

Chapter 2

Waves of mist were drifting like white veils over the giant volcanic crater honeycombed with cavities. Their openings looked like the open mouths of dead people loved ones had forgotten to close. In the largest cave, the leaders of all twelve tribes of the small island of Benahoare had come together.

Iriomé, who had seen her seventeenth winter, let her eyes wander over the bearded crowd that had settled on the bamboo mats. The men had fixed themselves up for the occasion by braiding their long hair. The beards, usually wild and disheveled, were hanging down to their suntanned chests in good order. Some wore sandy leather garments embroidered with colorful seedpods; others had stitched-together goatskins tied around their loins.

It was the shortest day of the year, the day on which Tichiname, the supreme medicine woman, would transcend the limits of time to learn what the gods had predetermined for her people. She was sitting motionless, eyes closed, in front of a mighty fire in the midst of the cave. Her face, wrinkled by wind and weather, framed by curly white hair, was painted with blue spirals, the sign of infinity and the eternal recurrence of being. Around her neck she wore a string of dried lizards, and in her hand she held a roughly carved staff, at the top of which was mounted a goat skull with two pointed horns.

The tribal leaders hoped to learn from Tichiname what the coming year would bring. Whether their herds of goats would grow, whether the women would find enough roots, fruits, and edible leaves to build up stocks for times of privation. They were anxious to know whether enough children would be born. And whether Guayote, the hellhound, living deep inside the fire-spewing volcano, would remain peaceful and not desire one of them.

Without notice the wise woman made a shrill whistling sound that died away on hitting the stone walls of the cave. Iriomé took a deep breath. The time had come! For the first time she was allowed to be witness when Tichiname drank the sacred potion amakuna. She had cooked the brew as instructed by the medicine woman until the shadow of the rod of time had moved from one stone to the next. And even though Iriomé did not quite understand what the potion actually should bring about, she fervently hoped to travel someday in those mysterious worlds of which Tichiname told her over and over again. But so far she was only the youngest of seven disciples among whom the medicine woman eventually would choose her successor.

A low hum filled the air. The seven young women were standing side by side at the walls of the cave raising their arms. Their long cloaks made of bleached vegetable fibers spread out like the wings of seagulls. Their lips were painted blue. Each of them wore around her neck a small leather bag containing dried herbs.

Iriomé closed her eyes while the hum turned to a kind of song in which she and the other six disciples repeated a single word, always in the same rhythm. "Amakuna, amakuna, amakuna . . ."

Despite the barely tolerable volume, Iriomé perceived the sound of small bells that

hung on Tichiname's leather garment. Apparently, the medicine woman had stood up. Three knocks on the rock floor of the cave from Tichiname's heavy wooden stick silenced the singing.

Iriomé opened her eyes, brushed her long reddish-blond hair out of her face, and stepped forward to fulfill her assigned tasks. Proud and upright, she strode to the rock shelter in which a dish with the mysterious concoction was standing. It was not hidden to her that the dark eyes of one of the students were pursuing her with a look that promised nothing good. She knew that Guayafanta was eaten up with envy because she believed herself entitled to Iriomé's privileged position.

Two tallow candles illuminated the rock wall in which triangles, squares, and concentric circles were incised: symbols by which the initiates could connect with the spirits. Iriomé took the lid from the bowl and stirred the oily yellow film on the surface with a wooden spoon. Then she took the vessel in both hands, knelt in front of the supreme medicine woman, and held the bowl up in offering. Eagerly she watched as her teacher brought the bowl to cracked lips.

Iriomé thought she could smell the slightly putrid, earthy flavor of the syrup as if it was running down her own throat. After a few breaths Tichiname's pupils rolled upward. Only the whites of her eyes were still to be seen. She must have arrived in the other world. Suddenly there was a dull bang. The shell fell to the ground, shattering into several pieces.

Iriomé winced and looked in horror as Tichiname's body began to tremble, rearing up and twisting as if possessed by a demon. Her face distorted into an ugly grimace. Foam was seeping out of her mouth. She gasped as if fighting someone. Then she stumbled backward. Iriomé jumped up to catch her. But the body, shaken by convulsions, slipped from Iriomé's hands and crashed into a cliff edge. Tichiname howled with pain and rolled across the floor out of the cave. From a head injury blood was oozing, dyeing the medicine woman's white hair red. Outside she pressed herself against rough bark, seeking help against the gnarled trunk of a huge tree, which with its mighty crown towered into the pale moonlight.

From the frightened eyes of the leaders Iriomé concluded this could not be the normal running of the ceremony. The girls had turned away in horror; only Guayafanta's broad face with its dark, impenetrable eyes showed no emotion.

Iriomé was not able to imagine what the medicine woman had seen in the other world that would cause such an outburst. No one dared to approach her. Finally Iriomé could not stand it any longer. She ran to Tichiname, clung to the still trembling body and tried to unclasp her arms wrapped around the trunk like strong ropes, but to no avail. Only after some time the old woman finally let go. Her mouth was close to Iriomé's ear so she could hear what her teacher whispered with her remaining strength, "Men with ships will come, men who only care for power and wealth. These men know no love. They will destroy everything that is sacred to us. But one thing must never fall into their hands: the secret heart of the

island that beats in the cave of the highest mountain! Only when people are free from the greed for power and wealth will its secret be safe to reveal." Her voice became weaker. "It is your task as my successor to preserve amakuna until that time has come." Exhausted by the effort of speaking, her head lolled, forcing Iriomé to support it.

"Tichiname!" she screamed with fear.

"Swear," the dying woman panted with the last of her strength.

Iriomé took Tichinamé's wrinkled hand and laid it on her heart; "I swear."

A deep breath filled the chest of the old woman. "Vacaguaré," she breathed in the language of her people. "I want to die." And then again, "Vacaguaré!"

"No," Iriomé whispered, desperate. "No, don't go."

Tears were running down her high cheekbones. The blue color on her lips was smeared, her hair disheveled. She pressed her back against the trunk of the tree as if it could give new power for life, looking for help in the faces of the others who had formed a circle around them. But the breath of the old medicine woman became shallower, until it completely ceased and her old body slid to the floor.

Iriomé collapsed over her, sobbing. It was as if something inside the young girl had died as well.