

## TLÉIX'

### (ONE)

The red caves were on the opposite side of the island from the village of Koloshan, facing out on an isolated inlet, a honeycomb of chambers slowly carved by nature into the side of a steep cliff. The area was considered sacred by some of the older natives from the village. According to legend, the earth in and around the caves was red because it had been soaked with the blood of warriors who had battled there.

Jonah St Clair, Koloshan's only police officer, knew that iron oxide accounted for the area's unique coloration. But it was a good story. And he shared a sense of awe for the caves. His grandfather had told him countless tales about the red caves, hair-raising stories to excite a young boy's imagination and instill pride in his ancestry. In his early teens he had explored the caves in search of artifacts, half expecting, half dreading that something mysterious and strange would happen to him while he was there. But nothing ever had.

Today, Jonah was in his twenty-foot Alumaweld boat headed to the red caves to search for the young icht'a known as Chaaky, from tschāk, eagle, the crest animal he claimed as his. Chaaky was thought to have fled there either to escape the consequences of his actions—or to mourn them. Jonah wasn't sure which.

There was no trail leading directly to the caves from Koloshan. To get there by land involved following a series of animal paths which occasionally petered out and left one to push through the thick underbrush until another path could be found. It was a lot faster to go by boat.

An afternoon breeze had come up. The waves were larger than they had been earlier in the day, capped with frothy white foam. Jonah had to work the throttle to keep from taking water over the bow – slow down, speed up, slow down. Water was boiling around his outboard motor,

but the situation was not yet serious. Unless his 35hp Evinrude finally decided to crap out on him. Then he would have to radio for help and hope someone showed up before he was in serious trouble.

He passed two white crosses along the western shore. They stood out against the natural backdrop of rocks and brush, a stark warning to beware of the power of wind and water. Jonah had known the young native fishermen whose deaths were marked by the crosses. Unfortunately for their families, the bodies were never recovered. And, according to native belief, when a person is lost in the water their spirit is forced to wander forever. It had always seemed unfair to Jonah. He felt being lost at sea should be more like the Catholic purgatory, a temporary stage of the afterlife.

As he rounded the north end of the island the water grew calmer. He was able to make better time, speeding up the narrow inlet, caught in the red glow of the sun's descent. A gull flew overhead, its belly glinting pink in the vivid wash of color from the crimson sky.

As the caves finally came into view their shadowy cavities looked sinister against the backdrop of the rocky hillside and the fading sunset. A perfect setting for a bloody battle or the meditations of an aspiring shaman, Johan thought. He wondered what impact their ominous presence would have on a depressed and frightened young boy. Or on a guilty icht'a.

Those who knew about the incident had already tried and convicted Chaaky. But Jonah had doubts about the cause of Johnny's death, and until he had all of the facts, he was withholding judgement.

The tide was rising. In another hour or so many of the lower caves would fill with water. Once, when he was young, Jonah had gone into one of the smaller caves with his skiff, beached the boat on a rocky shelf, and climbed up onto a ledge to explore. He had lost track of time and

had almost been trapped inside by the incoming tide. By the time he had noticed what was happening, there was barely enough room for him to maneuver his skiff out through the entrance before water sealed off the cave.

Jonah slowed the boat down and eased it toward shore. There was no sign of Chaaky, but he hadn't expected to spot him from the boat. If Chaaky was there, he had undoubtedly heard Jonah's approach. Sound traveled a long way over water. The boy would have had plenty of time to hide. What Jonah hoped was that Chaaky would be willing to talk to him *if* he could make contact.

There were quite a few caves to search. Jonah had decided to cover those accessible by water first. If he found no sign of the boy in any of the lower caves he would go ashore and search among the wind-stunted trees that clung to life along the top of the cliff. From there he could also reach some of the higher caves, although as darkness fell the task would become more difficult.

He tossed his anchor into the water, not bothering to back down on it. The holding in the area was poor, but unless the wind kicked up, he doubted his boat would drift off. He flipped the rubber dinghy he'd brought along into the water, got in, and rowed toward the entrance of the furthest cave to his right. He would move from right to left, checking each cave along the way.

Just a few feet inside the first cave he moved into total darkness and was surrounded by a musty scent of decaying seaweed. He switched on his flashlight and called out: "Chaaky! It's me, Jonah. I just want to talk to you." The words echoed back, eerie, inhuman. He almost expected old bones to rise up and dance.

Once the echo died, everything was still. With his flashlight he saw a cleft in the back wall that he thought might be large enough for a boy to hide. He rowed toward it to get a better

look, bumping along the jagged rock wall. If he wasn't careful, he would rip the hell out of his dinghy.

The opening was about three feet deep, but there was no sign of Chaaky or any indication that he had been there. Jonah turned the dinghy around and rowed quickly toward the entrance, anxious to get back outside.

The sky had lost its brilliance, the dim glow of the sun falling off the edge of the world into the sea. Jonah looked at his watch. It was only 6:30. In the spring it stayed light nearly all night long, but in the fall and winter months the wilderness darkness came early with a black intensity unrelieved by the halo of streetlights, the shimmer of neon signs, the telltale luminous glow of televisions, or the flash and flicker of headlights.

Dusky water lapped at the rubber dinghy as he rounded the rock wall separating the cave he had just searched from the adjoining cave. "Chaaky," he called. "It's Jonah. I'm not here to arrest you. I just want to talk." Something flapped its wings close to Jonah's head as it fled from his approach. Jonah had a brief vision of bats with red veined wings and glowing eyes. But it was an ordinary sea bird, nothing more.

He turned into another cave, the sound of his oars kissing the water as soft as the pumping of bird wings. After a brief look around at the barren, empty interior, he moved on.

The next cave was small, barely providing sufficient height to enable Jonah to maneuver the boat. He scraped against the side of the cave several times, ducking to keep from hitting his head. "Damn," he said, his curse resonating back at him, unfriendly and alien. He quickly ran his light around the cave. Nothing.

He was just about to enter one of the largest caves at water level when he sensed rather than heard a noise overhead. Before he could look up a massive rock streaked past him and

smashed into the water next to the dinghy, barely missing the small craft. The explosive sound of rock striking water drove Jonah into action. He slammed his oars into the water and muscled his dinghy into the cave, stopping just inside the entrance to listen.

Everything was quiet. There was no sound from above. No more large or small rocks falling.

After a few minutes, he eased the dinghy out of the entrance and peeked up at the top of the cliff, but it was already too dark to make out anything up there clearly. “What?” he mumbled. Had the falling rock been nature’s way of reminding him that you had to stay alert to danger when you were in the wilderness? Or was the source of the incident human? Had Chaaky accidentally caused the large rock to tumble over the edge while trying to stay out of sight? Or had it been a deliberate act? Perhaps he was up there somewhere staring down into the growing darkness, speculating on whether the rock had smashed Jonah’s boat—or his skull.

“Chaaky!” Jonah yelled. “It’s Jonah. Do you hear me? I need to talk to you.” Water slapped against the gravel beach. A bird shrilled. But there was no human answer to his appeal.

The tide was slowly pushing him back into the cave. Putting his suspicions aside, he dipped his oars in the water and steered the dinghy into the chamber. There was still the possibility that Chaaky was hiding in one of the lower caves. He had to keep searching.

His flashlight revealed watermarks on the cave wall. The water was already about even with one of the highest dark lines etched into the red rock. It was going to be an exceptionally high tide.

A sound overhead drew his attention. His light caught a flash of movement. An adrenalin rush pulsed through his system, focusing his attention, preparing him for action. Then two birds whooshed past him. A flutter of wings and he was alone.

He took some deep breaths to calm himself, then moved on, glancing upward from time to time, worrying about the possibility of another rock cascading down from above. But the only motion was from his oars as they sliced into the water and slowly rose back to the surface.

The next few caves were impossible to enter. He leaned over the side of the dinghy and tried to see into their murky interiors on the off chance that there would be a pair of eyes looking back. He was worried that Chaaky had hidden in one of the caves that was rapidly filling with water, afraid to come out because he had heard Jonah calling him. At that very moment he might be in some cubbyhole in danger of being swamped.

A rocky outcrop extended out into the water just before the entrance to the last cave. As Jonah pulled around it he went through a ball of herring, tiny fish jumping all around, making delicate, fluorescent rings in the black water. Slowly, he moved through them into the cave, probing the cave's secret curves and niches with his flashlight. Water licked the sandstone walls, eroding, carving the hollow still deeper.

There was a recess to the left that his light couldn't penetrate. "Chaaky?" he called softly. The cave murmured the name back at him: "Chaaky ...aaky."

Jonah waited, trying to decide. How could he come this far and leave without checking one of the most obvious hiding places? He remembered the narrow crawlspace from his own explorations as a youngster. It curved back into the cliff about ten feet. There was only a shallow clearance overhead, but it was definitely sufficient for a young boy determined to stay hidden.

He draped the frayed manila painter from his dinghy around a rock that jutted up from the water near the shelf's edge and tugged at it a few times to make certain it was secure. Then he removed his shoes and socks, rolled up his pants, put his flashlight in his pocket, and, balancing himself the best he could by grabbing at the rocks along the edge of the shelf, he stepped onto a

slime covered outcrop. Shells of sea animals pressed into the bottoms of his feet. Something made a popping noise. He felt an irrational urge to jump back into the dinghy. "I can do this," he told himself.

Switching on his flashlight to get his bearings, it produced a thin glow in the large space, leaving most of the cave in shadow. Outside, under the dark night sky, there might be headless horsemen and Halloween nightmares, but water caves conjured up particularly bizarre images of evil creatures, death and decay. He stood there, rigid, listening to water dripping somewhere off to his left. Suddenly water splashed around his ankles and up the inside of his pant leg, breaking the spell. He had to get on with it, before the entire area was flooded.

He carefully inched his way forward, across the slippery and uneven surface. Droplets of cold water landed on his head and rolled down his forehead into his eyes. He blinked hard to clear his vision, then swiped his jacket sleeve across his face. As he took the next step something soft moved under his foot. He jerked his foot back and almost lost his balance. The flashlight fell from his hands and landed with a muffled splat in a tide pool, casting an eerie light across the floor of the rocky ledge. Damn stupid thing to do, Jonah thought, as he retrieved the flashlight. If he lost his light or broke it that would make his search impossible and his retreat precarious.

At the back of the cave, just as he remembered, there were toeholds made by other explorers who had climbed up to see what was there. He put his flashlight in his jacket pocket, reached up for something to hold onto, pressed his right foot into the first toehold, and pulled himself upward. A second step and he was able to reach the top. Fingers digging into rapidly receding dirt and rock, he heaved his body onto the ledge. Rocks cascaded over the edge. He forced his body forward into the blank space to avoid getting caught in a landslide of earth and rock.

Finally, everything was still. His own breathing, uneven and heavy, the only sound. He felt like an intruder. He could imagine voices calling for him to leave, ancient voices demanding privacy. He reached into his pocket for his flashlight and illuminated the hollow. There were no swirling spirits, no skeletons propped up against the wall, no animal waiting to attack. The emptiness was almost a relief.

Getting down was in some ways more difficult than getting up had been. Jonah slid part of the way, scraping his bare feet along the rock wall and landing with a loud splash in the now ankle deep icy water. Shivering with cold he made his way back to the dinghy and gratefully donned socks and shoes.

“Chaaky!” he yelled as he rowed into the night. “Chaaky, do you hear me?” His voice was lost in the vastness of nighttime sky and water. “I just want to talk. We need to talk.”

“To talk, to talk,” came the voiceless reply from the red caves. “To talk...”