servant,” Iakinthu said. “If they regard us in Kunusu and say, ‘Look — they’re from Fair Island,’ why should we be anything but proud?”

Kilinkizu gave up her objections. Iakinthu wrapped the kilt around her waist and knotted its belt. She allowed Kilinkizu to hand her the jacket. When she had put it on and fastened it, glad of the support for her breasts, she turned to her younger companion and arranged the errant curls of her bright hair so they fell perfectly in front of her ears. Iakinthu placed her hand against Kilinkizu’s fair cheek. Kilinkizu stood nervously beneath her hands, like a bandit’s frightened, beaten horse.

“You’re a member of my family, and beloved.”

Kilinkizu nodded without speaking, biting her lip, gazing down at Iakinthu. Iakinthu shook off the feeling of discomfort, her response to Kilinkizu’s strange light eyes. She kissed Kilinkizu’s forehead, picked up the woven basket in which Maranti’s snake coiled, asleep, and strode from the apartment onto the balcony.



Balconies surrounded the living quarters of the harbor-on-land, shielding and shading the rooms from the heat of day. Beyond the shade, beyond the elegant columns that tapered inward to their bases, the sun shone bright and hot on the stone paving. The cypress trees stood silent in the still air.

On the ground level of the complex of buildings, the clink of hammers and the grinding of small drills, the rasp of saws and the rhythmic thump of kick-wheels interrupted the morning’s silence. The artisans had finished their breakfasts; the workshops had come to life.

Iakinthu passed a painter touching up the wall with a yellow brush, taking away new cracks and flakes that marred a plaster fresco of blooming lilies.

The paintings often cracked when the ground shuddered. Many generations past, and more than once, the ground had shuddered and destroyed the harbor-on-land entirely. Each time the people built it anew, and better. But the renewal came at great cost in effort and treasure and attention, in famine and poor harvests if the storerooms and seed grain were lost, and most of all in the people hurt and killed during any tantrum from beneath the earth.

Earthquakes plagued Fair Island even worse than they afflicted the island of Idaea, on which Kunusu stood. Iakinthu had been caught in those earthquakes herself. They were gentle compared to the great quake of a thousand years ago. It had destroyed much, yet saved everything.

The painter greeted Iakinthu; she returned her salute with a smile.

A staircase led from the balcony to the next lower level, deeper and farther into the complex. Iakinthu strode down the cool stone slabs. Familiar with her route, she hardly hesitated when she moved from dazzling light to the dimness of the interior. Her sandals fit the depressions worn into the rock as she followed the path of centuries of inhabitants.

The inner courtyard blazed with sunlight. Iakinthu kept to the shade of the walkway on the courtyard's long side, enjoying its coolness. She took a deep breath of fragrant fresh air, preparing herself for the Eldest Daughter's receiving room. Reluctantly, she left her sandals with the other pairs at the edge of the path.

She stopped in the wide doorway, blinking in surprise.

The Eldest Daughter's apartment used to be crammed to the ceiling with the accumulation of decades of gifts and possessions, pottery and jewelry, sculpture and clothing, morose exotic animals snarling and scratching and pooping on the floor. The smell of animal droppings, masked with a hundred different perfumes, had oppressed the air. Visitors, barefoot by tradition, stepped cautiously across the obscured designs. Now, painted gryphons flanked the chair of the Eldest Daughter, the new brushstrokes on the plaster so deep and vivid that the creatures might have breathed. The whole apartment had been cleaned out, freshly plastered, and painted. Striped dolphins frolicked on the floor, their sleek flanks as blue as the sea.

Maranti sat playing with her eldest sister's child, a sweet little boy who grasped at her sealstone bracelets. She caressed him and made faces at him till he laughed. She glanced up, saw Iakinthu, and laughed as merrily.

"You look surprised!" she exclaimed.

"You've changed the apartment since I went to Egypt."

"Yes. Now you may cross the floor without watching every step."

Iakinthu did so, glad of cool painted plaster rather than fetid animal droppings beneath her bare feet. She strode across the painted dolphins, stepping from one curved back to the next, as if the creatures would carry her through the room.

Iakinthu brushed her fingertips across the dark fuzz of the little boy's hair and kissed Maranti's cheek. Maranti had washed off her cosmetics, all her kohl, all her rouge. Her palms were patterned with last night's henna.

Her light, rose-scented perfume hung gently around her. She wore a skirt and cincture and an open jacket. She seldom wore an informal kilt these days.

Maranti nodded toward a wicker chair, placed more conveniently for conversation than the ceremonial stone benches along the walls. Iakinthu settled into it.

“The beasts —?”

Maranti gestured—as far as she could while the baby clutched her bracelet—to the gryphons, the dolphins, the swallows dancing together near the ceiling.

“Painted beasts are enough for me,” she said.

“Except for this one,” Iakinthu said, handing Maranti the snake basket.

“Except for this one.” Maranti accepted the basket, raised the lid, stroked the smooth coils of her companion snake. “As for my predecessor’s pets, those who could live free, I freed; those who might die, or who might be a danger, I returned to her family.”

“A danger? That feeble toothless old cheetah?”

“It loved her, my friend, and pined for her, and followed her. When its bones are clean, I’ll bury them beside hers.”

Iakinthu had always felt sorry for the cheetah, a gift of Pharaoh to the previous Eldest Daughter. If it had loved her, it was the first cheetah of Iakinthu’s acquaintance who harbored deep feelings for any human person.

“And the other gifts?”

“I sent them back to her family, of course.”

“That was generous.” The gifts to the Eldest Daughter belonged by right to the person who carried the Eldest Daughter’s aspect.

“Could I keep them?” Maranti said. She gave up being serious and giggled. “Oh, Iakinthu, stop it! The poor old woman filled her rooms with trash and with treasure, and I wanted none of it. I could hardly move! Or breathe!”

Iakinthu remembered last spring’s visit, the last time she had been in the Eldest Daughter’s apartment, when Maranti, newly elected, saw it for the first time, refused to cross its threshold, and expressed astonishment that any of her predecessor’s companions would enter it.

“Did she and I agree on everything —”

“On anything?”

“But I loved her when we were young. She changed... Slowly, over years. Finally, she lost herself. I lost her. When she died, I already had mourned her.”

“I sent her family the treasure to ease the grief of their loss. But they must also take the trash, and do with it what they please.”

Maranti's gesture would help ease the family's loss of prestige. The position of Eldest Daughter seldom passed by heredity. Even the relatives of Maranti's revered, then wandering, predecessor knew the position would go to someone outside their line.

"I believe she kept every gift she ever received as Eldest Daughter," Iakinthu said. "Every screeching bird or shedding rodent, every shitting monkey—"

"Be fair. She had only the one monkey."

"My dear, she had several, but they grew old and died before you were born. The last one was so lonely, it tried to play with the cheetah. They stumbled about in the pathways, knocking over trash and treasure alike. The monkey was lucky the cheetah had lost its teeth."

Iakinthu flung up her hands, recalling long years of exasperation, of trying to believe everything was well with her old friend and political adversary.

"I'm glad to see this floor again," she said. "I've missed the dolphins."

"They were rather deeply buried," Maranti said. "But, see, a great deal of scrubbing, some fresh plaster and paint—and the memories of our elder artists."

Maranti's nephew tired of seeing her attention elsewhere. He jammed a stone from her bracelet into his mouth and gummed it happily. Maranti gently disengaged the stone and handed him a crust of bread to distract him.

"He's teething," she said. "If I let him chew on stones, he'll ruin his teeth... But I think he likes the taste of carnelian."

The baby boy dropped the crust of bread and reached for Iakinthu's sealstones, one of which, her favorite gryphon, was carved from fine carnelian.

"Ah, my dear," she said. "Leave my poor gryphon."

Maranti's mother Gientiia hurried in, twisting her long thick silver hair into a knot at her nape. She gathered up the little boy; once again he allowed himself to be distracted.

I wish my grandchild had been as tractable! Iakinthu thought, a little envious. Issiia had been a colicky baby, and from her infancy had known what she wanted and demanded it.

"Come back with me," Gientiia said. "Silly boy-child, poor boy-child, poor sore teeth." She gave him a roll of felted wool. He fussed, grabbed the wool, and chewed it.

"Good morning," Gientiia said to Iakinthu.

"How are you?" Iakinthu replied.

"I'm well, the children are happy, and this boy's mother is halfway to Alashya to trade for copper."

"I wish her great success," Iakinthu said sincerely.

"What of Issiia?"

"Visiting her mother, on Fair Island."

"Did she like Egypt?"

"It entranced her," Iakinthu said.

"Of course it would," said Gientiia, with a bit of envy, "since your family traces its roots there."

Iakinthu smiled politely. She thought Issiia enjoyed Pharaoh's court far too much.

"What next for her?" Maranti asked.

"She goes with Kilinkizu." And will benefit from much plainer living, Iakinthu said to herself.

"What an adventure!" Maranti said, her tone quite sincere. "I'm envious. Iakinthu, you promised me an adventure."

"Can you cast another net into the sea?" Iakinthu said.

"I'm a woman of many nets." Maranti said again. "You promised me an adventure."

"I hope Issiia looks upon this as an adventure," Iakinthu said. "It's less so for my daughter. Did I give Omempau a sister, a brother, to share her responsibilities? She wishes Issiia would stay and learn the family business."

"Issiia!" Maranti exclaimed. "Would Omempau take your granddaughter from you?"

"She understands Issiia's path," Iakinthu said. "But she wishes it were different."

Maranti kissed her nephew and her mother, rose, took Iakinthu's hand, and led her from the apartment.



Unattended, Iakinthu and Maranti took off their clothes in the ante-room and descended the long staircase to the bathing chamber. Sunlight sparkled from the alabaster walls, fading as they moved into cool dimness. The stone floor gleamed with the patina of a millennium.

Iakinthu shook fresh sand onto the stone, scattering it evenly to improve their footing. Maranti poured oil from a bird-beaked ewer onto a large sea sponge. The oil, its thick green scent lightened with costly wild-rose essence, dripped over her hand and down her arm. She stroked the cool oil along Iakinthu's shoulder blades and back, down her arms and over her collarbones, and followed the deep scar that crossed her biceps and her left breast.

Iakinthu closed her eyes, enjoying the rough sponge, the smooth bathing oil. Oil flowed down her legs and onto her feet. She rubbed the calf of

her left leg with the top of her right foot, spreading the oil upward to keep it from going to waste on the stones and sand.

"Let the ground have its share," Maranti said. She trickled oil from the ewer onto the join between two floor stones; it flowed along the crack like a tiny river.

"The ground will have all of it, when we're finished," Iakinthu said. She took ewer and sponge and bathed Maranti as the Eldest Daughter had bathed her, paying particular attention to the taut muscles across her shoulders. The marks of adulthood had begun to touch the younger woman's body, maturing it from green youth. Maranti had looked like a boy till she was fifteen. She could have been a dancer, but she was more interested in politics. When she had borne a child, she would come into her beauty. She had plenty of time for that.

Iakinthu scraped the excess oil from Maranti's skin with a polished ivory bathing stick.

"Has anyone chosen Rhenthizu?" Maranti asked abruptly.

"Chosen him!" Iakinthu exclaimed, shocked. "Chosen him, before last night?"

"Thought of choosing him," Maranti said. "Spoken to you about him." She glanced at Iakinthu, sidelong, fresh-faced and bright-eyed despite having been up all night.

"He's too young to be chosen," Iakinthu said. "Who would choose a man so young?"

"I might," Maranti said.

"You're too young to be choosing anyone!" Iakinthu spoke, for once, without considering her words.

"I'm too young to be Eldest Daughter," Maranti said. "According to many, when you proposed my name."

Iakinthu loved her given child and she loved her young friend Maranti. She considered an alliance between them.

It's the best match any young man could hope for, Idaeian or Islander, Iakinthu thought. But he's so young. Still, and yet, he's young to be Gephyra as well. Are my plans for him more important than to be chosen by the Eldest Daughter?

Iakinthu startled herself, as she seriously considered changing the pattern of the fabric she had been weaving for so many years.

"He's a given child," she said. "He must go back to his mother."

"Did his mother give him to you?"

"I saved his life for her," Iakinthu said. "It amounts to the same thing."

“Did she look for him?”

“How would she know where to look?”

“How do you know where to look for her?”

“My friends the Maisusutha have a long reach. Do you remember Uinithi?”

“I followed Uinithi around like a puppy, when I was little.”

“Rhenthizu said the same.”

“That was true. I cried when you took Uinithi back to Thamenthu.”

“Uinithi will find where to look for Rhenthizu’s mother.”

Maranti rubbed Iakinthu’s belly with the warm, fragrant oil. Iakinthu’s eyelids drooped.

“Rhenthizu’s mother must think him long dead.”

Iakinthu brought herself abruptly back to wakefulness. She put her hand on Maranti’s.

“My dear, all the more reason to take him back to her. To give her joy instead of grief.”

“What if he decided to come back to Fair Island? What about her grief then?”

“My happiness would balance her grief, if he decided to return with me. And perhaps she’ll come with him.” She rubbed oil gently into Maranti’s fingers. “Perhaps his grandmother will say, ‘Go, have adventures!’ Perhaps they’ll all come back with us.”

Maranti blew out her breath, exasperated, then laughed.

“And perhaps you’ll find new trading partners, to add to your family’s wealth.”

“Of course,” Iakinthu said. “Why else am I Gephyra?” She laughed in turn, then sobered. “Perhaps I’ll find new trading partners for all Idaea,” she said, “as I did with the Maisusutha and their neighbors. New friends, new allies to stand with us against the northerners.”

“Bandits and pirates!” Maranti exclaimed. “When did any Idaeans fear bandits and pirates?”

“Who spoke of fear?” Iakinthu exclaimed, stung.

“I meant —”

Iakinthu tightened her hand around Maranti’s, and Maranti fell silent.

“I must take Rhenthizu home, Maranti, Eldest Daughter, if I can. I’m Iakinthu Gephyra, bridge-between-people. I want to take him across the Sunset Sea, across the Sunset Land, across the world to the place of his birth. I want him to be Gephyra to the most distant people. I want to take him home to his mother.”

Maranti gazed at her, thoughtful and sad.

“Should I think of Idaeia, and Rhenthizu?” she said. “Or should I think of myself...and Rhenthizu?”

“Did he please you?” Iakinthu asked.

“Oh, yes,” Maranti said. She raised Iakinthu’s hand to her breasts, to her lips, and kissed her henna-stained palm.

Iakinthu considered Maranti’s desire for Rhenthizu.

She could withhold her approval. Maranti held her in high esteem of friendship, and they held each other in mutual regard. The Eldest Daughter owed her position to Iakinthu.

In turn, Iakinthu thought, I invested my influence to Maranti’s benefit. I have considerable reason to support her now. Her judgment’s good. I wanted the Eldest Daughter of Kunusu to possess wisdom leavened with audacity. Can I refuse the first thing she asks of me?

Maranti would like her desires to be the warp, and my preferences to be the weft, Iakinthu thought. As I would like her desires to be the weft to my warp. We’ve seldom disagreed, and I’m glad of it. Would she oppose me, if I oppose her choice?

How easy it would be, Iakinthu thought, to unweave my plans and string the loom in a different pattern, to encourage Maranti and Rhenthizu, to retire to Fair Island to raise bulls and train dancers.

If Rhenthizu’s childhood memories were true — Iakinthu doubted but honored them — he came from a land of mountains ten times higher and rivers a hundred times wider than any Idaeian had ever seen. He came from a land of strange magical animals. Perhaps it was true, for she had heard many stories of the Sunset Land: that it cradled civilizations whose buildings rivaled those of the Egyptians and people crueler than the pirates and wilder than the People, to whom Kilinkizu would return. Iakinthu had looked forward to visiting the Maisusutha again and to seeing the storied marvels of the Sunset Land.

Now, she questioned her own plans.

I am Gephyra to Egypt, she said to herself. To the Maisusutha. To the People. I’ve traveled in the southlands. I’ve crossed the greatest desert, and I’ve crossed the Sunset Sea.

But I do believe Rhenthizu’s first home lies at a farther, longer distance than I’ve ever been. Is crossing the Sunset Sea enough for one lifetime, or must I cross the Sunset Land as well?

Instead of taking him home, I could accept Maranti’s honor to him and to our family, and retire to Fair Island.

I've danced, Iakinthu thought, and trained dancers. I've destroyed pirates, and I've suffered living in Egypt, wretched hot place oppressed by gods and their afterlife. If I lived my last years in peace, others would honor me for it.

She chuckled softly.

"Why are you laughing, Iakinthu?"

"Because I'm nearly fifty. People must think it's about time for Iakinthu to stay home and settle down, a proper grandmother negotiating for the well-being of her given children and her daughter's born child."

Maranti raised a skeptical eyebrow. "If they say that, will you believe it?"

"Am I finished with adventures?" Iakinthu said. "Even Egypt has much to recommend it, though its history outshines its present. Issia thrived there. She liked the luxury and the ceremony. It spoiled her a little, but every girl deserves a little spoiling. Perhaps she'll become Gephyra to Egypt."

"Or to the People."

"That would be an adventure, indeed."

Maranti picked up the bathing stick and stroked it down Iakinthu's back, smoothing away the excess oil.

"Tell me about Egypt," she said.

"We hunted gazelles with cheetahs, and we drove chariots, and we presented gifts to Pharaoh."

"She received them well, I'm sure."

"With fulsome praise. And then she put them away for her tomb, for her afterlife."

Maranti laughed. "Even your good wine? What a waste!"

"Have I met anyone," Iakinthu said, "have I heard of anyone, even north on the mainland among the pirates and the barbarians, who can spend and waste more of other people's time, than the royalty and the priests of Egypt?"

Maranti took a deep breath and returned to the subject of Rhenthizu. "Tell me what you'll do."

"Can I say for certain?" Iakinthu said. "Rhenthizu must tell me what he wants." His uncertainty this morning now made more sense, though Maranti's sudden choice surprised her. Perhaps Rhenthizu's enthusiasm made up for experience.

"Why must he cross the wild sea?" Maranti exclaimed. "What drives you to sail over the curve of the world?"

"You should understand. I chose you, to look ahead."

“That’s what I’m doing, Iakinthu Gephyra, my dearest friend. But I see a different pattern. Has anyone, any adventurer, any diplomat, any trader ever gone as far as you? Are you allowed to rest?”

“Do you think I’m tired?” Iakinthu said. “How can I rest, when I should take my given child to his mother?”

“Does he ever speak of his mother?” Maranti said. “He speaks of his —” Her voice dropped. “His father.”

“So shocking, my dear,” Iakinthu said, “that he believes he knows his father.”

Having failed to shock Iakinthu, Maranti scowled and folded her arms and changed her tack. “So dangerous. All those wild people —”

Iakinthu made a sound of derision. “You know better. Did we attack the Maisusutha? Did they retaliate? We approached as friends and parted as allies. To our mutual benefit.”

“But —” Maranti stopped.

“You and I may argue. I may squabble with the family on the next farm. The mainlanders plot to raid our villages or plunder our ships. But the Maisusutha, or Rhenthizu’s people? Why would they go so far to attack us, or we go such a distance to attack them? What a waste.”

“You’re right.” Maranti dropped her belligerent stance, and her gaze. “It’s so far. It is dangerous. The Maisusutha are your friends, but the weather? The monsters? The Sunset Sea? Iakinthu, are you afraid of anything?”

She picked up a glass bottle, poured light oil into her hand, rubbed her hands together to warm the oil, and stroked it into Iakinthu’s long silvering hair.

“I’m frightened of any long voyage,” Iakinthu said. “Will I come home again? Will my companions? Only youths are immortal.”

“Are we?” Maranti said, her expression somber. “That must be why I’ll think it’s forever, when you take Rhenthizu away, until he comes back.”

She arranged the curled lovelocks of Iakinthu’s hair.

Iakinthu in her turn dressed Maranti’s hair, arranging it in thick sleek coils. They ascended the steps, brushing the sand from their feet. In the anteroom, Maranti towed Iakinthu with Egyptian linen, and Iakinthu did the same service for the Eldest Daughter.

“He would come back!” Maranti said. “Fair Island is his home, and he belongs to your family.”

“If he came back,” Iakinthu said, “I’d be most pleased of all.”



Maranti's household fed Iakinthu an excellent lunch—how could a morning of bathing make me so hungry? she wondered—of pit-baked lamb, and hearth bread, and wine from their own vineyards.

Complimenting the food and the wine, Iakinthu thought, Fair Island wine is better. Can anything compare with the family's vintages? Yet Maranti's wine is perfectly acceptable...for Idaean wine.

She and Maranti took their leave, embracing, acknowledging that more remained to be settled.

Returning to her family's apartment, Iakinthu felt comfortable, well-fed, and sleek. Her hair hung heavy on her shoulders, combed into coils and gleaming with oil. She walked in a faint fragrant cloud of Maranti's perfume.

She walked in the cool shadow of the eastern side of the harbor-on-land. Gathering the afternoon's heat, the flat roofs and smooth ashlar walls blazed white in sunshine.

In the sleeping room, she sat on the pallet beside Rhenthizu and drew the bedclothes from his face.

"Wake up, sleepy bones," she said, "or you'll turn into a mountain for children to make stories of"

"I'm awake!" he said, his eyes still closed. "I've hardly slept."

Smiling, she patted his shoulder. "Can anyone sleep," she said with understanding, "the day after coming out of the fire?"

He sat up abruptly, wide awake, looked around, then sank back, puzzled, resting on his elbows.

"I thought... I thought Maranti—Eldest Daughter—"

"I bathed with her this morning. The scent is her perfume."

"Yes," he said, dreamily.

Rhenthizu sat up again, putting his hands to his head as if to push back sleep-tangled hair, encountering the shaven stubble just beginning to show. He rubbed his hands slowly over his scalp, then rubbed his scalp fast with his fingertips.

He grinned. "Itchy." He stretched, yawning loudly, throwing his arms wide. He took up more room than he had occupied the day before. Iakinthu smiled to herself. She enjoyed the way girls and boys, new-made into youths, gained more confidence.

"I will go," he said suddenly. "I'll honor your wishes. But will I stay, as Gephyra?" He frowned.

“Whether it’s to stay with your born family, or your given family—both are my dearest wish,” Iakinthu said. “Could I decide between them, in your place? You’ll choose when it’s time. When we’ve found your...” She hesitated. Fair Island was his home; could she give that designation to any other place, to a place half the world away? “...when we’ve found the people of your birth.”

He smiled at her. “It will amaze you, Iakinthu. The mountains are so huge, so mysterious, ten times higher than any mountains you’ve ever seen!”

She patted his hand, thinking he was small, so the mountains appeared so large.

In the land of the Maisusutha, the sun rose from the sea and set over land. Rhenthizu had told her that where he was born, the sun rose from the mountains and set into the sea. He came from so far beyond the farthest place Iakinthu had ever visited that the land ended and the sun set into a different sea, the sea beyond the Silk Lands, that the Sheng called Untamable Ocean.

Can I go that far? she wondered, and then thought, Rhenthizu came that far to reach us. Passed from hand to hand, sold and exchanged like livestock. His journey was erratic. It was interrupted. It was terrible. Yet, here he is.

“I know what I’m asking of you,” she said.

“And what you’re offering me,” Rhenthizu said in his first language. “You’ve given me everything. Have you ever asked anything of me? When I come back, I’ll be a worthy member of your family.”

“You are,” she said in the same tongue, “and always have been.”

He remembered the languages of his childhood. Iakinthu had learned them from him while she taught him Idaeian, when she took him as her given child. They spoke the language of his childhood occasionally, so they would both remember it.

When he had wakened shaking from nightmares, he cried out in the language of the child-stealers. Only Iakinthu understood him. She wondered how anyone could communicate in a language of abuse, curse, and demand.

“I wish I could remember...” he said. “The name of the village, the people, my mother’s name.” He dropped his voice. “And my father’s.”

And your own, Iakinthu thought. The name your mother gave you, Rhenthizu, my brave given child.