

A Mayan Vision Quest

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THE POWERFUL CITY-STATE of Caracol, nestled in the cool hilly plateau country of Belize, west of the Maya Mountains, lays isolated from its larger sister states of Copan to the south, in the Honduras of today, and Tikal to the west in present day Guatemala. The cultural splendors of the Mayan civilization are at their zenith.

Over the caldron fires of the ritual pit, high above the central plaza atop the largest pyramid, the diluted sap of the javorri tree, the yellow-gold liquid of Oneness, simmers in two other crucibles. Here, worship of the long lost, Toltec mystics, the Founders, and other mythical ancestors takes place along with ceremonies involving rites of passage and the marriage ritual.

Today a maiden, seeking adult status and the right to marry, is positioned on the presentation pedestal next to the pit. The streets below are packed with city people as well as the peasantry summoned from the cultivated lands and forested valleys a hundred miles around, all the way to the Caribbean Sea.

Myakka is adorned in white linen, a fine gold and jade necklace gleaming at her throat. Matching bracelets, of intricately webbed, leather bands imbedded with green gemstones and fixed in gold

settings, circle her wrists. Long, black hair is braided and pulled back in the supplicated Mayan style of the adolescent female. Filled with the exhilaration of youth, petrified by the cold fear of the coming battle with the unknown, and smitten with lustful longings for a young man, at fourteen, she stands and waits.

Acrid smoke from the pits blows across her face; she squints around a constant stream of

tears. The eerie rise and fall of the chanting and wailing below ceases abruptly. Chimes and clapping cymbals ring out from the top of the pyramid, the signal for the low humming to begin. Progressively increasing in intensity, the hum rises to culminate in a roaring scream that initiates the vision quest ritual.

Shivering in the chill evening breeze, Myakka gazes over the thousands of candles that light the streets, like spokes of a wheel, all leading to the plaza surrounding the ceremonial pyramid. It has been sixty-two years since the last attempt by a female to face the adult vision quest and the marriage challenge at the same time.

A bright, full moon lights up a cloudless sky as three, eight-foot tall figures glide out from the back side of the pyramid, becoming visible to the crowds as they approach the edge of the fire-pit. Their dress represents them as the spotted jaguar, the green, thorned palm, and the blue, wind-torn sky. They take her by the arms and back of the neck, pulling her off the pedestal to the very edge of the fire-rim for all to see.

Dark purple, vermilion, and shades of red and orange, filter through the stringy clouds that hang like curtains in the distant horizon above the after-glow of the descending sun. The priests throw handfuls of cinnamon spice into the pit that burst into crackling blue and green sparklers rising high above the ceremony. A piercing, screeching scream from some hidden recess behind the priests accompanies this symbol of an expanding life, and is instantly followed by the slow gathering of unearthly moaning from below.

The priests take turns presenting the ocher, javorri crucible out to the crowd, and then in front of them all, Myakka defiantly takes the harsh, thick liquid down in gulps that sear her throat and spread molten lava in her gut. The overflow mixed with her retching spills down her white dress, but she stands straight without fainting. Perhaps she would be successful. Many had failed.

The jaguar priest offers the golden bowl of javorri paste. She rubs it into her hair and over her arms and face. The moaning ceases. Without warning the priests rip off her beautiful ceremonial dress, exposing small, almond-centered breasts, shapely long back, and muscled haunches. She is tall and lean, clearly favoring the long forgotten ancient ones.

The priests apply the paste to her chest, breasts, back, and legs, and roughly forcing the

parting of her thighs, disdainfully spread the paste to her cleft. They lift and carry her body, ridged in fear, to the base of a giant palm tree that marks one end of the overhanging terrace. The priest of the thorned palm lashes her tightly to the trunk for all to see in glistening, naked wetness. The moaning ceases.

TYOKKU, CLAD IN A leather hunter's harness, is wrestled by the priests to the center of the precipice. The crowd's moaning begins anew. The male must put up a convincing display of resistance in succumbing to the prescribed kneeling position, head up and open-mouthed. He ingests twice the dose from the javorri crucible as given to Myakka, and is taken to an ornate, golden cross form of the Quetzal bird facing Myakka at the opposite end of the ceremonial terrace. He is stripped and mounted to the bird totem.

Instantly the crowd becomes silent. In a circular frenzy, arms raised high, colorful robes flying like birds of prey, the priests disappear with their fire cast shadows into the secret aperture behind the pit. The candlelight patterns below disintegrate into darkness.

Tyokku will be released from his bonds in two days time to fulfill the male's role in the ritual quest for the right to marriage. To be successful, all his tracking and hunting prowess must be applied to survive, to find Myakka during her private trek, and then to return together to the priests at the "Pit of all Beginnings," all within four settings of the sun.

The man-boy has one advantage. Having recently completed the vision quest for adult status at age 16 under a single dose of the javorri, he knows what temptations and dangers lie ahead in the 56 miles over the mountains, through the thick jungle, and on to the sea.

The trial is the same for any Mayan male wishing to belong permanently to the community and undertake the responsibility of propagating the race. Once committed to the ritual, those who fail will be sacrificed to appease the wrath of the providing gods, or face harsh servitude in the fields.

THE VISION QUEST is the Mayan female's only path to acquire adult communal recognition. From there she may assume the responsibilities of marriage and childbirth, or enter into apprenticeship to become a "woman of the secret ways," the first status level of "Bruja," the position of Mayan sorceress. Few women have ever attained this highest of honors. The teachings were arduous, and the practical application filled with dangerous and treacherous mental and physical testing.

Myakka stands naked and trembling, acutely focused on the hot bed crawling from her mid-section, slowly engulfing the internal parts of her body. The burning of her skin begins to subside as if it is seeping inside. The crowds have long ago dispersed, leaving her totally alone in the starlit night to come to grips with the frightening changes in her awareness, and to conquer the growing fear.

Craning her head to one side, she sees Tyokku still strapped to the Quetzal totem at the other end of the pit. She only vaguely realizes that the straps that bound her are now loosely hanging. Myakka is free to begin.

Tradition holds that she must not be found, or even seen, by another Mayan of her community, for four full sunsets. Using her own resources on a journey to the sea, she must capture a fresh conch, and return to present it to the priests as proof of her passage. Four days are allotted to complete the trek and reappear at the Pit of all Beginnings with or without Tyokku.

If Myakka does not return within the time period, she will be hunted for sport and killed like a wild animal in the forest she could not conquer. Though late, if she eludes the hunters and ascends the pyramid, she will face communal slavery. If she returns without Tyokku, but within the time limit, the marriage is not to be, and she will be allowed a full life. At 16, after two year's of dedicated service to the priests, she would be allowed to petition the elders for acceptance into the path of the Bruja, or to be offered into wedlock to an elder for a life of service and care.

Her eyes suddenly narrowing, struggling to gain control, she lifts her head to gaze fully at the disked moon, creeping up from the eastern horizon. This is her direction of flight.

The effects of the javorri, a distant, treed cousin of the beloved peyote, but much stronger, are nearly in full bloom. The unique, psychedelic stimulation causes a cascade of hormonal mayhem that only the very young or mentally strong can sort out and harness. The sensual and mental effects last for up to 48 hours, wearing off abruptly, leaving the recipient with a paralyzing sense of paranoia and rapidly decreasing stamina.

Standing aware of her fallen bindings and continuing to cast her gaze on the moon, Myakka experiences a sudden, all encompassing knowingness, a coalescing of all natural instincts into one. She can become the wind, the sea, the mountains, the jungle plants, the animals, the sky, the stars, the clouds. It is the experience of being the Oneness Of All Things. The wise ones told her she must make the right choices amongst the elements in order to survive.

Myakka chooses the wind and becomes it, sweeping down the pyramid steps in naked splendor, the blood pounding behind her eyes and coursing with molten heat through every cell of her being.

But she must not allow herself to attempt soaring for fear of losing her direction and her will. The old ones told her, 'To soar is certain death.' They said, 'The visions must be controlled but not fought. They must be accepted, and the mind made to adjust to the being of them.' They also said, 'Use the attributes wisely.' And finally, they implored her not to sleep until she had refreshed herself in the sea. 'If you do,' they said, 'you will awaken inside yourself, alone, unable to find the sun and moon to guide you back to the ground where you left your life.'

Filled with exhilarating purpose, Myakka bursts down the sloping plaza streets, paved tightly with smooth rocks. She is the ultimate warrior, wildly confident that no one can perceive her in the wind's embrace. Her energy is endless, and no heavy breathing from the labors.

The dark green edge of the jungle looms ahead, and she realizes the wind can not penetrate the barrier. In an instant of cogent awareness she recalls the elder's counsel, 'You must become the animals there,' they told her, 'to have hope of attaining passage unharmed through cunning and stealth.'

As the mighty condor, she glides over the edge of the green canopy and dives, her eyes registering the clearing in rapid clicks with the descent. Breaking through the foliage, landing

lightly, wings spread, Myakka feels the cool of the ground. Dropping down on all fours, the pelt of the tusked-boar begins to grow thickly over her body; her eyes become the glowing gold of the black leopard; her hands, the clawing spikes of the great eagle; her ears, the ultra sensitive reverberators of the vampire bat.

She throws herself headlong into the solid black and lavender walls that mark the edges of clearings, touching nothing. Streaming down well-worn paths of no man's making, Myakka's senses are alive with the sight, smell and sound of all living things. She knows them, moving or still. Nothing can challenge her. Even the plants mysteriously make way for her, with their soft, dew soaked, caresses leaving no visible marks, no blood.

Abruptly stopping, she assesses the quality of the quiet, and surveys the landscape ahead. Through the star filled spaces in the canopy, she adjusts direction on the moon, the eastern guide to the sea, and as suddenly she fiercely plunges back down the path.

The trails and pathways wind endlessly, one after the other, magically connecting. Pumping endorphins carry her so quickly, her feet seldom seem to touch the ground. The feeling of unlimited strength tempts her to burst out into flight with the wind each time she comes upon a clearing. But she holds herself in check, remembering the wise ones.

With the rising sun, the morning rain, and the steep, upward climb into the mountains, somewhere along the way the sturdy boar became the elusive, spotted jaguar with the eyes of the hunting hawk and the appendages of the adaptive otter.

Myakka flows on without hesitation. Only once does she climb above the animal trails, melting into Oneness with the fabric of the pine and the protective branches of the giant cocoa palm, as two men stalk her brother, the long nosed cow, near her chosen way up the largest mountain.

With the first setting of the sun the pace continues undaunted by darkness. But Myakka's feelings of dominion and safety from her heightened instincts begin to wane. The blood still hotly pulsates behind her eyes and across her brow, but movements are becoming increasingly wary. The gusts of wind no longer tempt her at clearings.

By the time the moon is full at her back to the West, she senses her skin has lost its coat of protection. The animals feel farther away and are not so easily perceived through the trees and brush. Perceptions begin to fill with fear of the lesser creatures.

Myakka can now only summon the short winged dove, to flick and skitter here and there through the dense foliage. She remains trail bound to conserve energy, wary, but still confident of her cunning.

Near the top of the mountain, she halts briefly and climbs a tall, dead hickory tree, noticing the noisy rasping of her breath. She uses the safety of the moment to take stock of her body, and with the help of moon-glow, pick out the best route down the other side and into the lowlands. Covered with patches of dried blood from scrapes and scratches, she resigns to be more careful.

The bird inside tells her the sea is near. She sniffs the air for telltales and calls to the wind. Perhaps she can still ride; but the wind is gone. Nevertheless, with renewed determination she sets off down the mountainside toward the ragged line of reflected light that must be a stream cutting through the foothills and leading to the sea.

As the sun rises on the second day, Myakka enters the steamy, dense, coastal lowlands, the stream having spread out into low-lying marsh. After several hours in the hot sun, she begins to notice the loudness of her thrashing through the vegetation, and a decreasing ability to easily follow the trails. The dense, swampy lowlands, with their increasing jumble of new sounds, gradually absorb all her attention. Building anxiety challenges her sense of security. She must not allow this wall of foreboding to frighten her.

Sloshing carefully through a marshy clearing, she sees a vast line of clear sky off in the distance. Perhaps the great sea is nearer than she thought. With renewed resolve, deep within, she continues winged flits and short bursts that bring her to a slightly elevated berm of sandy ground with less vegetation where she takes up a steady pace.

The little dove finally reaches the sea late in the day. Entering the captivating beauty of a small lagoon, the quiet waters surrounded by the white of the sea's breakers over the exposed reef, she washes the aches and pains from her limbs.

Feeling refreshed in spite of her skin burning from the salt water, it takes only a few minutes to harvest the sacred conch from the crystal clear depths. With the sun going down on the second day she wades back to shore, the creeping exhaustion in her limbs obscuring her elation. Myakka falls asleep on the soft sand.

AN ENCROACHING TIDE slithers probing fingers closer and closer to her feet. Myakka lays sprawled out on her side with one long leg pulled up almost to shoulder level. A rounded bank of ancient coral and limestone outcrops hides the flawless, white sandy beach from casual observation. Back the way she came, small dunes, coastal brush and wetlands loom in layers to meet the sloping darkness of the Maya Mountains.

The first spikes of pink and yellow fire are appearing in the east over the water, signaling the ascending sun of the third day. Myakka wakes with the tickle of the sea sliding around her. A cacophony of voices coming from the land side of the private sanctuary freezes her in startled terror. Scrambling noiselessly under the overhang of the coral bank, for the first time she is acutely aware of her nakedness and the searing pain that covers the surface of her abused skin. She waits and hopes.

Fear makes the world seem suddenly small and compressed, closing in. She is no longer invincible, no longer the force and flight of the wind, no longer the strength and cunning of primitive animals, no longer able to hide in the quiet peace and protection of the plants, no longer the owner of the moon, stars, and sky. Alone and frightened, but fervently wanting to live, she remembers what the wise ones said, 'Beware of the changing; do not remain in fear.'

Only native stealth, in staying out of sight moving around the meager bank, enables her to remain undiscovered. A group of fishermen pass. As soon as it is safe, a burst of adrenaline helps propel her into the concealment of the coastal brush.

Painstakingly applying the skills of her hunting forebears, she picks her way through the lowland swamps and hillock terrain, always going west away from the glaring sun, back toward the big mountain.

Now it is time to find Tyokku and return. And she is to do it alone, deluged with an inordinate fear she must learn to control, and without the ownership of the Oneness Of All Things.

In mid-afternoon Myakka reaches the first, small, deciduous trees that signal the beginning of the beautiful jungle hills and valleys stretching up to the higher mountains. About half way up through the hills she comes across a natural rock overhang out of the wind on three sides. Her stamina waning, she smartly decides to make camp.

Foraging, she acquires several straight, hardwood limbs from which she manufactures one good spear. She gathers rocks and wood, and carves out a fire-pit to one side of the natural shelter. Later during the cooking process, she will fire-harden the spear point and the reed she brought from the swamp.

She finds a small stream nearby and the little, red-backed frog, from which she extracts the gift of death just under the skin. Scouring the banks, she harvests the feathers and thorns necessary for the blowgun's deadly darts.

Her hunger rages, but before settling into the hunt she scouts the terrain for a half-mile around to identify reference points that will assist her in staying on course up the big mountain ahead. After a brief rest, she will take advantage of the early moon, before it follows the sun behind the mountain, and move over the remaining hills. If she does well, she might have time to start up the mountainside with the last of the moon's light.

Comfortable with her surroundings, her hunt on returning to the campsite brings rabbit and fish to the fire. Sweet coconut meat, wild berries, and roots add additional nutrients with enough left over to pack in the pocket flaps of her new loin-cloth, gut-sewn and dried in the heat of the fire.

IT SEEMS ONLY moments of slumber, but clear of mind and some-what refreshed, she sets about in the dark of mid-evening to extinguish the fire, recognizing a growing confidence returning; the veil of fear is lifting.

Before setting out for the hills, she lays a row of rocks from the fire-bed shaped like an arrow, just in case Tyokku should track her. Other signs of her presence will tell him how long she had been gone.

With the moon's radiance she makes good time over the foothills. As fortune would have it, she starts up the mountain. With increasing anticipation she knows somewhere on the mountainside Tyokku is camped and waiting. They must join here without delay, and use their remaining strength and concentration to return by sunset tomorrow.

First, Myakka sees the fiery eyes through a flicker of moonlight, and then a dull shine glancing off the moving blackness of the leopard's back on a ledge up ahead. Instantly she realizes that death is certain on a the ground; her spear and blowgun would not protect her from the ultimate stealth machine and lightning strike of the lord cat. He rules this kingdom at night.

She must either climb a tall, strong tree and position herself to fend off the climbing leopard, or find a defensible cave. She spots a perfect tree. The cat is across the remainder of the clearing forty meters ahead and above her, creeping slowly along a narrow, brush-choked ledge over a sheer rock face in the mountain side. The tree is in the midst of a thicket off to the right of the rock face. The cat shouldn't be able to jump her from the ledge as long as it stays there.

Her mind purposefully set, she moves quickly across twenty meters of dry stream-bed toward the thicket, right at the cat. It cowers down. Instinct tells her it will remain still, waiting for her to move closer rather than slink down from its hiding place.

Crossing to the white oak, Myakka momentarily considers that it is unusual to find this stalwart tree so close to the sea and on the rainy side of the mountain. Checking the lashings of the spear and blowgun across her back, she shimmies about six feet up the trunk to the first main branches. Climbing further, pulling herself up one by one, she hurls her body weight on the branches below as she climbs, severing as many as she can from the trunk to make it more difficult for the cat to climb. Myakka's senses are vivid and alert from the flight and strenuous climbing. She doesn't detect any movement on the ledge.

Feeling more secure, but aware that exhaustion is beginning to creep in, she reaffirms her resolve not give in. She reaches all the more deeply to rise above the fear and survive.

Twenty feet further on Myakka comes to a crotch of three, peculiarly large, flat branches; they are short, thick, and flattened, nearly as big around as the tree trunk. Carefully sliding down into a sitting position, she finds comfortable support against the trunk, and contemplates resting and waiting out the night. She could deal with the leopard in daylight if it decided to linger. More than likely, as a night hunter, it would move during the night and work the whole of its hunting range of several miles.

And then a wave of cold fear strikes her. She does not have the time to wait out the night. And then longing thoughts of Tyokku well up, wondering where he is, if he is safe, whether he will find her, and if they will make it back in time. The edge of hopelessness is poised to absorb her. The rush of tears is near, but the Maya don't cry.

She pushes the anxiety aside, recognizing the creeping paranoia, and forcefully casts her attention back into the night and the dangers of the present moment. Not a sound from the cat, but she can not remain here for long. Soon she must take a chance.

Wrapping her arms overhead, around the back of the tree trunk, Myakka pulls up closer, gently stretching war-torn muscles, moving the bruised bones, and loosening her back to feel the energy flow returning. Her medicine man father taught her that the energy is there, to be coaxed from the spirit within for calming a warrior's nerve.

Suddenly from above, she hears a short, crisp, whirring sound, followed by an even shorter humming. Releasing the grip on the trunk, with a frightened jerk she looks up to find the source. A section of bark on the trunk, about a foot above where her hands had been, has disappeared, and a metallic surface, eight inches square, containing four colored buttons, is now embedded in the tree.

She jerks back, regaining balance, with a cold knot of foreboding locked in her throat that is beyond experience. Escape from the tree is her only thought, but she is petrified in place.

Frightful moments pass and nothing happens. The block in her throat begins to uncoil, and she hears herself breathing again. Nothing is happening, no noises.

Myakka can't help herself. Curiosity compels her to slowly rise to a standing position, balancing on two of the branches, and examine the metal plate. Her face tightly drawn in concentration, she touches it, the smooth coldness a surprise. Wondering what the pretty buttons would feel like, she ventures a quick flick with her forefinger that makes contact, and the green one begins flashing. Simultaneously, a sensation of well being seeps into her mind, and images of the rock face and the stand of trees flash as mental pictures.

The images melt into a close-up of the sheer rock face, and she witnesses the appearance of a rectangular opening at ground level in the solid rock. Astonished, she closes her eyes tightly, but the opening in the rock face remains in her mind.

Looking at the panel again, now with renewed curiosity, the opening still pictured in her mind, with another quick flick of her forefinger, she touches the red one. The green light stops flashing, the image in her mind dissolves, and the panel covers again with bark. She slouches back down the trunk bewildered.

TYOKKU REMAINED LASHED to the huge cross-posts of the Quetzal totem for two days. Visions, hallucinations, and involuntary bodily sensations from the double dose of jivorri saturate his perceptions.

With great patience he kept reign on the onslaught, not allowing dissemination of his personal power or the loss of his will. He survived, braving the wind, rain, the lonely skies of night, and the torturous burning glare of the sun during those two days through the practice of being only in the moment. He had learned on a previous journey that the welcoming Oneness of All Things was there inside to help him hold on to sanity.

Filled with insatiable thirst, the last of the sun's disk disappearing, Tyokku feels his bonds mysteriously melt away, and a shuffling sound fades behind him. He catches himself from crumpling into the gravel bed of the terrace; the mental concentration required to confront the effects of the javorri has almost drained his mental resources, leaving muscle functions unattended.

He gathers his will, and pulls the wild meandering of his mind and a background of hallucinations under control, and suddenly faces an overpowering temptation to fly with the wind. But the legendary hopelessness of return from such a journey curbs the desire. Turning his thoughts away from the folly, he is jolted to his senses by the starkness of being alone, on top of the pyramid, standing on the edge of the terrace overhang, unharmed, and staring up at the bright moon.

Strong and able to move, the heated energies of his bodily engine gathering momentum, Tyokku believes the spirits will guide him to Myakka. The hammering behind his eyes lessens the moment he unleashes himself to flow with the wind, charging ahead, eager for the safety of the Oneness offered by the pitch-black jungle and towering mountains spread out before him.

A skilled and fearless boy-man-warrior, Tyokku picks up Myakka's trail at the point she had entered the forest, and tracks her over the top of the highest mountain in the east.

They had agreed in advance that the mountain would be her guide going to and from the sea. If they were to be united, she must make it back to the mountain no later than night-fall of the third day. He had less than twenty-four hours to find her to be able to return in time.

The plan was to meet on the seaside of the mountain sometime during the night of that third day and rest briefly before the last eighteen hour push to Caracol. He was to mark the best route along the way to save time returning, so that an exhausted and famished Myakka could rest as long as possible.

Through the night and late into the next day Tyokku plots the return course over the mountain through the maze of ephemeral illusions and temptations manifested by the javorri. He makes camp before dark, half way down the east side, well back from a stone prominence that offers a panoramic view of the mountainside below. He will watch for Myakka from that perch, and guide her to food, shelter, and a safe rest. In preparation, with weapons and tools of his own making, he builds a fire, traps and spit-grills a ground squirrel, constructs a lean-to, and gathers a comfortable grass bed.

As his vigil wears on into the night, he is taken up fighting off the increasing encroachment of paranoia. Suddenly he spots her a mile or so away. She's moving over the final hill and valley system under the last of the moon's guiding light. He gasps joyfully under his breath,

knowing he can not dare to call out. Judging her path, he shoulders his weapons and sets out down the mountain to meet her, the heat of the javorri re-surgings inside on a wave of adrenaline.

Cautiously winding his way down, Tyokku feels the warm glow of pride and happiness, mixed with longing for the sight, touch and smell of her. Though they had never made physical contact, or been permitted more than a fleeting word, a natural bond of understanding had formed; after a while, whenever they chanced upon one another, their shared smiles were as powerful as intimate conversation.

Tyokku over-runs Myakka. She had strayed from her course, momentarily losing the guidance of the moonlight to the clouds beginning to stack up against the east side of the range.

Tyokku backtracks in time to watch her in the bright moonlight, a hundred meters or so back up the slope, racing across a clearing, picking her way across a dry stream-bed, and scampering up a large tree in a thicket. He sets off at a run, aware of the noise she is making eliminating branches in the tree as she climbs.

Tyokku knows full well what is happening. He slows up, nocks an arrow into the bow, and begins to scan the high ground for the cat.

Using cover and concealment to his advantage, he moves to the edge of the dry stream-bed behind thick shrubs, and motionlessly scans and re-scans for the slightest movement. A branch moves ever so slightly. The form of the black jaguar on the ledge takes on shape. Tyokku realizes he will be in great danger if the cat learns of his presence.

There is a light breeze cascading down slope, and the cat is crouched, not moving, intent on Myakka in the tree. The wind is in Tyokku's favor. The cat is unaware of his presence, but it will remain in view only a few minutes longer. The moon is about to dive behind the mountain. He must move quickly and decisively.

Tyokku is suddenly startled by flashing green light coming from the top of the big oak tree. Fear of the unknown freezes him in place. Before he can gather composure, debilitating fear turns to icy terror, as a rectangular entrance into the solid rock of the mountainside suddenly

appears. And then, just as mysteriously, it vanishes along with the flickering green light in the tree.

MYAKKA, SKIN CLAD, her long hair braided and tightly coiled behind her neck, weapons still lashed to her back, stands again in the tree crotch. Uncontrollable curiosity drives her to continue exploring the buttoned panel. She wants to see the images again and feel what happens when she touches the other colored buttons. The presence of the cat on the ledge is gone from her mind.

After probing a few times, the metallic surface reveals itself. A small, discolored area on the trunk about the size of a thumb-print appears to activate the miraculous conversion with a little pressure.

Unable to contain herself, and with unexpected confidence and trust, she moves her hand tentatively over the orange button, and touches it with her forefinger.

Instantly it starts flashing. Alarming sensations fill her consciousness. Rapid, sequential visions form in her mind, filled with strange animals and men in different modes of dress in scene after scene of hostilities.

Just as Myakka realizes they must be happenings in the past, and she recognizes the scenes as taking place in the surroundings from her viewpoint in the tree, the orange light stops flashing, the images cease, and the top of the tree disappears from about eight feet overhead.

She almost loses her balance watching as a shiny, metal post with a huge, glowing, rotating, blue ball on the top, takes the place of the tree-top. The blue button on the panel in front of her begins to flash.

STILL SPELLBOUND, TYOKKU turns his head sharply to new movements in the tree. Seeing the top part of the tree disappear, and a blue balled, stanchion suddenly materialize, he automatically crouches behind a rock, confused and dumfounded.

Shifting his gaze, remembering the cat, and trying to pick it out again, he curses his fate as the moon take its last light to the other side of the mountain. All his instincts tell him to get to the tree as quickly as possible. Cats are unpredictable. Myakka could be in danger. He must not allow fear of these mysterious visions to interfere with his purpose.

Steadying himself, he rationalizes that the javorri brings the phenomena. Pushing himself to commit to action, Tyokku has to move to aid Myakka, let her know he's found her. Charging across the dry stream- bed in a full-out, heated run, his face gleaming and open, full of unabashed excitement mixed with unbridled fear, he shouts her name into the quiet of the night, prepared to do battle with the cat.

AT THAT SAME moment Myakka's finger makes contact with the flashing, blue button. The rotating blue ball on the stanchion top instantaneously discharges thousands of blue light shafts in all directions, the cracking, thunderous roar sending her cringing in terror and pain, clutching at the tree trunk in momentary blindness.

It is over in an instant. Looking down the trunk, her face beaming through the fright, she opens her mouth to welcome Tyokku whose sweet voice she heard.

He is lying at the base of the tree. In reckless abandon she slides and shimmies down the trunk, scraping her inner thighs and arms to bloody gashes. He is sprawled out on his back, a bloodless, round hole in the side of his head the size of a small apple. His face is filled with a lover's love, and his blazing, blue eyes lay open and fixed on the stars.

Anguish and despair leaves Myakka abruptly with the loud cracking of branches and the crashing thud twenty feet away of a large, black leopard hitting the ground. Before she can absorb and reconcile what has happened, the humming noise returns. She looks up just in time to see the ball disappear and the top of the tree re-materialize.

It is eerily calm, quiet, and windless. Even buried in darkness, she can see the forested mountainside covered with countless thin spires of white smoke from the blue light impacts. The stench of death hovers thickly in the still mountain air. Except for Myakka, every living creature on the forest floor lays lifeless.

Standing like a stone statue, Myakka retreats to the solace inside, to the place where she finds the hidden resources of will to neutralize fear and desperation. The strange and mysterious sense of well being she felt earlier, touching the green button, slowly seeps back into her consciousness.

Well before the rising of the sun, she performs the traditional, burial ceremony for Tyokku. Curiously, as she works to shape and lay in the marking stone, it comes upon her that she must accept the events as judgment and direction from the gods and Founders; and all that has transpired should be seen as a personal blessing and the definition of a new beginning.

Myakka leaves the mountain assured in the deepest recesses of her being that it is a sacred place given to her husbandry. During the return to Caracol, a blissful sense of joy is Myakka's constant companion, and she come to believe she has been granted access to the great mysteries of the arcane mystics; and to understand the mysteries, she must acquire knowledge, the knowledge that lies inside the mountain.

It is she who must become the Grand Bruja, greater than the sorceress, Milar, the greatest of all the revered female ancestors.