

Sitting Bull Decides
from The More We Take, Chapter 24, *The Sky Council*

It is 1881. Sitting Bull, as I mentioned, has returned from Canada, where a reservation had been refused him. It is a time of deep grief. All that remains is to take the great chief from Standing Rock to Fort Randall by steamship. Four companies of U.S. infantry and two troops of cavalry are there in full dress. Pressed flannel, brass buttons, peaked caps. A forty-two-piece band playing. Sitting Bull's warriors are also in full dress, as best they can manage: buckskin tunics, war bonnets, dyed eagle feathers, fringed leggings; beads and quills and shells; their finest bows, tomahawks, and pipes. Many fear that Sitting Bull will refuse to go along, that after seeing his people safely on board, he will die the way he had long predicted: as a warrior in battle. The women and children are riverside. Sitting Bull's daughter steps forward. Only eighteen, she too is turned out: a dark broadcloth dress, elk-tooth necklace, a white feather in her black hair, tanned leggings. But most important, around her shoulders is a scarlet blanket. It is a signal, an appeal to her father. Her mother had dressed her. The red is a prayer to Sitting Bull: choose life. Red, *sa*, is the Lakota color of endurance, perseverance. When his daughter steps forward and opens her arms wide, Sitting Bull stops. Time seems to stop. What will the chief of chiefs do in his last act as a free man? He scans the gathering, daughter, wife, warriors, elders. He closes his eyes to see his ancestors. Then he sings his song of sorrow. When he's done, he follows his red-winged daughter onto the steamship. His song links the mourners on the shore to the warriors on deck to all who came before them. Sitting Bull chose life. The mooring line is cast off. The river takes him away.