

The Cantora



Paul D. Cohn

Early Acclaim For *The Cantora*

“*The Cantora*, an utterly transporting reading experience. . .immensely skilled setting and scene building. . . Brazil during the 1500s—a vivid life for the reader.”

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And From *The Cantora*: “Yema’s voice filled the church, and some felt it filled the world. . . An ecstasy upon the ear, a vital singing, the honeyed perfume of song.”

—Page 23, *The Cantora*

Extraordinary Praise for Paul Cohn’s First Book in *The Cantora Series, São Tomé— Journey to the Abyss—Portugal’s Stolen Children*

“*São Tomé*: A riveting work of historical fiction. ...vivid portrayal and character descriptions. ...powerful, gut-wrenching, heartbreaking and joyous. Impossible to put down.”

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“*São Tomé*: Uma história trágica e de emoções que viveu uma criança perseguida por um dos maiores terrores da nossa história e ainda mal contada. De leitura interessante, vale bem o tempo e o investimento nele.”

—Nuno, *Goodreads, Five Stars*

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The Cantora

♪ *The Native Singer of Colonial Brazil* ♪
(Book II of The Cantora Series)



The Cantora

Standing alone on her balcony above the abbey's courtyard, a nun stares at the workers finishing the construction below. Bathed in the yellow light of the late afternoon sun, two structures extend their grim silhouettes across the rough cobblestones, a gallows where she will die in the morning, and a burning stake for her ward, the little girl known as The Cantora.

One of the workers notices the nun and calls to his fellows. At the same time he makes a circling motion around his neck and jerks an imaginary rope upwards, lolling his head to one side. The others laugh. She looks away from this familiar taunt as her thoughts turn to the child. *What must it be for Cantora imprisoned two stories below in a cell where no light enters? The little girl has never known such cruelty in her short nine years on this earth. And now before morning prayers we are to die.* She considers further, knowing that life without this child is truly no life at all. *If I die to save her, so it will be.*

The nun goes to her desk, retrieves her journal, and places it on the wide wall of the balcony. The fading sun now partly hidden behind the jungle canopy at the west edge of the settlement briefly illuminates her features revealing a pleasant oval face with a fringe of black hair ringing the wimple at her forehead and temples. Her light blue habit—that of the Portuguese Coimbran Order—compliments the sister's fair skin and penetrating brown eyes. She is a woman who often shows a generous and welcoming smile, but someone equally capable of a contentious, censoring frown.

As she routinely does before Vespers, the sister pulls a stool forward, opens the journal and begins to record the day's events, her Hebrew script flowing evenly across the page.

I write of this, perhaps my last evening on earth if I fail to save the child. Then tomorrow I will inhabit Heaven with Cantora, we two condemned by the very Church I serve and she so wished to serve. Surely she will serenade at the throne of God, and I will swell with pride.

Are these Catholics fools? Secretly, I've

always suspected thus. There is no one here, not even Bishop Damião or any of the wretched tribunal who can read my Hebrew. They may send my journal to Lisbon, but I do not care. Tomorrow I will no longer need it.

She gazes to the east, across the courtyard wall to the bay and the docks usually littered with people waiting in turn like insects to deposit their shards of wood bound for Europe. But today, for the first time in her memory, the harbor is deserted. There is smoke too, smoke rising from biers in the death yard and the remains of native huts burned in the uprising. The nun wonders, *what is the significance of two more deaths after so much killing?* She sighs and turns to a journal entry recorded the evening following her first visit to the docks, an entry nearly two years old, written shortly after her arrival in the New World.

Ours is a land of chaos and death, of rapacious commerce and a Church equally so. God must look away from this hateful Brazil coast, for if He knew this sad and lonely land, surely what happens here could not. Perhaps He is never among us, or in His disgust has made this place *Inferno Novo*.

The nun turns a page and reads her account of that first visit.

Noon passed an hour back. I view a cluttered dock crowded with African and Indian slaves and free Portuguese, each burdened with dyewood bundles bound for weighing and then to the ships. At the end of the tally line a ship's officer sits at a makeshift desk under a canopy recording the weights. He has two sets of ledgers, one for the slave owners, the other for free Portuguese. The officer doles out a few copper reis to each Portuguese. The slave overseers will receive their pay at day's end.

A brief rain has drenched them all. Each wretched soul in the line is stained from the dyewood, bodies running red, or orange, or black, the garish colors mixing at their feet and through the slatted dock into the waters

below. The wash of waves stains the shore itself.

Eyeing the Indians, the spoilers wait at the fringe. Many of the natives are near death from the coughing sickness. A woman staggers a step and goes down. She has a baby wrapped at her breast, the infant now screaming under the mother's weight.

These Indians are a handsome people, and may have enjoyed good health until we Portuguese arrived. Now they stoically endure sickness and pain to the moment of death, standing without complaint, a corpse shuddering from fever and cough, the last sign of a life at its end until they fall. Two spoilers rush forward, one holding the still woman with his foot, the other stripping the dyewood bundle from her. No one moves to help. In a moment someone rolls her over the dock's edge, the baby's cries silenced in the water. Even from this distance, I can see several bodies in the stained swirl, each writhing under the assault of the countless vicious fish that inhabit this stinking bay.

There is more, but she cannot read further. She remembers the bishop warned her to not go near the harbor and docks, but she had to see for herself. The sister closes the journal. "What's the use?" she says to the evening air. "What's the use?" In a moment she returns to the current day's entry and signs her name, not her Catholic name, but her family name, Leah Anna Saulo, her Jewish name, the name she possessed years ago in Lisbon. She again sighs and lays the bound volume aside.

The memory of the visit to the docks forces it way back into her thoughts. A ship's captain approached her that day, requesting a blessing for his voyage. "Sister, we sail for Spain at first light. Will you bless our journey?"

It was a strange request, asking a nun for a blessing. She suspected this Spaniard had other motives, but she answered kindly. "I will bless your sailing sir, if you carry no slaves. I do not

bless slavers.”

The man took a step backwards and made an unctuous bow. “Of course not, dear sister. Both Crown and Church prohibit the taking of Indian slaves. I carry only dyewood for the clothiers of Spain and the Vatican.”

The captain and his backers stood to make a fortune if the voyage proved successful. With a shipload of dyewood sold in the markets of Europe, particularly the red color, the same *paste-rouge* the Indians applied so casually to their faces and bodies—when refined, more precious than gold—this captain could buy a fleet of ships. “Cardinal red,” as the Europeans now called it, was extremely rare and expensive until the discovery of dyewood trees in the New World. Prior to this find, only the highest church clergy and wealthy nobles could afford the red pigment previously imported from the far east. The first Portuguese explorers called the trees yielding the red dye *brasa*, the word for ember, and soon the coast, with its abundance of *brasa* trees, became known as Brazil. The Indians called the pigment *Mbóia tuguay*, blood of the Devil.

“You will be a rich man once you arrive in Spain with your thoughtful gifts for the Holy Father,” the nun said.

“God willing, dear sister, if we live to make the crossing. *And* avoid the English and Dutch corsairs that plague our seas. Please believe me, I carry no slaves.”

Either the man was a dolt, she thought, or too clever to register her jibe about the Holy Father. And what hypocrisy! Everywhere she looked there were slaves. “Point out your ship, dear captain.”

There were four ships in the harbor, and he gestured to the farthest, a three-masted schooner anchored several hundred yards off shore. “So please give us your blessing. She is the Santo Tomás.”

The name brought her up short. “Did you arrive here from São Tomé?” she asked. All vessels arriving from Tomé Island carried African slaves. “Perhaps your ship’s name is just a coincidence.”

“Of course, dear sister. As you say, the name is simply a coincidence, an unhappy coincidence.”

She gave him a withering stare. “Captain, you are lying. I

know your ship. My name is Sister Mãe da Doçura, and I arrived here just last month from São Tomé. On that sorry island I was the chronicler and principal scribe for Bishop Henrique Cão.” The man looked stricken. The nun shook her head. “Your drama is overblown. Your vessel is a dedicated slaver and you will not get my blessing.” He began to protest. She raised a hand to silence him, but he pressed on.

“Tell me Sister Doçura, when you look at the spectacle on the docks, the sick and dying Indians, these pitiful souls perishing from disease which we brought, why is there no priest there to offer salvation, or at the very least absolution?”

What a stupid and mean-spirited question, she thought, and likely the man was pandering to her. No matter, she again chose to respond in a kindly manner. “This question I now ask myself. You see, I arrived here on a Sabbath morning, captain, with the docks mostly empty. Even the bodies had been removed. Not like it is now. This is my first view of the true situation. But you know the answer as well as I.” She extended her arm and drew a boundary in front of them. “Because of the moneyed influence from the slavers, we clergy are prohibited from ministering to those who toil on the docks. And sadly it is the Church’s position that slaves, both Indian and black, are property and thus not worthy of His Grace.”

“The Indians are vicious heathen cannibals,” the man responded. “If they die like vermin, it is God’s will.”

Doçura looked around, making sure there was no one to overhear. Then she said, “May I remind you of our Savior’s words in John 6, Verse 54 which admonishes us to the Sacrament, *‘Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and—’*”

The captain shrunk back in horror. “*Surely* Sister you do not equate our Blessed Sacrament to cannibalism? The Sacrament is —”

Although she had sufficiently shocked him, she raised her voice and continued, “and then following in Verses 55 and 56, *‘He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him.’*”

The man simply stared at her, his mouth open.

“Let me point out, sir, that many of the natives are cannibals, but not all. Certainly none that live here in our little

settlement of Luís. My life on São Tomé taught me the valued lesson of tolerance, tolerance of other people. Is it not Christ's purpose that we bring salvation to these Indians? Is it not improper that our mission is denied to those enslaved? Where in the volume of God's Law are we directed to enslave?"

Suddenly she'd grown weary of this pretentious Spaniard and the hateful docks. "Please do not think me rude sir, but I must go." She gathered the skirt of her habit, turned and walked quickly away, her thoughts painfully confused. Ever since arriving in this New World, Doçura found herself plagued by heretical thoughts—thoughts so alarming that she pushed them to the very back of her mind, forcing them into retreat each time they began to gnaw their way forward.

The afternoon fades to evening. The nun returns to her desk and the first pages of her journal, pages left blank from the onset. When she began the volume, she knew there would be something important to record on these pages. On this evening, her last on earth, they come to her.

She unfastens her collar, reaches inside and unhooks a gold chain from around her neck. She places the necklace next to the journal. The sight of the precious strand brings her to tears—this sacred chain that once was hers, the chain that held the amber kamea passed down from her grandmother, the chain she gave to her brother the night they were kidnapped, the very chain which was returned to her on São Tomé after her brother's death, this chain that connects everything from her past. She wipes the tears on her sleeve and considers the journal's first page. With hands trembling, she begins to write.

I am a nun of questionable origins, having lived my life until the age of sixteen as a Jew and a member of the family Saulo in Lisbon. Eight years ago on the first day of Tishri, our Holy New Year, my brother and I were kidnapped along with two dozen children from our synagogue. The Crown soldiers who stormed our lovely place of worship took most of the children down to the harbor for shipment, conscripted to work the sugar

plantations on São Tomé Island. A few girls, including me, were given kidnapped infants and sent to the convent at Coimbra. There the nuns trained everyone in the Catholic faith and taught us to care for the children. Almost five years later I had the chance to accompany a shipment of children to Tomé. Hoping to see my brother, Marcel, I embraced the opportunity, although I'd had no word of him for years. Happily, sadly, I found him dying in the hospital at Elmina, a two days' journey from São Tomé. Later on that dreadful island, Bishop Cão (the Church's first black prince) who greatly admired my brother for his opposition to slavery, assigned me the task of translating Marcel's journal from Hebrew to Portuguese. The bishop told me he believed my brother to be a Just Man, a Saddiq.

In that first year I became acquainted with my brother's large family, including his intended wife, Ariella, and their children. (It seems my brother fathered or adopted a significant number of children.) Two years later, after Bishop Cão was forced from the island and I prepared to depart Tomé for Brazil, Ariella graciously gave me the gold chain. It remains the dearest gift I have ever received.

The sister stares at the remaining blank pages. If there is something else to write, she does not know. She goes to the balcony and sees that the work in the courtyard is finished, the place abandoned except for a guard in the shadows by the outside gate. A fragrant breeze touches her skin, one otherwise refreshing, though tonight it feels as cold as the January winds of Lisbon. There is a single torch atop the gallows illuminating the space and casting restless and bizarre shadows.

The Vespers bell rings. Sister Doçura crosses herself and kneels to pray. She cuts the prayer short and stands up, again making the sign of the cross. "God well knows my devotion," she

says aloud. “Prayers may come later. Now I must do something to save Cantora.” Earlier in the week she’d prepared a note for Father Julian, still not knowing if he was alive or dead. She gave it to the child acolyte, Agato—a young boy who admired the girl—when he brought her food that evening. Now, days later, the hour of Vespers is at hand, and still no one comes to see her.

At the little girl’s bedside, next to her own, she considers the child’s meager belongings, a bracelet and a necklace, both made of twisted animal sinews and strung with a single ivory clam shell ribbed with clay-red stripes. There is a shabby stick doll with arms of bundled grass, and a woven headdress dyed orange with a circle of blue feathers, the same headdress worn by the child on the day of their first meeting. Sister Doçura settles the child’s necklace over her head and around her neck, tucking it next to where her gold chain had been. She thinks of Cantora imprisoned in a cell somewhere beneath the abbey, a cell dark as night itself. She puts a hand to her breast. In the year since she has known the child, the little girl has captured her heart.

Doçura turns to a blank page in her journal and, with her left hand pressing against her forehead, pens another note. Next she retrieves the dagger kept by her bed, placing it over the gold necklace on the table. She paces for a moment, then returns to her desk and uses the dagger point to pry open a link, effectively cutting the strand in two. The nun tears the note from the journal and folds half the necklace inside it. The other half she drops into a handkerchief which she pushes into the tight sleeve of her habit.

If Agato would only come. He is her last hope.

Ever since her abduction in Lisbon eight years before, hopes—those outcomes always illusive yet so wished for—remain more fragile than the slender veils of mist at morning’s first light. Now any outcome other than death for her and Cantora seem completely out of reach. Regardless, she has to try.

It all began with a rumor: an Indian girl who sang with the voice of an angel. A tiny girl, perhaps only nine years old. No one believed it at first, but the rumor persisted. Finally one day a runner arrived bringing news. Fr. Julian from a Caeté Indian village to the north would travel to the settlement next week with the child and her family. Bishop Damião immediately sent the runner back with

instructions that when they were a few hours travel from the abbey, they should camp and await his emissary. Damião, a priest who struggled furiously against the daily chaos that surrounded him, summoned Sister Doçura to his office.

Ushered inside, she found the bishop sitting behind his desk. As usual his tiny dog looked up from the man's lap and over the desktop. The bishop immediately stood, placed the dog on his desk, walked around and offered her a chair. He returned to his chair, retrieved his pet—settling the animal in his lap—and explained the situation. “You see, Sister Mãe, there is no telling what heathen apparition these Indians may send us. I must have someone see first and prepare them, and perhaps prepare us for this visit.” The bishop tried to like the sister; he did admire her intelligence and direct manner, and he often called her Mãe to make her feel more comfortable in his presence. If the truth be known, he felt intimidated by Sister Doçura; but what the bishop found even more troublesome was her Jewish birth and refusal to go to confession.

Bishop Damião continued. “Since Fr. Julian endorses them, I must assume they are members of his church, Christian converts.” He made a face. “Hopefully they are no longer cannibals.”

The nun found it curious that the bishop chose the words “Christian converts,” thus avoiding the more common *Novos Christãos*, the term reserved for converted Jews and Moors—words now part of the Inquisition's list of epithets so often hurled against those souls persecuted and tortured. After a moment's hesitation, she asked, “Am I to believe these rumors, that this child can sing the Latin Mass? If so, that is truly remarkable.”

“Indeed that is what we hear. According to Julian's letter, this little girl may be a miracle, The Almighty's Grace among us.” He ran a hand over the large silver cross that lay on his desktop. “Supposedly she is no ordinary singer. Could it be that this is the first miracle of our New World? Surely I have heard of no other.” He stood and paced the room, the dog following at his heels. He gestured to the balcony and the forest beyond. “Could God in His wisdom produce such a blessing from this primal wilderness, this diocese in nowhere? Everyone knows the Latin Mass is reserved just for priests and perhaps acolytes, but certainly never a girl.” He

shrugged. “Julian says this child sings to him with a voice from Heaven. So he lets her sing at Mass.”

The sister admired the native people, and she felt a swell of pride. A chill quickly replaced it. She wondered at the source of this sudden dread. “Perhaps it is God’s wisdom to send us a girl,” she said.

“It might seem so.” The bishop sighed. “And an Indian girl at that.” He returned to his chair and spoke in somber tones. “You see sister, the unsettled nature of this forlorn place, the jungle, these naked devils, how can this be God’s creation? How am I to bring order here? Back home in Aveiro I was an assistant inquisitor. I led a simple life, cleansing of the faith. Purification of the flock, if you will.” He clenched his fists. “What burdens us here is unimaginable! We indeed *need* a miracle.”

Sister Doçura rose to her feet and began to speak. Damião interrupted her. “I know, I know sister, I have introduced an uncomfortable subject.” He gave her a cold smile, knowing how distasteful she found the topic of inquisition. He wondered why he’d mentioned his Aveiro activities to her.

Bishop Damião stood with the intent of escorting the sister to the door, but she took a step back and gave him an angry look. “With all respect, sir, I have seen enough inquisition on São Tomé, and heard enough of its horrors in Portugal and Spain. My parents fled inquisition and now live in the Ottoman. As they are in a new land, so are we. God has given the Church and each of us the opportunity to do good work here, *His* work.” Sister Doçura walked to the entrance and paused. “And I intend to do that good work.”

Once she was gone, the bishop went to the balcony and watched her cross the courtyard and enter the hall below her residence. He imagined her walking angrily up the stairs. He considered this argumentative female a problem, but since she was so well-connected to the Tomé Colony—the source of his most needed supplies—he resolved to tolerate her presence. At best, she remained a difficult asset.

As the time of the visit approached, everyone at the abbey and the surrounding settlement grew excited. Again Sister Doçura—summoned with urgency—found herself in the bishop’s office. A

tall priest stood next to him, a thin man with deep-set blue eyes that gave his unshaven face a haunted look. His clothes were dirty, and he appeared exhausted. “Sister Mãe,” Bishop Damião said, “you know Fr. Julian, the one who will deliver this fabled cantora to our humble abbey.”

The sister gave a slight curtsey. “Fr. Julian, yes. It is good to see you again.” She turned to the bishop. “Did you say ‘cantora’?”

Julian, who had been holding the bishop’s dog, placed him on the floor and crossed himself. “You must first hear her sing, dear sister. Then it will be *The Cantora*.”

The bishop broke in, nodding to the priest. “I have instructed this deliverer of miracles to take his rest for today. Tomorrow, Sister Doçura, you will accompany him to their camp and bring the treasured singer here.”

“Where are they? How far?”

Fr. Julian smiled. “Not far, Sister, two hours north by mule, camped by the Rio Jacu.”

The nun gulped. “I have never before ridden, neither horse nor mule.”

Bishop Damião gave a short laugh, then stood and walked to the door. He opened it for Sister Doçura. “I will send someone over this afternoon with a gentle animal for you to learn. It seems this child singer provides us all with new experiences.”

Chapter 2

As promised, a soldier from the garrison arrived with two mules in tow. He placed a small stool on the cobblestones and assisted Doçura into the sidesaddle on the smaller animal. She found the riding uncomfortable but tolerable as the soldier first led her around the courtyard before mounting his mule to demonstrate the fine art of controlling the animal.

Next morning, as the sun first colored the eastern sky, she went to the chapel where Bishop Damião and Fr. Julian conducted the Lauds sunrise devotion. The bishop’s participation in this service was unusual. “...but today is special,” he declared in his brief sermon. Afterwards he asked Julian and Doçura to join him for a breakfast in his private quarters. Two acolytes stood by as the

three of them settled around the bishop's small dining table. The acolytes served a fine breakfast of boiled hen's eggs, maize biscuits and honey, and steaming yerba buena.

"Am I expecting too much from this child?" the bishop asked.

Fr. Julian, looking much improved from the day before—clean shaven and wearing a newly-laundered robe—answered, "We shall see, Excellency. At the very least she will be an extraordinary asset to the Mass."

After further speculations and casual talk, and the breakfast concluded, the bishop stood and gestured outside. "Well," he said, "you two must start your journey. I am eager to experience this momentous day for our little diocese in this backwater of Christendom."

They set off, led by an Indian guide on foot and trailed by two armed soldiers from the garrison. The forest at the border of the settlement had always loomed mysteriously to Doçura, but only because she had not much considered it. Once inside she began to savor the sights around her.

Fr. Julian commented on her composure. "I had thought, dear sister, that you would regard the jungle with trepidation."

"Oh, I'm quite familiar with jungles from my time on Tomé Island. The many creatures, the thousand greens, the sights and smells, they fascinate me. Perhaps The Garden was something like this." She pulled herself upright, trying to ease her discomfort. "I cannot say the same for riding this poor animal. His gate is uneven, and the saddle was certainly not made for a woman wearing a nun's habit." And then, with a wave of her hand and a quick smile, "But in service to Our Savior, I will happily survive."

To their astonishment, a large cloud of delicate butterflies, small and of the palest green, descended from the trees and hovered everywhere, alighting on the mules and around everyone's eyes. "They steal salt from the animals' skin and from the eyes," Fr. Julian explained, brushing several from his face. "The Indians call them *hapoo jeyurã*, tear drinkers." As if the priest had commanded their leave, the myriad *jeyurã* took flight, rising and falling around them with wind-like sighs. Doçura found the swirl of butterflies remindful of the early spring snowfalls in Lisbon, and she grew quiet and thoughtful. But then, as if the forest wished to

further its welcome, they entered a small clearing where stood an immense fig tree from which a steady rain of vermillion flower petals cast loose by a flock of noisy birds feeding in the highest branches, drifted to the jungle floor.

Having noticed Doçura's long silence, Julian said, "You appear thoughtful."

"I am," the sister replied. "Just thinking of home." In an effort to not be questioned further she asked, "Do you miss Portugal, Fr. Julian?"

"Yes," he answered. "What I wouldn't give to see my home again."

"Where was that?"

"Way to the south. Portimão." He paused for a moment. "Would you believe that my father was a priest?"

She gave him a quizzical look. "I've heard of such things. Did you live with him?"

"Oh no. He was the vicar for the southern diocese. But he took very good care of my mother and me. Everyone in town knew he was my father, and no one seemed to care." He raised a hand to his ear. "Hear that? We're getting close."

Within minutes they arrived at the Caeté camp on the south bank of the Rio Jacu. Doçura found herself surprised by the number of people, adults and children, about a dozen in all.

The Indians began an excited chatter as Fr. Julian helped the sister dismount. "They've never seen a nun before," he explained. The priest introduced the adults, the singer's father and mother, two aunts and an uncle. One of the aunts—the only native fully clothed—stood apart from the others with her arms crossed and stared unblinkingly at Doçura. The woman wore a twisted red cloth encircling her head, and a vest decorated with vertical strings of black beads. With her heavily tattooed face and forearms, she presented an imposing figure.

Fr. Julian paid particular attention to her. "This is Janaína," he said. "She is the tribe's medicine woman, the *turguy kuñã*."

The nun acknowledged her with a quick smile, but the woman remained impassive. "Is she angry?" Doçura asked.

The priest shrugged. "Perhaps, but it's complicated. I'll explain later."

Doçura eyed the children. "So who is the little girl with the

miraculous voice?" she said, then felt silly, knowing none of them understood her.

To the nun's amazement, a beautiful youngster stepped forward. In distinct Portuguese she said, "I am the girl who sings in church." The child wore an orange headdress with a ring of blue feathers, but was otherwise naked. She had a round face, lovely olive skin, and dark eyes that danced as she spoke.

In reflex, the sister crossed herself. "Oh my," she said, "How unexpected!"

"She is quite remarkable," the priest offered. "Yema would have introduced us all if I had not. The Indians encourage their children to speak freely to anyone."

"Yema, that's her name?"

"Yemanjá, actually," the priest answered. "Though everyone calls her Yema." The little girl smiled and curtseyed.

"Yemanjá?" the nun repeated. "I've heard that before."

"No doubt you have. It's one of their pagan gods, the Goddess of the Sea. The natives invoke her name all the time. Some carry little carved statues of her."

Yema spoke up. "Yemanjá is also the..." She searched a moment for the words. "—the guardian of children."

In that instant, Doçura had known exactly what the girl intended to say. Her throat grew tight and she stifled a gasp. Here was the same fear she'd felt in Bishop Damião's office when they first talked about the child. It took her a few seconds to regain speech, though she could not voice her feelings. Instead she said to Fr. Julian, "But the quality of her Portuguese?"

"Ah yes," he answered. "Yema's gift goes far beyond song. She seems to remember everything, and her propensity for language now extends to rote Latin. Besides the singing parts, she has learned the full liturgy of the Mass just by listening."

"Should it bother us that this rite is limited to priests and acolytes? Certainly not a female."

Julian shook his head. "She does not recite the Mass, but only sings a brief portion, the *Confiteor Deo*. With Bishop Damião's permission, perhaps she can sing more. I pray he will understand, as I know you will understand when you hear Yema sing."

By now the Indians had laid out woven mats in the short

grass along the riverbank and set out a meal of yam bread, fruit, and cured fish. They began a singsong chant. Doçura listened closely as Yema chimed in. What she heard was simply a little girl's voice, nothing extraordinary. She decided not to comment, but thought, *What is happening here?* and gave the priest a quizzical look.

Misunderstanding, he responded, "This food is in our honor." Doçura shrugged and settled herself between two of the children, a boy on her left and Yema on her right. The medicine woman, Janaína, spoke to the boy and he immediately moved, making room for her. She next spoke to Yema.

The little girl listened and said, "Janaína wants to know if you are a medicine woman?"

"I am not," Doçura answered. "Simply a woman of the Church. We are called nuns."

When the girl explained, the woman gave them both a troubled look and spoke in hard, sharp sentences. "Janaína is upset because you are not *turguy kuñã*," Yema said. "She wants someone to give us a remedy for the coughing sickness."

"I wish I could," the nun answered.

"The Indians blame us for bringing the sickness," Fr. Julian said. "I suppose they are right." He swept his hand around. "None of these people appear ill, but several at the village have died, and many more are stricken. That's why Janaína's husband is not here. He is gravely ill."

The nun turned to the little girl. "Tell her I wish we had a remedy. I truly wish we did. And I am sorry for her husband."

The conversation moved to lighter subjects. The sister asked Fr. Julian, "What are we to do about all this nakedness? You know the bishop dislikes—"

"Indeed he wants his savages clothed," he answered. "And we'll find clothes for them at the settlement before we meet with him tomorrow."

Yema gave the priest a puzzled look. "Fr. Julian, does this bishop think we Caeté are savages?"

"A figure of our speech, little cantora, and you are not savages."

Doçura listened with amazement. She passed her fingers across the child's feathered headdress. "You don't miss a thing,

little one, do you?”

With the meal concluded, they set out for the abbey. Once more mounted on their mules, Doçura said to Julian, “May we ride ahead? I have many questions.” The priest nodded and they moved off. Once out of earshot, she asked, “Are these people cannibals or not? Is their civility just for show? They appear as savage as any people I’ve ever seen. Certainly more so than the natives around the settlement. All this red paint, tattoos and feathers.”

“You certainly get to the heart of the matter, dear sister,” Fr. Julian said. “Bishop Damião assured me you would.”

“It is my nature to be direct. And that child. She has the same tattoos around her eyes as the witch woman. That’s what she is, right?”

“I said it’s complicated, and it is. First of all, they were quite recently cannibals. They ate the bodies of enemies captured in wars with other tribes. By eating them, the Caeté believe they acquire the spirit of the enemy, and thus defeat them.”

“Disgusting!” she said, but could not help remembering her conversation with the ship’s captain. *In a similar manner we acquire the spirit of Christ, she reasoned, the Sacrament of His Person.*

“True,” Julian said, bringing her back to the present, “but they also have some rituals I’ve only heard about, some so awful I cannot even tell you. I hope I never live to see them. For now they have given up the practice of cannibalism because I forbade it. It may be the intervention of our Savior, or it may be the sickness. So many men have died, none have the energy to wage war. I’m sure distant tribes without a priest still war and eat their captives.”

“And the woman, Janaína?” Doçura asked.

“Besides being the child’s aunt, the name *tuguy kuñã* means blood woman. She oversaw the care, feeding, and eventual killing and eating of the captives.” He reacted to the sister’s startled look and nodded. “Yes I said ‘care.’ You really don’t want to know the details. So our little girl is the apprentice to the witch woman as you call her. She is a *tuguy kuñã* in training. That’s why she has the face markings at the corners of her eyes. Makes her look like a cat, doesn’t it?”

The two of them looked back to see the natives following

in the trail a distance behind. “And as you’ve seen,” he went on, “Yema’s talents are considerable. She and her aunt are the only females allowed to go along when the tribe trades with others who do not speak their dialect. Our cantora has the skill to listen to a language and quickly translate it. She has little trouble with the native languages since most are similar. They regard her as a treasure in the village.”

“How long did it take her to learn Portuguese?”

“Oh, quite a while,” Fr. Julian answered. “At least a year. She was very insistent, following me around, yammering constantly. But she can also be quite charming, so I put up with it. Even before she knew much Portuguese, maybe after a dozen or so church services, she began to recite Latin and sing some of the Mass. I was astounded.”

“Her speech seems almost cultivated.”

“It is, dear sister, at her insistence. You will have plenty of time to find out how insistent she can be.”

“What do you mean?” Doçura asked.

“I should not have said that,” the priest answered, appearing shocked by his own words. He crossed himself. “Oh my goodness.” They rode in a tense silence, broken only by loud calls of birds in the treetops and the chatter of Indians following in the trail. Finally he said, “Bishop Damião believes that if Cantora lives up to expectations, the Church will adopt her and you will be her guardian.”

Doçura felt a sudden chill and pulled her mule to a stop. “That is not right. What about her family?”

“I don’t know.” The priest shrugged. “We shall see. It will likely be the end of my mission with these people.”

“Adopt? Don’t you mean steal? Do you know the Hebrew word *khateefat*, Fr. Julian? Well I do! It means stealing children. This is a dangerous thing we do. Besides, the girl sounded quite ordinary when she sang back at the camp.”

“I should have not have said what I did, Sister Doçura. But regarding her singing just now, that was because she sang with the others. By herself, it’s quite another matter.”

The nun turned the mule and rode back to the Indians who had nearly caught up and trudged just a few yards behind. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts, but Yema ran up, grabbing at

a leather strap that hung from the saddle. She began asking questions. The nun pulled the strap away from her. “Little one, don’t. I’m afraid the animal will step on you. Have someone lift you up here and you can ride with me.” Someone did, and in the next moment the child was riding on the sidesaddle in front of Sister Doçura, one hand resting on the saddle’s rim, the other on the nun’s arm which encircled her waist. Yema’s hair smelled of cinnamon, and the touch of her hand and the feel of the child’s gentle weight as she leaned back against the nun made Doçura’s heart melt with affection.

As they neared the settlement with Yema slumped forward, fast asleep, Doçura’s dread grew. For the past half-hour she had entertained the idea of warning the Indians, telling them to go back to their village. What would she do then? Gather her few belongings and return with them? An exile with a native tribe in the jungle? Excommunicated? The thought was nearly as terrifying as what lay ahead. But it struck her that it might all work out once the bishop heard Yema sing. Her voice would sound like any other child’s. He would simply shrug, chastise Fr. Julian, and send them all home. Then she could go back to her usual churchly duties, ministering to the native women and children of the settlement. This is what she always wanted to do, work with women and children and little babies. Help them deal with the rigors of the dyewood trade. Help them with salvation, salvation here on earth, and salvation from the pain of disease and injury. And for those enslaved, salvation from their lives of misery. Her brother’s lifelong mission had been a fight against slavery, and she wished to do the same.

The next day, Saturday, began with violent thunderstorms that delayed their meeting with Bishop Damião. Fr. Julian remained quartered in the abbey, while the newly arrived Indians took shelter with their brethren in the settlement’s thatched huts called *ógas*.

When the group finally assembled in the afternoon, they found the bishop in an unsettled mood, irritated at the weather’s effect on his schedule. The natives were also unsettled, having to wear clothes, many of them for the first time in their lives. Bishop Damião was surprised by the number of people—too many for his

office—and allowed only Yema and her brother, her parents, Fr. Julian, and Doçura into his inner sanctum. He gestured for everyone to take a seat, then walked around the room, greeting each person as Julian made the introductions. To the great amusement of the children, his dog watched the goings-on from his perch atop the bishop's desk. After the introductions, the bishop knelt in front of Yema and extended his hand. "So you are the little cantora?" he inquired.

"Yes," answered Yema, placing her small hand in his. "I am the girl who sings in church."

"My-oh-my, child, your Portuguese is indeed excellent. Fr. Julian has so informed me."

"Bishop Damião," Julian asked, "would you like to hear Yema sing? I can recite a brief liturgy to the *Confiteor Deo*, and then provide the cadence for her to sing the *Confiteor*."

Perfect, thought Sister Doçura. She will sing, the bishop will be disappointed and he will send them home. That will be the end of it.

To her distress, this did not happen. The bishop waved his hand. "That won't be necessary," he said, looking at Yema. "I am sure your voice is most special. We shall hear your charmed singing in church tomorrow morning."

Julian protested. "But Your Grace, her voice is also most unusual for a child. It would—"

Bishop Damião stood. "Fr. Julian, my day is much too crowded." He walked to his office door and opened it. "There will be many opportunities to hear her sing. Tomorrow, Julian, tomorrow." As the group filed out, he motioned to Doçura. "Will you stay a moment please?" He closed the door, then turned and said, "Dear Mãe, have you come to know this child?"

"A little, sir. Just on the trip from the Jacu encampment. Her intelligence seems remarkable."

"So it would seem. Have you heard her sing?"

"Yes, with the other natives. She sounded like any other child. Nothing unusual. I wish we had listened today. Tomorrow may be disappointing."

"I see." The bishop wrung his hands and gave a series of nods, for a moment unable to find the words. Finally he said, "Well, would you spend some time with the girl this afternoon?"

Find her something suitable to wear, not those rags she had on today. Take her to that woman in the settlement.”

“Yes,” she said, “Fr. Julian and I intended to do so this morning, but the storm kept us inside. I’ll see to it this afternoon.”

“And one more thing,” Bishop Damião said, “if these people want to be all painted up for Mass tomorrow, that’s fine. But can Yema please have a clean face?”

Doçura assured the bishop she would do her best, then left the office. *It’s starting,* she thought. *I will be a party to this kidnapping.* When the nun caught up with the Indians, she addressed the child’s mother while Yema translated. “The bishop would like your daughter to wear something special for tomorrow’s Mass. There is a woman here, she and her daughters make clothes.” The Indians dutifully followed Doçura through the settlement, the children playing, running ahead, the nun silent and lost in her thoughts.

Bishop Damião stepped onto his balcony and watched the Caeté group as it worked its way through the confusion of brown huts. After a moment he returned to his desk and picked up the large silver cross. He went to the altar in one corner of his room, knelt, and held the cross aloft. He gazed at the crucifix on the wall behind the altar. “Oh Mighty Lord Jesus, Light of the World, Savior of Mankind, bless us tomorrow with Your Grace. Grant that this Indian child shall be your first miracle of The New World. I plead this as Your most faithful servant at the very frontier of God’s realm.”

Chapter 3

The sun rose from the Atlantic into a beautiful sky strewn with small clouds extending to the horizon, and a soft breeze from the ocean promised a temperate morning. Doçura woke at first light and went to the abbey’s kitchen where she drank a hurried cup of tea, then walked to the nearby chapel for the Lauds devotion. An acolyte conducted the service for the few souls in attendance, a soldier from the garrison, a half-dozen sailors, and a young Indian woman who Doçura knew to be a prostitute.

After the devotion, she walked to the church and found it already surrounded by a talkative crowd eager to hear the little

cantora. It appeared that a good number of the Indians had spent the night sleeping on the ground around the building. Soldiers were stationed at each entrance to keep the crowd from overrunning the place. It was a simple structure, fifty feet long by thirty wide, and covered with a peaked, thatched roof that overhung the sides of the building to less than three feet above the ground. This design, which the settlers copied from the native huts, afforded dry shelter even during the heaviest rainstorms. The building's interior had four rows of finished wood benches directly in front of the altar for Europeans, and a series of log benches to the rear for the natives.

Doçura, concerned about the day's events, had not slept well. Her worries continued through Lauds and her brief visit to the church, and now stayed with her as she entered the small dining area next to the abbey's kitchen, a space reserved for church workers. There were several people there, all of whom she knew, including the settlement priest, Father Paulo—unusually drunk for a Sunday morning—and his assistant. Sitting at another table were two young Indian women, sisters in training, who met frequently with Doçura in preparation for their voyage to Portugal and formal schooling at the Convent Coimbra. The last thing the nun wanted was to be around people this morning. Nevertheless, she greeted each person, then seated herself with the two women.

“Are you excited to hear this fabled child sing?” one of them asked. But before Doçura could answer, Fr. Paulo, having overheard the question, rushed from the room followed by his assistant. The young woman frowned and said, “I think he's upset that he is not conducting Mass today. It will be Fr. Julian? Is that right?”

Doçura nodded. “That's only because the child knows him. Her name is Yema. And hopefully for Fr. Paulo's sake, I think it will be Julian just for today.” A slave boy brought in the usual breakfast, thick maize gruel and yerba buena tea, setting the plates in front of the women. They said a brief grace, then poured goat's milk on the cereal and sweetened it with black syrup. In an effort to avoid the subject of Cantora, she tapped the syrup pitcher with her spoon. “Do you know where this came from?” she asked. “What it is?”

The two novitiates looked at each other. The young woman named Sincera said, “I know it comes from Tomé Island, but I

have no idea what it is. It's one of my favorites." In fact, black syrup was a favorite with all the natives, and often used as a trading currency. While the Indian population knew sweet foods—flower nectar, ripe fruit, and honey in moderate abundance—the thick, black syrup from across the sea was particularly suited to their taste. It had the subtle flavor of roasted figs, and the myriad of ants suspended in the liquid gave it a unique sharpness. Honey on the other hand was sweeter, though the wax and broken bodies of bees gave the local honey a somewhat bitter flavor. Honey from Portugal and even that from São Tomé was filtered through gauze and did not have the bitter undertones. But gauze was in short supply in the settlement, and used primarily for insect netting around sleeping areas.

Doçura held up the heavy pitcher. "This is why our Church can afford to send you to Portugal—sugar. Indeed the syrup does come from Tomé, and it's produced from the sugar mills. It drains into basins beneath the drying bins and slaves collect it. Most likely that's why our priest was so drunk this morning. It makes a very strong beer." Then in a hushed voice she said, "Never doubt for a minute, ladies, our Church is devoted to commerce almost as much as to our Beloved Savior." Before the subject of the child singer could be raised again, the nun stood and excused herself. "I must return to my quarters and prepare for Mass." She quickly retreated from the room, leaving her companions exchanging puzzled looks.

Although no one needed a reminder that day, a half hour before nine, the bell atop the abbey rang, announcing Mass and summoning the faithful. The bell, just above Doçura's room, startled her. She had been drifting in thought and prayer, asking for guidance and understanding for the events that lay ahead. The nun waited a few minutes, then left for the church. She'd found no one in the courtyard and scarcely anyone along the way. Everybody was already there, the church nearly filled. From the size of the mob, it appeared to be the entire settlement, and most of the congregation would have to listen from the outside. A soldier motioned to Doçura from a side entrance, escorting the sister to her usual seat on the front-row bench. She was pleased to see Yema and her companions sitting there, including Janaína who appeared

as stern as ever.

The child, her eyes dancing, patted the bench and said, “Please sit here.” Doçura settled herself next to the little girl, smiling at how pretty she looked in the blue shift dress they had found for her the previous day. “See,” Yema said, plucking at the nun’s habit, “we are almost the same color.”

Once settled, Doçura turned to greet the people who sat behind her, and was met with a line of sullen faces. These were privileged citizens of the settlement, accustomed to sitting in the front row. Merchants, slave traders, dyewood brokers, and others irritated not only by the change of seating but by the presence of the Indians in front of them.

The congregation turned silent, standing as Bishop Damião—gently swinging the smoldering incense thurible—took his place in front of the altar table. He faced east, his back to the congregation. Next Fr. Julian joined him and stood with his hands clasped in prayer, then turned briefly and smiled at Yema, who nodded solemnly. Fr. Paulo’s assistant took the third position next to Julian, providing the required Trinity. Doçura speculated that Fr. Paulo was likely too drunk to attend, much less take the third position. Two Indian altar boys came forward, one taking the thurible from the bishop, the other handing him the veiled chalice. Julian took the sanctuary bell from the table and rang it three times, accepted the chalice from the bishop, and placed it next to the Missal. The bishop retired to his chair to the left of the altar table.

Fr. Julian crossed himself, and gazed at the crucifix above the table. He recited, “*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti... .*”

And thus began the Mass.

Paulo’s assistant and Fr. Julian worked their way through the *Ordo* and Psalm 42. Julian delivered the priest’s introduction, and concluded with “*Dominum Deum nostrum.*” Next, the assistant chanted the brief *Misereatur Tui Omnipotens*, bringing the Mass to the *Confiteor*. He stepped back and nodded to Yema who by this time was already standing. Doçura gave her hand a squeeze before the little girl ascended the pulpit and took her place next to Fr. Julian. Without prompting, she faced the crucifix and made the sign of the cross. Then, her features radiant, Yema turned to the

congregation, and began to sing.

♪ “*Confiteor Deo omnipotenti
beatae Mariae semper virgini
beato Michaeli archangelo...*”

Churchgoers and clergy alike gasped in unison at the sound of her voice— Suddenly gasped as if struggling for air. Many slid from their seats and knelt or prostrated themselves. Outside listeners fell to their knees, for there was no room to lay flat. Likewise Bishop Damião slid forward from his chair and prostrated himself on the altar, his hands clasped prayerfully in front of him. The three figures on the altar remained standing. Doçura listened in spellbound amazement. The Indians around her displayed satisfied grins, for they had heard their magic Yema sing many times before.

Her voice filled the church, and some felt it filled the world. They heard a powerful grown woman’s voice, not that of a child’s. A vital singing, the honeyed perfume of song, an ecstasy upon the ear.

And at the end, ♪ “... *orare pro me ad Dominum Deum nostrum,*” Yema left the pulpit and took her seat next the Doçura. Julian waited a few moments while people collected themselves, then continued. The bishop returned to his chair, visibly shaken and with tears in his eyes, tears shared by many in the congregation.

For the worshipers now, the rest of the Mass seemed to take forever, the child’s singing having changed everything. Finally Fr. Julian chanted the last words, “... *Patre, plenum gratiae et veritatis,*” and the assistant responded, “*Deo gratias.*” A quiet settled over the congregation until Julian, looked directly at little Yema, repeated the last phrase in Portuguese, “Thanks be to God,” and then, “*Me’eng kũ Tíva veve,*” the language of the Caeté. The congregates repeated the phrase, the two languages mixing in strange dissonance.

At that moment the cold fear again gripped Sister Mãe da Doçura. Her own kidnapping replaying itself in this new land.

Immediately after Mass, the Sunday festival began. The bishop, in his efforts to entice the multitudes to the ranks of the faithful, scheduled frequent festivals of food, entertainment, and

celebration. All morning the delicious odor of roasting meat, both goat and pig, had drifted across the settlement. The food, prepared in the garrison courtyard, now approached the church via a procession of carts drawn by free Africans and Indians and supervised by mounted soldiers in parade regalia.

Soon everyone began to feel the heat of the day. The soldiers discarded much of their suffocating uniforms, and the natives their Sunday clothing. Doçura congratulated Yema, calling her “The Cantora” for the first time, then used the heat as an excuse to retire to her quarters. Once inside, she removed her outer garments and ate some fruit brought from the celebration.

That afternoon a messenger knocked on Doçura’s door and passed her a note. She was summoned to meet with the bishop and Julian an hour before Vespers. When the time arrived, she met them in the courtyard, the bishop taking the opportunity to walk his little dog.

Damião began the conversation. “At Vespers tonight I will say a special prayer of thanks for this child singer. She is indeed the miracle I’ve hoped and prayed for. Fr. Julian informs me that she is anxious to return to her village, that the medicine woman is encouraging this quick departure using the excuse of her husband’s illness. I am sure you both now realize this child can be instrumental in converting the natives.” Then he added, “Likely more successful than our past efforts.” They paused for a moment to watch the dog’s antics as it chased grasshoppers strayed onto the cobblestones from outside the courtyard.

When Julian picked up the conversation, the sister had the feeling that he and the bishop had rehearsed all this. “I invited the family to Vespers this evening. Also we must keep Cantora engaged and tempted. So with the bishop’s permission, I promised she could sing the *Glória* this evening. She already knows it.”

Doçura gulped, trying to understand her feelings. She felt delight at the prospect of hearing the girl’s miraculous voice again; and intensely fearful that her involvement to lure this child into the churchly fold was about to be thrust upon her. Julian had said something important, and she’d missed it. “I’m sorry,” she said to Fr. Julian, “please repeat that. The thought of hearing her sing the *Glória* overwhelmed me for a moment.”

“What I said, Sister, is that I also promised she could sing

more of the Mass next Sunday, and that you would be her instructor.”

Doçura nodded gravely as Bishop Damião picked up where Julian left off. “Dear Mãe, I have asked Fr. Paulo to assist you.” With a nod to Julian, he continued. “Fr. Julian tells me the child is fond of you. So I want you to sit with her at Vespers, and in the future spend as much time with the girl as you can. I believe she will stay with us as long as we provide new things for her to learn. You can meet with her daily at the chapel to school her in the chants and hymns of the Mass.”

Doçura turned and looked at them. “What about her wish to return to the village?”

Bishop Damião answered. “We want you to persuade her to stay. Let that tattooed woman go home without her. We will give the child’s immediate family whatever they want.” The nun tried to say something, but the bishop continued. “Sister Mãe, this child is an asset beyond our wildest dreams. I have instructed the garrison captain to provide anything they want, a tent, food from the garrison kitchen, and—.”

The bishop’s dog began growling, then furiously barking as it ran to the courtyard entrance where a large procession of Indians along with a few Portuguese and Africans streamed inside. From what they could see, it appeared there were more than fifty people. At the head of the procession walked an Indian leading a goat with a rope around its neck. The bishop addressed Fr. Julian. “See to that, please. And see if you can catch my dog.” Doçura took the opportunity to excuse herself.

A smiling Fr. Julian returned with the squirming dog and set him by the bishop’s feet. “They’re all here for Vespers,” he said. “And the goat’s a gift to the Church.” He looked around. “Where is Sister Doçura?”

The bishop inclined his head towards her quarters. “Just as you warned, I’m afraid Sister Mãe does not approve of our scheme. But right now, dear Julian, there are far too many people for our small chapel. Pass the word. We will celebrate Vespers in the church. Think of it, Julian, our largest Vespers ever.”

Sitting at her desk that evening, a large candle illuminating her journal, Sister Doçura recorded the day’s events. As the nun

contemplated the meeting in the courtyard, she paused for a moment, then started a fresh page.

Late afternoon brought my most dreaded fear. Bishop Damião charged me with schooling Cantora. He aims to coerce her to stay in the settlement, not to return to her village. Because of the child, the crowds were so large we moved Vespers to the church. Her singing the *Glória* was a supreme treat, but I could not shake my fear. Perhaps she is indeed a miracle. I don't understand how a small child can sing so beautifully. If I am to be her teacher, what will I do when she pleads with me to return home?

Doçura prepared for bed. She removed her clothes and washed herself using the water basin and pitcher in the corner of the room, then rubbed her face and body with a fragrant poultice of flowers given to her by Marét, Yema's mother. Next she donned her nightgown and brushed her hair, sighing as she remembered how long and beautiful it was years ago in Lisbon. The sister had not said a Rosary for her evening prayers in quite some time. But this evening, lying in her dark bed, the gauze net moving softly around her, she said the Rosary twice before falling into a troubled sleep, the *Glória* echoing in her thoughts.

Chapter 4

On Monday morning, Yema's father and most of the visitors prepared to leave for the village. Only the girl, her six-year-old brother, and the mother would stay. Before leaving, the family and Janaína conferred for a half-hour by themselves in the courtyard. Then the children and mother, accompanied by Doçura, followed the Caeté to the edge of the settlement where they said their good-byes. The nun found herself painfully missing her own family as she watched the affection the tribe members showed one another as they bade farewell. Later that day she enrolled Yema and her brother in the settlement school.

The next afternoon, the nun and Fr. Paulo began Yema's religious instructions in the abbey's chapel. At first only the