A Shadow Over the Land

by Liz Williams

Bantam gave Liz Williams her most recent American book publication when they released *Banner of Souls* last fall. The novel has picked up the author's third nomination for a Philip K. Dick Award. Her other books include *The Ghost Sister*, *Empire of Bones*, *The Poison Master*, and *Nine Layers of Sky*. In addition, Liz has had over forty short stories published in *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *The Third Alternative*. Her latest tale takes a young woman on a perilous academic expedition.

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I always knew that one day I would return to the veldt, to the light and the silence. At night, when I closed my eyes, I could see the veldt rolling before me in the darkness, all the way to the rocks of the Damara. They are red with iron, great rusted cliffs that lift up out of the plains. Further in lies the Ushete Rift and the range that the early settlers to this world called the Mountains of the Moon, meaning both a barren land, and home. Gahran has a moon, too, and when it rises over the Ushete, it seems close enough to touch, but I knew nothing of this land when I first came there.

I first went to the veldt a year ago. The university had sent me out to Yaounde, close to the border, with team leader Andre Vauchelade. I hadn't been at the university for very long. I had arrived on Gahran from Earth, where I'd held a post at Nairobi. I was less sure of myself, a year ago. More things seemed to matter to me, and to matter more. The Yaounde expedition seemed fraught with importance. I had so much to prove, both as a young researcher and as a woman from Earth. Vauchelade had a reputation as an exacting man, who was hard to work for and harder to like. I remember sitting on the edge of my bed the night before we left, clasping my hands together until they hurt, and thinking that I must not fail, that I must be perfect in all that I did. Now, I look back and wonder. I failed, certainly, to make my reputation or even to protect my name, and now it hardly matters.

I lived out the last year in the city, went to the university by day and came back at night to write and sleep. At work, I kept myself to myself, as far as that was possible with a hundred and seventy students to worry about. Yet somewhere at the back of my mind, I was always aware of the contrast, of the part of the world that was absent.

Irubin, where I lived, was one of the big transcontinental ports: you could stand on one end of the Benue Bridge and look across to the distant hazy shore on the other side. The city straddled a long arm of the sea, but on the shore beneath the bridge, there was only an echo of salt on the wind, and the water was sepia with river sand. I tried to escape at weekends to the northern coast, to the long sweep of Hama beach beyond the shanty blocks, and watch the breakers roll in. I never found what I was looking for, and never expected to, for the veldt had marked me, and I could

never see the city in the same way again.

In the veldt, there is no one and there is no water, unless one follows the thin line of the river Ghila. It was barren land, to the unschooled eye, but I am a geologist, and it was rich country for me. I could see life everywhere, the lost life of this world that had ebbed to leave its traces in the rocks.

Yaounde had been established as a military outpost some seventy years ago, when the first settlers arrived and no one knew what lived out in the veldt. This was before they discovered how empty this world really was, with only the thinnest scattering of life of its own. When we came through the building at the end of the little airstrip, there was a single soldier, in the khaki uniform of the SSC, clutching a semi-automatic. He looked no more than fourteen. Vauchelade, ignoring the gun and the uniform, made him help us with the bags. Poor Professor, I thought. Short, white, and with the florid face of the South African Boer, he could not have looked more out of place. He was sweating profusely and I felt suddenly sorry for him.

"You'll have to sign in," the soldier said, trying to rescue some dignity. I felt sorry for him, too. He'd joined the army because it sounded more exciting than a life spent working for his dad on some country farm, and now here he was, guarding an isolated airstrip on a world that has no enemies.

"Whatever," Vauchelade said, then strode past the front desk and out onto the forecourt. The soldier and I followed. "Where's the car?" Vauche-lade said impatiently. "I told them when we were coming. This is bloody typical!" I sat down on the bags. The sudden rush of heat had hit me. It was much hotter than the damp air of Irubin, or even Nairobi.

"Did you take your pills?" Vauchelade asked.

"No, I forgot." I said meekly. He did not bother to reply. I knew what he was thinking. We'd only been here fifteen minutes, and already I was doing things wrong. I fumbled in the stretch case for the packet of capsules and extracted two. God only knows what they did to you. I felt them travel the length of my dry throat and then an icy chill spread upward from my stomach, constricting my heart. It felt like fever.

"Give them a minute to work," Vauchelade said, not unsympathetically. I nodded. "You'll still sweat, but they do cool you down. Look, here's the car."

It was an old general terrain vehicle. The engine cover was missing, removed to cool the engine. The driver hopped down and slung the bags into the back of the GTV.

"Careful with those," Vauchelade said irritably. "There's some delicate instruments in there."

"Sorry," the driver said, perfunctorily. He handed me into the back seat; Vauchelade took the front.

“I hope this isn’t the assigned team vehicle,” Vauchelade said over his shoulder. “I’m not taking anything in this condition out into the veldt.”

I watched the streets unfold through the filthy window of the GTV. It was a good example of frontier military architecture: row after row of prefabs and one four-story compartment building festooned with satellite equipment. The drive did not last long. Yaounde was not a large place, and we were staying in the single hotel.

When we arrived, I collected the imprint for my room and went straight upstairs. The little window looked out onto a dusty backyard filled with petrol drums and an old mattress. I think my culture shock was finally beginning, fueled by disappointment. I had come all this way, out to another world, and it was just like home.

I remembered my grandfather telling me about those early days, when a Settler’s claim had been finally granted to Gahran. He was an engineer, my granddad, and he had been in space, on one of the lunar projects. He said that he and his people had been filled with hope, that there was at last a land of their own: a new Africa. I think he really felt it was a kind of return to Eden, given by God, where they could avoid the mistakes of the past and start again, be the people they once were. To some extent, he had been right. Irubin was one of the great cities of the human worlds, and Somalai, and Rununda. But not Yaounde, I thought. Yaounde was the same as everywhere else. I had not felt that I belonged in Nairobi. I did not feel that I belonged here, either. I stood and stared out of the little window, and when the phone shrilled, it made me jump. The female voice on the other end was unfamiliar.

“Dr. Selu?”

“Yes?” I said.

“My name’s Essengene Tesh. I’m with the outpost team? The guys that you’re replacing.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was supposed to call you earlier in the week. I couldn’t get hold of you.”

“No, I know. Something came up. I had to go up-border. I’m actually downstairs now, in the bar. If you’re not too tired, I thought we could have some lunch?”

“Yes,” I told her. “Yes, that would be good.”

Essengene Tesh was a handsome woman in her mid-forties. She was wearing military gear, which confused me until she said, disarmingly, “Everything else is in the wash. I borrowed these from the colonel ... Otherwise you wouldn’t have wanted to sit next to me, I’m afraid.”

“We had an eight-hour flight from Irubin. I wouldn’t have noticed,” I said,

and she laughed.

"When I get back to Irubin, I'm going to hire a salon for a week and live in it. But I envy you, Dr. Selu," she added, suddenly serious. "You don't know how much you'll like it, out there."

"You can call me Assia," I said. "How do you know I'll like it?" I asked, curiously. She looked at me for a moment. In the darkness of the bar, her eyes were impenetrable, hooded.

"Oh, you will. Whether *Vauchelade* will, I don't know. Maybe, maybe not."

"The professor's been here before."

"Yes," Tesh said, considering. "He has and he hasn't. I don't think he's ever really *seen* things out here. He's a good geologist, mind, I'm not saying he's not. But there's more out there than rocks."

"I thought the veldt was uninhabited."

"No one lives there. I don't mean there's mysterious alien life or anything. It's hard to explain."

She looked up and smiled at Vauchelade, who had appeared through the door of the bar, and the conversation turned to more practical matters. We would leave Yaounde early the next morning, head out to the base camp, and set up in preparation for the arrival of the team. Most of the equipment would be inherited from the departing group, but the instrumentation relevant to Vauchelade's own research would need to be assembled. Tesh briefed us on the previous month's findings and gave us a copy of the field notes before driving out to the airstrip to sort out the departure details. When she had gone, Vauchelade said, "I wouldn't worry too much about what Dr. Tesh tells you."

"About...?"

"The veldt. I've heard her views before." He smiled indulgently. "She's a very spiritual woman." I did not think it was meant to be a compliment.

"I've read her papers in the AGA journals," I said, wanting to defend her.

"Oh, she's very competent, I suppose." He picked up the bill and looked around for the pay-in. "I should get some rest, if I were you. We've got a long day ahead of us tomorrow, and there's not a great deal we can do here. I need to get the transport sorted out."

I wandered back up to my room and lay down on the bed. It was stuffy, and the bed cover seemed far too thick. It made my skin itch uncomfortably, but I must have fallen asleep, because when I next opened my eyes, the light that poured through the little window was thick and golden.

When I looked at my watch I discovered that it was four in the afternoon. I showered and changed, then went downstairs. Reception was deserted. I stepped out into the street, still feeling the remnants of sleep around me. It was very quiet, and the sun was sinking to cast long shadows across the packed ochre earth of the road. I must have dreamed as I lay sleeping in the stuffy hotel room, because I could not shake the feeling that I had been speaking to someone. I felt light-headed and strange, and wondered whether it was some after-effect of the temperature control, but then I realized that I was hungry.

Even in the smallest place, there is always a market. In Yaounde, it lay at the back of the temple and consisted of a few stalls selling household goods, cheap clothes, and fast food. The smell of frying plantain made my mouth water. At the end was a café, a lot more appealing than the dark and arid bar of the hotel. I went in and sat down. It was full of people: soldiers and mining personnel. Everyone seemed to know one another, no surprise in a place as small as this. I typed my order into the keypad, and, as I did so, something warm butted against my shins, startling me. The woman sitting opposite me reached under the table and extracted a small child, who gave me a long and uncertain stare.

“Sorry,” the woman said.

“That’s okay. She just made me jump.”

“You’re with the scientists?”

It’s always the same in a small town; they like to place you, to know who you are.

“Yes, that’s right. We’re here for the next six weeks or so.”

“Out in the Rift,” the woman said, wonderingly.

“Have you been there?”

She smiled at me. “No, never. Why would I?”

The little girl was marching a plastic doll across the table. She was making it talk, babbling away on its behalf.

“Who’s dolly talking to?” her mother asked. The child gave a radiant smile.

“Demelo.”

Her mother laughed. “Oh, okay.” I did not recognize the word. The woman gave her daughter a pat. “Come on. We should be getting back.” She hefted the child into her arms, and, at that point, my food arrived. I did not see them go.

I went to bed early that night and had no dreams that I can remember. The next day was hot, even so soon after dawn, and a bright glaze lay across the sky. The sun rested in a bronze halo above the distant cliffs of the Rift. Vauchelade

wanted to get going before the heat became too intense to travel. He had acquired a ground car from the military base, which proved both smoother and faster than the GTV. Yaounde fell behind us in a cloud of dust. For the first thirty kilometers, we saw scattered farmsteads—round, white perma-domes surrounded by fields—and then there was nothing but the plains. The veldt is arid, speckled with stones and tufts of coarse grass. We saw no life, and the sky, a lid the color of bone, was empty of birds.

The dust of the Ushete is also the color of rust. It rose up in a soft cloud, lifted by the wheels of the car, to settle against the windscreen. Vauchelade switched on the airwipers, but the dust continued to swirl up to hide the plains from view. Vauchelade turned the wipers to a constant setting and sealed the windows. The air inside the vehicle became icy. I tried to adjust the control, but to no effect. It was like traveling through some cold, dark night.

At last, Vauchelade pulled the wheel of the car over sharply and turned the engine off. The roar of the AC seemed loud in the sudden silence. I opened the door and slid out. It was very quiet and very still. The mountains of the Rift rose up before me and they were red as blood in the light of the distant sun. They rolled up in a series of crumpled folds as far as the horizon to conceal the immense fissure of the Rift itself. The wind carried a dry, harsh heat and the smell of the parched land.

Vauchelade said, “The camp’s at the edge of the Rift. We won’t be able to take the car much further. There’s a track leading down to the site.”

We got back into the car and Vauchelade drove for a short distance along the rudimentary track made by an earlier vehicle. The track wound between the crimson rocks until it opened out onto a short plateau. The Rift lay beyond. Stepping down from the vehicle, I walked to the edge and looked out across the Ushete.

Compared to other features on other worlds, I suppose, it was not the most spectacular formation of its kind. Even so, the scale of the Rift left me momentarily breathless. From the lip of the plateau, the ground fell abruptly into a great chasm, which snaked away into the distance. It was like standing on the very edge of the world. A single step, I thought, and I would not fall but float down into the gap, down forever, and never reach an end. It seemed as though the world had become inverted, as though all the skies and the starry plains beyond were contained in the space beneath my feet. Somewhere beyond vertigo, I reeled, and the world spun around me in a reversed image: light turning to darkness and the rocks of the Rift burning like fire. Then Vauchelade was pulling me back.

“Careful,” he said, genially enough, but there was an edge to his voice.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Look.” Vauchelade pointed into the endless gap of the Rift. “See the strata running across the ledge? That’s what I want to take a look at. An interesting product of what we’re calling the Metosaic.” He was holding my arm in a tight grip.

He probably meant to be kind.

We walked back to the car and began to unload the instruments. The temperature control kept me cool, but the heat burst over my skin like a wave and I could taste the dust on my tongue. It was reassuring and familiar, like the dust that covered the streets of Dushange Street and which my mother swept from the steps every morning. I closed my eyes for a moment, and, when I opened them, I expected to see the low house between the lemon trees, and the globes of the fruit yellow as suns among the leaves.

Laden with the bags, I followed Vauchelade. He seemed to vanish over the lip of the Rift, but when I reached the place where he had gone, I realized that a steep little path led down to a second, wider ledge. The pale tops of the dome tents billowed up in the wind from the Rift. A small figure stepped out and waved: as we descended, I recognized Tesh. There were two main tents, the living quarters, and a smaller nest of domes, like mushrooms, which housed the equipment. The gear belonging to the departing team was packed and piled at the entrance to one of the larger tents, ready to go.

"—but we're actually going to wait until evening," Tesh was explaining to Vauchelade. She ran a hand over her forehead, pushing back the dark braids. "I don't want to slog three hundred miles in this heat." Vauchelade nodded.

"I think that's wise," he said.

"When are the rest of your team coming?" Tesh asked.

"They might be in Yaounde now. As soon as I can put a call through I'll find out. They may decide to set out tonight."

A second person emerged from the tent, a young man with a round, cheerful face.

"Hi," he said, smiling at us. "Dr. Vauchelade and Dr. Selu, I presume?"

"That's right," I said. "And—I'm guessing—you're Clayton Richards?"

"Good guess. Yes, I'm Clay."

"Well," Vauchelade said. "Since we've got two or three hours before you go, why don't you bring me up to date on your readings?"

"Sure." Richards held the flap of the tent open for us. We followed him into the cool half-light of the main tent. The amount of research that they had managed to complete was impressive. Vauchelade nodded approvingly.

"This is really good stuff," he said. Tesh grinned.

"This," she told him, "*This* is the piece de resistance." She handed him a series of slides and a sample box. As Vauchelade examined it, his face changed.

“My God,” he said.

“Bet you haven’t seen anything like that before,” Tesh said.

“Well, no, I haven’t,” he admitted. He handed the slide to me. It showed a microscope sample, and it was beautiful. It was part of a crystalline fragment. Azure spires reared upward, an Ethiopian city in miniature, iridescent as a peacock’s feather.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It doesn’t have a name yet,” Richards said. “But we’re calling it essengenite, after its discoverer.”

“And who knows what else is out there?” Tesh said. I felt a snaking knot of emotions grip my stomach: pride in her achievement, a measure of jealousy, and most of all, ambition. This discovery could make Tesh’s name in contemporary geology. I felt her eyes upon me and knew that she saw what I was feeling. It was an oddly compassionate gaze, as though the discovery was something that had almost ceased to be of importance to her.

We spent the rest of the afternoon setting up the equipment. Vau-chelade put a call through to Yaounde and learned that the team was ready to set off.

“Should be with you by midnight,” a crackling, disembodied voice announced.

“Good,” Vauchelade said.

“Well,” Tesh remarked, straightening up from behind the instrument bank. “I guess Clay and I should think about making a move.”

When we stepped outside the tent, I found that the wind had dropped and the sky had become infused with the intense rosy glow of sunset. The sun itself had disappeared beneath the edge of the Ushete, as if devoured by the Rift.

“Look,” Tesh said. She turned me around to face the mountains. The moon was rising, filling the whole world, enormous in the sunset sky.

“Close enough to touch, isn’t it?” she said. The mountains of the moon were outlined in a sharp rim of shadow. The great disc bore no semblance of a face, as the Europeans like to think, nor the long-eared hare seen by people in Asia. Its craters formed a meaningless pattern on which no interpretation could be placed. In Irubin, they call it “the mirror,” for when you look upon it you are confronted only with yourself.

I said goodbye to Tesh and Richards and walked with them up the track to the plateau where their own vehicle was parked. I watched as they sped away, sending the dust up in a moonlit cloud. Then I walked again to the edge of the

plateau and looked across. The moon, clear of the mountain rim, hung over my shoulder, and the Rift fell away in a ridged mass of shadow. The tilted, serrated spines lay like bones, as though something almost too vast to be imagined had laid itself down to die. I stepped back from the edge. My shadow raced away from me, elongated by the end of the light, and, within my shadow, I saw a deeper patch of darkness. I thought at first it was a stone, but then it moved. I had the same sensation that I had experienced that afternoon. The scar of blackness was small enough to lie within the confines of my shadow, and yet, at the same time, it seemed huge, encompassing the valley, the mountains, and the roseate moon. It lasted only a second or two. It left me completely disoriented, and it was a moment before I was able to recollect myself and head back to the camp.

Vauchelade said that he would wait up until the team arrived, but that there was no need for me to do so. He went up to check the car, and I found a camp bed in the back tent and claimed it, setting up an energy field to keep out insects. It did not take long to drop into sleep, but, in the early hours of the night, I was awoken by the wind. It roared overhead, beating at the tent as though it were a drum. I lay and listened to the wind, and it seemed to me, half-dreaming, that I could hear a voice in the wind, crying out. Toward dawn, the storm blew out, but it was too late for sleep. I got up and made my way around the stacks of equipment to the makeshift shower rig. Then, a little refreshed, I stepped out of the tent into the morning. The sun was coming up over the distant ridges, infusing the land with a gray light. It was very cold. A swirl of wind blew across the ground, rolling the loose earth before it. Vauchelade was perched precariously above the drop, tapping data into the daily log.

“Good morning,” he said, courteously enough. “It’s been quite a wild night. Did you get any sleep?”

“I slept a little,” I said.

“Storms blow up fast in this area,” Vauchelade said. “One moment, it’s a clear sky, and, the next minute, you’re choking with dust. The satellites pick them up, but you can’t always get a link.”

“Are the others still coming?” I asked.

“They should be, later. I tried to get through last night, but the storm knocked out any communication.” He was staring out across the Rift, his eyes narrowed against the sunlight. “Right. Get yourself something to eat and then we’ll make a start. There are a number of things I’d like you to be getting on with today.”

My first morning in the Rift was spent with my hands in the sink, washing samples. Vauchelade climbed down onto a lower ledge and did not return until noon.

“You’ve finished here? Good,” he said. “Haven’t they got here yet?”

“There’s been no sign of anyone,” I said.

“Well, that’s very odd,” Vauchelade said, evidently annoyed. “They should be here by now.” He began to fiddle with the radio, from which a distorted crackling sound emanated. I left him to it, and went into the adjacent tent to vacuum pack the smaller samples. When I came back in, Vauchelade had got through and was conducting a one-sided conversation. I heard him say, reluctantly, “Well, all right then. I suppose that will have to do,” and then he switched the radio off. Leaning back in his chair, he said irritably, “That’s that then. They’re stuck. That storm deposited half the dust in the Rift onto the Upper Veldt. The road’s blocked. They’re trying to hire an aircar, which will send us way over budget.” He glared at me, as though I was directly responsible for our present plight. “Well, what are you standing there for? There’s work to be done.”

Vauchelade wanted samples from the lower cliffs in order to build up a picture of the strata.

“Sort out whatever you need from the stack,” he instructed me. “I presume you’re familiar with the relevant equipment?”

“I think so,” I said. I wanted to tell him that we had covered basic tasks such as this one in our second term of university, and I was a post-doctoral student, but I let it go. Instead, I went into the tent and sorted out the necessary gear, but there was something missing. I could not find the sounding gauge. It was such a small thing, and could easily be overlooked. I ransacked the equipment stack and then I went back into the main tent and looked there. At last, it occurred to me that Vauchelade might have taken it for his own testing that morning. Feeling stupid, I went over to the big collapsible box that he used for his personal equipment and opened the top drawer. There was the sounding gauge, stuffed inside with packets of soil. Brilliant Vauchelade may have been, but his working methods left a lot to be desired. I tugged the sounding gauge free, and the contents of the drawer spilled out across the floor. And into my lap fell the piece of rock that Essengene Tesh had discovered, blue as the hem of Isis’ robe. I picked it up and stared at it.

“What are you doing with that? Put it back,” Vauchelade’s voice came from immediately behind my ear.

“I was looking for the sounding gauge,” I said. “I thought that Tesh took this with her?”

“No. She left all her samples here, so we could ship everything back at once,” Vauchelade said, with restrained patience. He added, “Come along, Dr. Selu. We haven’t got all day.”

I placed the blue fragment back inside the drawer and followed him outside. Vauchelade suggested that he should cover the top end of the bluff, while I sampled the lower ledge.

“I’ll have to winch you down in the cradle,” Vauchelade said. “It’s a damn nuisance, being so short-handed. Still, we’ll just have to make the best of it. I’m sure

you can handle it. You've done this sort of thing before, haven't you?"

"In the Caucasus. With Jerry Hutton. We—"

"Yes, yes," Vauchelade said. "Help me with the winch."

Together, we carried the light extendable winch down to the lip of the canyon and stood back as it assembled itself. He had some expensive equipment with him, for all his griping about the budget.

"Keep attached to the guide rope at all times," Vauchelade said, "And give me a call on the portable when you're ready to come up."

"No problem," I said. I wanted to show him that I could, as he had suggested, handle it on my own.

I strapped myself into the cradle and was winched slowly down the cliff. The ledge on which I landed was no more than a few feet wide, but there was adequate space in which to work. Methodically, I started my sampling; photographing the strata and then taking core samples of each separate formation. It was very quiet within the valley of the Rift, and very hot. The sun had baked the floor of the ledge into a pavement of cracked bricks, and there was a smell of earth and heat. I worked in a kind of dream, the repetitive action sending me almost into trance. Somewhere at the back of my mind, like a pebble at the bottom of a well, lay the thought of Tesh's blue stone, which should have been with her, but was not.

I did not realize how late it had become until I glanced at the watch attached to my belt and saw that it was well after six. I finished what I was doing and packed everything into the pouches of the cradle. Then I spoke into the portable.

"Professor Vauchelade?" I said. "I'm ready to come up now."

No one answered. I switched the portable to a higher frequency and tried again. I may as well have spoken into the deep and empty air of the Rift. It did not yet occur to me that anything might be seriously wrong. I knew that certain formations blocked out the frequency from the portable, and Vauchelade might have moved out of range. I set the portable on an automatic signal, and sat down on the hard earth. Heat burned out from the Rift wall. My sunsuit protected me from the worst of it, but it was still uncomfortably hot. I was grateful for the little breeze that drifted down the Valley, sending the fine sand skittering across the floor of the ledge.

Slowly the wind began to grow. The entranced complacency of the afternoon faded and I began to feel uneasy. The portable was still transmitting, to no effect. At first, I think I wondered whether something had happened to Vauchelade. The golden light that poured into the valley was hazed with dust, a veil borne on the rising wind. I looked down at my hand, and saw the dark skin dulled beneath a spice-colored film. The dust had crept underneath the wrist seal of the sunsuit, and it itched where it rubbed against the skin. I turned back to the cradle, trying to see

whether I might climb up the guide rope to the brow of the cliff, but when I looked upward, I could no longer see the top of the bluff. It was hidden by the dust. I pulled at the rope, and watched in disbelief as it uncoiled down the cliff and fell snaking around my ankles. It had come detached from the winch.

I shouted into the portable, and still there came no answer. A gust of wind buffeted me, nearly sending me over the edge, and throwing me onto my knees. Beyond the ledge, the Rift valley was filled with a shifting sea of dust, red waves rolling up to burst like spray against the ledge. It filled my mouth; I spat and rubbed my eyes, and, for a moment, I saw the sun riding, bright as garnet, through the boiling storm. I thought, *I am going to die,* and then everything seemed to right itself. I breathed dust, and there at the edges of the storm I sensed again a shadow, vast as the Rift and burning like the sun. It grew as vast as the world. It filled the Rift, welling up from it like water—and then I knew that it was nothing more than the Rift itself.

I understood then what Tesh had discovered: not the shard of rock that would be named after her, but something else, the *presence* of the land. Each place has its own spirit, born out of rock, and wind, and earth. I was choking on dust, and I was going to die, and it seemed hardly important. I was part of a place; I belonged. I plunged my hands into the dust that covered the ledge, and laughed.

Since I am here to tell you this story, it is evident that I did not, after all, die there. A wave of warm air washed over me, and above the wind, I heard the sound of a propulsion system. Minutes later, Vauchelade and a woman I did not know were bundling me onto a stretcher and I was being lifted up into the bowels of the aircar. They gave me a shot, and pumped out my lungs, and so I did not see the aircar lift out as the storm spilled over the edges of the Rift to engulf the camp and the reaches of the Upper Veldt.

When I came round, we were running ahead of the storm back to Yaounde and I made a thorough nuisance of myself trying to explain what it was that I had experienced. Vauchelade snorted. The others clearly thought I was raving, with the exception of one woman, Gereta Apere, who looked at me strangely and said, “I know what you mean. I was born on a farmstead near New Cape, not far from the edge of the Rift. They call it *demelo*. A shadow over the land. Not everyone sees it. They say it is a sign that the land has accepted you, that it will save your life when it can, that you will enter its spirit when you die.”

She didn’t say anything more, and I relapsed into a fitful sleep. We reached Yaounde safely, and I spent the night at the medical center. They discharged me the next morning, and though my throat felt as though it had been sandpapered, I was clear-headed and in need of answers. I went in search of Vauchelade at the hotel, only to be told that he had returned to Irubin.

“He told us what happened,” Apere said. “You must have called him, but he was in one of the side gullies and the portable failed to receive. At last, he went in

search of you and found that the winch had disassembled, some nano failure. He was standing at the top of the cliff when we arrived. He was about to climb down to you, he said."

"Can I speak to Tesh?" I asked her.

She looked at the floor and said, "Dr. Selu, there's something you should know. Dr. Tesh and her colleague never reached Yaounde. They were caught in last night's storm. There's been a patrol out looking for them, and they found the vehicle this morning. They'd gone over the edge into a gully. Didn't the professor tell you?"

"He knew?" I said.

"Yes, of course. I told him myself, over the radio. Perhaps he didn't want you to be upset."

"I'm sure that's it," I said. I was thinking of Essengene Tesh and the azure mineral that would have made the name and the reputation of its discoverer. I was wondering where Vauchelade had been, that first night, whether he would have had time to follow the departing team members, and, if so, what a ruthlessly ambitious man would have done. Or perhaps he was merely prepared to take advantage of a tragic accident, and dispose of the only other person who knew that Tesh had been the one to find the mineral. Outside, the morning sun spilled heat across the parched garden of the hotel, but the atrium seemed very cold.

"I have to get back to Irubin," I said.

I need not have worried. I returned to find my department mourning the loss of a promising geologist, and celebrating the discovery that she had made. Tesh, it seemed, had possessed the forethought to transmit the details through to the university. They were grateful to Vauchelade for bringing her sample back with him. I said nothing. I had no proof that Vauchelade had done anything. My contract at the university was extended, and they placed me on Vauchelade's research program. We saw one another every day, but he seemed to have increasing difficulty in meeting my eyes. After a few months, he was awarded a chair at the University of Durban back on Earth, and left the department.

My year in Irubin drew to an end. At the end of the year, I postponed an offer to renew my contract. I wanted, I told the Dean, to take a walking holiday, see a little more of Gahran, perhaps revisit the place where Tesh had made her discovery. Presumably, they thought I was referring to essengenite. At the edges of the Ushete Rift, they call it *demelo*, the shadow of the land, and so I am going to go walking in the veldt, until I can see the Mountains of the Moon, and find again what I hope I have not lost.