

DARK WATER'S EMBRACE

STEPHEN LEIGH

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To Becca and Guy
Because.



And, as ever, to Denise, with whom I've mingled jeans and genes both.



Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge *The Life and Death of a Druid Prince*, by Anne Ross and Don Robins (Simon & Schuster 1989)—an excellent book which gave me the initial “what if” impetus to this novel, however wildly divergent it actually is. Look up the book and read it—it’s one of the most fascinating archeological detective stories you’ll ever come across.

For some interesting speculation and insight into the causes of why species disappear, I would also like to recommend David M. Raup’s *Extinction* (Norton, 1991).

I’d also like to thank Dr. Rebecca Levin for her input into the potential biology of the Miccail. Any errors of extrapolation and science are mine, not hers.

WHERE DID THAT COME FROM?

AN INTRODUCTION TO DARK WATER'S EMBRACE

One question—in fact, *the* question—a writer is most often asked by new writers is this: where do you come up with the ideas for your stories? I can only shake my head at that one. Story ideas are floating everywhere around us; I find it hard to *avoid* them. You have to push them aside just to go out and get the paper in the morning. All that's required is to be open-minded and curious.

In fact, for the book you're holding in your hands, I can actually relate the moment the spark first flared. Well, actually it was *two* moments.

The first was a conversation with some friends. It was one of those rambling, genial, and relaxed discussions that good friends have, our conversational gears lubricated by a bit of wine. Somewhere along the way we started talking about sex—not *human* sex actually, but (because one of the friends is a veterinarian) feline sex, and how it's sometimes difficult to tell a male kitten from a female one. Someone remarked that men and women often seemed more like alien species. I remember saying something along the lines of "Huh...I wonder what things would be like if we had *three* genders instead of just two..." and that took us into speculation about what role a third gender might play...

We didn't really spend much time talking about it, and the conversation quickly drifted on to other topics from there. But the thought of a third gender and what that might represent stuck with me. I gave it to the subconscious to chew on for awhile.

At the same time, I was reading a book: *The Life & Death Of A Druid Prince* by Anne Ross and Don Robins. It's an archeological detective story about the discovery of a bog body in England, and I found it fascinating. While I was reading it, I played the "What if..." game in my head—what if human explorers on an alien world came across an alien bog body and had to decipher what the former inhabitants of the world might have been like from that.... That woke something inside: I suddenly had a strong image of the scene in my head. I also knew, too (as my subconscious stirred with beautiful

synchronicity) that the alien bog body had to be neither male nor female, but Something Else, and that this had to be vitally important to the survival of the humans involved.

I immediately went to the computer and wrote that scene because it *was* so vivid—it still exists (substantially changed) as the opening for *Dark Water's Embrace*. All the rest started to flow from there. If you'd like a really comprehensive view of the worldbuilding and my thought processes in putting together *Dark Water's Embrace*, go here: <http://www.farrellworlds.com/oldpages/worldbuilding1.html> and you'll get the whole story in far more detail than you might like...

Dark Water's Embrace remains a book that I'm proud to have written. It explores prejudice: mostly gender prejudice, but also fear of the unknown in general. The sequel novel, *Speaking Stones*, continues that process, focusing far more on racial prejudice. I'm pleased that both of these books will now be available again. I'm also pleased that Arc Manor has decided to include the appendices that were left out of the original novel, and has included the illustrations that 'Anais' drew as her reproduction of the bog body. And hey, this cover's *much* better than the original!

I hope you enjoy the book as much as I enjoyed writing it. You're always welcome to browse over to www.farrellworlds.com and tell me what you think.

Stephen Leigh

Cincinnati

October, 2008

DARK WATER'S EMBRACE

“I suspect that if humankind had never known sex, we would have invented it anyway: the women to celebrate friendship, and the men to celebrate themselves.”—Gabriel Rusack



Discoveries



CONTEXT:

Elena Koda-Schmidt

The autumn day was as hot as any in recent memory. The temperature was nearly 10°C, and Elena paused to unbutton her sweater and wipe away the sweat that threatened to drip into her eyes. Near the tree line bordering the river a kilometer away, the dark waters of a pond glittered in the sun: Tlilipan, it was called, “the place of black water.” The peat-stained shallow lake was the last vestige of a much larger parent, now just a marshy wetland. Further down the peat bog, Elena could see Faika Koda-Shimmura and Aldhelm Martinez-Santos—they were kissing, a long, oblivious embrace that made Elena feel vaguely jealous, watching. Faika was ten and had reached her menarche.

Elena suspected that her brother Wan-Li was going to be disappointed when she told him. Wan-Li had spent the night in the Koda-Shimmura compound with Faika a few days before. It seemed he hadn’t quite made the impression he’d thought he had. Elena remembered her own menarche year, and how she’d experimented with her new sexual freedom.

The cart was nearly full of peat; Elena leaned her shovel against the wheel and rubbed her protruding stomach with callused hands. She loved the swelling, surprising curve of her belly, loved the weight of it, the feeling of being centered and rooted. Her roundness made her believe that despite the odds, *her* baby would be perfect. *Her* baby would live and give her grandchildren to dandle on her knee when she was past childbearing herself. She stroked the hard sphere of her womb and the baby kicked in response. Elena laughed.

“Now you be still, little one. It’s bad enough without you stomping on my bladder. Mama’s still got a lot of work to do before we get home.”

With a sigh, Elena picked up the shovel and prepared to attack the peat once more. She was working an old face, several feet down in the bog where the peat was rich, thick and as dark as old Gerard’s face. She lifted the spade. Stopped.

A flap of something leathery and brown like stained wood protruded from the earth, about a foot up on the wall of the ancient marsh. Elena crouched down, grunting with the unaccustomed bulk of her belly. She peered at the

fold of leather, prodding it with the tip of her shovel to pull a little more out of the moss.

Elena gasped and dropped the shovel. Protruding from the appendage, squashed and compressed by the weight of centuries of peat, was a hand with four fingers, the tip of each finger a wide knob capped with a recessed claw. The shock sent Elena stepping backward. The shovel's handle tangled between her legs, tripping her. She put her hands out instinctively to protect her stomach. She grunted with the impact, and the handle slammed against her knee. For a moment, she just lay there, taking inventory. The child jumped inside her, and she breathed again.

"Faika—" she began, but the shout came out entangled in the breath. She thought of how she must look, sprawled in the wet dirt and staring at the apparition in the peat, and laughed at herself.

"What a sight!" she told the child in her womb. "You'd think your mother was sure the boggin was going to get up and walk out of there," she said. She stood, brushing uselessly at her stained trousers and grimacing with the bruised, protesting knee.

As she stood, she saw movement from the corner of her eye. A figure shifted in the small stand of globe-trees a hundred meters away. "Faika? Aldhelm?" Elena called, but the shadowy form—almost lost in tree-shadow—moved once more, and she knew it wasn't either of the two. She could feel it, watching, staring at her. *A grumbler?* she thought, wondering if the rifle was still in the cart, but in the instant she glanced away to check the weapon, the shadow was gone.

There was no one there. The sense of being observed was gone.

Elena shivered, hugging herself. "Baby, your mother's seeing ghosts now," she said. She glanced back at the hand hanging from the peat. "I think I just saw your *kami*," she told it. "Don't worry, I'm not going to do anything nasty to you. I'll leave that to Anaïs. Knowing her, she'll *enjoy* it."

She took a deep breath, and looked again at the copse of trees. "Faika! Aldhelm!" Elena shouted. "If you two can stop fondling each other for a minute or so, I think you should come here and look at this."

VOICE:

Anaïs Koda-Levin the Younger

“So...are you pregnant yet, Anaïs?”
 I hate that question. I always have the wrong answer.
 No. I'm not.
 “Give it a rest, Ghost.”

"Everything's still the same, is it? You *are* still trying, aren't you? If we could only get you up here so we could *see*...."

I felt the old emotional garbage rising with Ghost's questioning: the anger, the bitterness, the self-loathing. I forced the gorge down, packing the filth down behind that internal wall, but it was an effort. Our ancient steel surgical instruments, worn to a satin patina by over a century of use and constant sterilization, beat a raucous percussion on the tray I was holding. "Ghost—"

"Sorry, Anaïs. No need to get irritated. As the repository of Mictlan's history..."

There are times when I wish I knew programming well enough to tone down Ghost's assertiveness. "Shut up, Ghost."

This time around, Ghost looked like an old blind man, hunched over an ornate glass cane that was as swirled and frosted as a Miccail stele. His sightless, ice-blue eyes stared somewhere past my right shoulder into the back corner of the coldroom lab. The outline of his body sparkled and flared disconcertingly, and his legs were implanted in the polished whitewood plank-ing past his ankles.

"Ghost, Hui and I put a new floor in here since the last time. You look like you're wading in wood, and it's really disconcerting. Can you shift your image up about a dozen centimeters?"

"Oh, now that we're on the subject of sex and reproduction, you want to change it? Anaïs, I know it's no comfort to you, but if it were possible to reach the *Ibn Battuta*, a resonance scan or even an ultrasound would answer a lot of questions, and we could—"

"Drop it, Ghost. Drop it right now."

This time, I made no effort to hide the anger. Ghost reminded me too much of the sympathy, the false reassurances given to me by my sibs, by my *mam* Maria. They look into my room and see my clothing draped carefully over the huge mirror (which had once belonged to Rebecca Koda-Levin herself), the shirts and pants arranged so that the mirror reflects nothing, and they don't understand the significance of what they're seeing.

The old man sighed. The image, sparking, raised up until the soles of his feet were almost even with the floor. "Better?"

"I'll do."

"You're going to have to describe what you're seeing," Ghost said. "Since you've had the ill grace not to put a video feed in here."

"Quit complaining." My voice was muffled through the gauze mask I was tying behind my head, and my breath clouded in the cold air. "We put the feed in; the line was bad. No one's had a chance to *fix* it yet—it's not exactly high priority. Maybe next time."

"But I'm curious *now*," Ghost persisted. "I don't have much time this orbit. Come on—you're as slow as your Geema."

I sniffed. A strand of hair had made an escape from the surgical cap; I brushed it out of my eyes. “Maybe that’s why they named me for her, huh?”

The retort was weak but it was the best I had at the moment. I turned back to the examination table and its strange contents. The bog body Elena had found lay there like a man-sized, crumpled bag of leather—which, in essence, it was. The acidic chemical stew of the peat had tanned and preserved the skin, but the skeletal structure and most of the interior organs had dissolved away. Over the last several days, in scraps of time between other, more pressing duties, I’d carefully cleaned away the worst of the peat clinging to the outside of the body, still hunched into its centuries-old fetal position. Now, like a gift, I was ready to unwrap the present given us by the bog.

Every time I’d looked at the body, I’d felt the same rush of adrenaline I felt now, a sense of standing in front of something...I don’t know...maybe *sacred* is the best word. Old and venerable, certainly. I was almost inclined to believe Elena’s tale about seeing a *kami* watching her when she’d found it.

After all, it was the bones of this race’s dead that had given rise to the name given to the planet: Mictlan, suggested by the lone Mexican crew-member of the *Ibn Batutta*. Mictlan was the Aztec land of the dead, where the god Quetzalcoatl found the bones of humankind—and now, where the bones of another dead culture had been found. The race itself were christened the Miccail—“the Dead,” in the Nahuatl language. In the years following, a few Miccailian burial sites had been explored. Not that the excavations told us much about the Miccail, since they cremated their dead before they buried the calcined and charred bones—a rite we’d borrowed from them for our own dead. The strange, whorled spires the Miccail had left behind on the northern continent, sticking out of Mictlan’s rocky soil like faerie cathedrals of dull glass and carved with images of themselves, had been photographed and documented; it was from these that we learned the most about the extinct race. More would have been done, probably, but the near destruction and crippling of the *Ibn Battuta* not six months after the colonists’ arrival and the resultant death of nearly all the crew members had suddenly, radically, and permanently shifted everyone’s priorities.

Basically, it was more important to scrape an existence from Mictlan than to try to decipher the mystery of our world’s previous inhabitants.

I suppose I could appreciate my ancestors’ sentiments. Priorities hadn’t changed much in the century since the accident. Survival was still far more important than any anthropological exploration. No one wanted Mictlan to harbor the scattered bones of *two* extinct, sentient races. I suppose we have the deliberate uncuriosity of the matriarchs and patriarchs to thank for our being here at all.

For one reason or another, though, I don’t seem to be much like them. In so many ways...

“Are you ready to record, Ghost?”

“I’d have much more to analyze with video.”

I waited. A moment later, Ghost sighed. The ancient's body dissolved into static for a moment, then returned as a young woman in an *Ibn Battuta* officer's uniform, though a fanciful, brightly-colored scarf was tied over her eyes like a blindfold. The voice changed also, from an elderly male quaver to a female soprano. "Recording into *Ibn Battuta* memory. Audio only log: 101 September 41. The voice is Anaïs Koda-Levin the Younger, Generation Six. Go ahead, Anaïs."

I gave Ghost a sidewise look, swearing—as I had a few hundred times before—that I'd never understand why Gabriela had programmed her AI with such a quirky sense of humor and strange set of idiosyncrasies. "All right. This is another examination of the Miccail body found in the peat bog—and this will be very cursory, I'm afraid, since I'm on duty in the clinic tonight. Ghost, you can download my previous recordings from the Mictlan library."

"It's already done. Go on, Ana, you have my undivided attention."

I knew that wasn't true—there were still three other working projectors scattered among the compounds, and Ghost was no doubt talking with people at each of them at the moment, as well as performing the systems work necessary to keep our patchwork and shrinking network of century-old terminals together, but it was a nice lie. I shook my hair back from my eyes once more and leaned over the table.

Imagine someone unzipping his skin, crumpling it up, and throwing the discarded epidermis in a corner like an old suit—that's what the corpse looked like. On its side, the body was drawn up like someone cowering in fear, the right arm folded around its back, the left thrown over the right shoulder like a shawl. The head was bowed down into the chest, crushed flat and turned to the left. I could see the closed lid of the right eye and the translucent covering of the central "eye" high on the forehead. A mane of dark, matted hair ran from the back of the bald, knobbed skull and halfway down the spine.

I gently pulled down the right leg, which was tucked up against the body. The skin moved grudgingly; I had to go slowly to avoid tearing it, moistening the skin occasionally with a sponge. Tedious work.

"Most of the body is intact," I noted aloud after a while, figuring that Ghost was going to complain if I didn't start talking soon. "From the spinal mane and the protrusions around the forehead, it's one of the type Gabriela designated as 'Nomads.' If I recall correctly, she believed that since the carvings of Nomads disappear from the Miccail's stelae in the late periods, these were a subspecies that went extinct a millennium or so before the rest of the Miccail."

"You've been studying things you've been told to stay away from."

"Guilty as charged. So that makes the body—what?—two thousand years old?"

"No later than that," Ghost interrupted, "assuming Gabriela's right about the stelae. We'll have a better idea when we get the estimates from the peat samples and measurements. Máire's still working on them."

“Sounds fine. I’ll check with her in the next few days.”

I was lost in the examination now, seeing nothing but the ancient corpse in front of me. A distant part of me noted that my voice had gone deeper and more resonant, no longer consciously pitched high—we all have our little idiosyncrasies, I suppose. “Two thousand or more years old, then. The body evidently went naked into the lake that later became the bog—there’s no trace of any clothing. That may or may not be something unusual. The pictographs on the Miccail stelae show ornate costumes in daily use, on the Nomads as well as the rest, so it’s rather strange that this one’s naked....Maybe he was swimming? Anyway, we’re missing the left leg a half meter down from the hip and...”

The right leg, boneless and twisted, lay stretched on the table. Fragments of skin peeled from the stump of the ankle like bark from a whitewood. “... the right foot a few centimeters above the ankle. A pity—I’d like to have seen that central claw on the foot. Looks like the leg and foot decayed off the body sometime after it went into the lake. Wouldn’t be surprised if they turn up somewhere else later.”

I straightened the right arm carefully, laying it down on the table, moving slowly from shoulder to wrist. “Here’s one hand—four fingers, not five. Wonder if they counted in base eight? These are really long phalanges, though the meta-carpals must have been relatively short. The pads at the end of each digit still have vestiges of a recessed claw—would have been a nasty customer in a fight. There’s webbing almost halfway up the finger; bet they swam well. And this thumb...it’s highly opposed and much longer than a human’s. From the folds in the skin, I’d guess that it had an extra articulation, also.”

I grunted as I turned the body so that it rested mostly on its back. “There appears to be a large tattoo on the chest and stomach—blue-black lines. Looks like a pictogram of some sort, but there’s still a lot of peat obscuring it, and I’ll have to make sure that this isn’t some accidental postmortem marking of some kind. I’ll leave that for later...”

The remnant of the left leg was folded high up on the stomach, obscuring the tattoo. I lifted it carefully and moved it aside, revealing the groin. “Now *that’s* interesting...”

“What?” Ghost asked. “I’m a blind AI, remember?”

I exhaled under the surgical mask, resisting the urge to rise to Ghost’s baiting. “The genitalia. There’s a scaly, fleshy knob, rather high on the front pubis. I suppose that’s the penis analogue for the species, but it doesn’t look like normal erectile tissue or a penile sheath. No evidence of anything like testicles—no scrotal sac at all. Maybe they kept it inside.”

“They’re aliens, remember? Maybe they didn’t *have* one.”

I accepted Ghost’s criticism with a nod; She was right—I was lacing some heavy anthropomorphism into my speculations. “Maybe. There’s a youngpouch on the abdomen, though, and I haven’t seen any Mictlanian marsupialoids where both sexes *had* the pouch. Maybe in the Miccail both

male and female suckled the young." I lifted the leg, turning the body again with an effort. "There's a urethra further down between the legs, and an anus about where you'd expect it—"

I stopped, dropping the leg I was holding. It fell to the table with a soft thud. I breathed. I could feel a flush climbing my neck, and my vision actually shivered for a moment, disorientingly.

"Anaïs?"

"It's..." I licked suddenly dry lips. Frowned. "There's what looks to be a vaginal opening just below the base of the spine, past the anus."

"A hermaphrodite," Ghost said, her voice suddenly flat. "Now there's synchronicity for you, eh?"

I said nothing for several seconds. I was staring at the body, at the soft folds hiding the opening at the rear of the creature, not quite knowing whether to be angry. Trying to gather the shreds of composure. *Staring at myself in the mirror, forcing myself to look only at that other Anaïs's face, that contemplative, uncertain face lost in the fogged, spotted silver backing, and my gaze always, inevitably, drifting lower...*

The Miccail body was an accusation, a mockery placed just for me by whatever gods ruled Mictlan.

"Gabriela speculated about the sexuality of the Nomads," Ghost continued. "There were notes in her journals. She collected rubbings of some rather suggestive carvings on the Middle Period stelae. In fact, in a few cases she referred to the Nomads as 'midmales' because the stelae were ambiguous as to which they might be. It's all scanned in the data-base—call it up."

"I've read some of Gabriela's journals—the public ones, anyway. Gabriela said a lot of strange things about the Miccail—and everything else on this world. Doesn't make her right."

"Give poor Gabriela a break. No one else was particularly interested in the Miccail after the accident. The first generation had more pressing problems than an extinct race. As an archeologist/anthropologist she was—just like you, I might add—a dilettante, a rank amateur."

"And she was your lead programmer, right? That explains a lot about you."

"It's also why I'm still working. Ana, I'm running out of time here."

"All right."

I took another long breath, trying to find the objective, aloof Anaïs the bog body had banished. The leg had fallen so that the tattered end of the ankle hung over the edge of the table. I placed it carefully back into position and didn't look at the trunk of the body or the mocking twinned genitals. Instead, I moved around the table, going to the Nomad's head. Carefully, I started prying it from the folded position it had held for centuries.

"Looks like she...he..." I stopped. Ghost waited. My jaw was knotted; I forced myself to relax. *Do this goddamn thing and get it over with. Put the body back in the freezer and forget about it.* "She didn't die of drowning. There's a

large wound on the back of the skull. Part crushing, part cutting like a blunt axe, and it probably came from behind. I'll bet we'll find that's the cause of death, though I guess it's possible she was thrown into the lake still alive. I'm moving the head back to its normal position now. Hey, what's this...?"

I'd lifted the chin of the Miccail. Trapped deep in the folds of the neck was a thin, knotted cord, a garrote, pulled so tightly against the skin that I could see that the windpipe had closed under the pressure. "He was strangled as well."

"He? I thought it was a she."

I exhaled in exasperation. "Goddamn it, Ghost.."

"Sorry," Ghost apologized. She didn't sound particularly sincere. "Axed, strangled, *and* drowned," Ghost mused. "Wonder which happened first?"

"Somebody really wanted him dead. Poor thing." I looked down at the flattened, peat-darkened features, telling myself that I was only trying to see in them some reflection of the Miccail's mysterious life. This Miccail was a worse mirror than the one in my room. Between the pressure-distorted head and the long Miccail snout, the wide-set eyes, the light-sensitive eyelike organ at the top of the head, the nasal slits above the too-small, toothless mouth, it was difficult to attribute any human expression to the face. I sighed. "Let's see if we can straighten out the other arm—"

"Ana," Ghost interrupted, "you have company on the way, I'm afraid—"

"Anaïs!"

The shout came from outside, in the clinic's lobby. A few seconds later, Elio Allen-Shimmura came through the lab doors in a burst. His dark hair was disheveled, his black eyes worried. The hair and eyes stood out harshly against his light skin, reddened slightly from the cold northwest wind. His plain, undistinguished features were furrowed, creasing the too-pale forehead under the shock of bangs and drawing the ugly, sharp planes of his face even tighter. He cast a glance at the bog body; I moved between Elio and the Miccail. Some part of me didn't want him to see, didn't want anyone to see.

Elio didn't seem to notice. He glanced quickly to the glowing apparition of Ghost. "Is that you, Elio?" Ghost asked. "I can't see through this damn blindfold." Ghost grinned under the parti-colored blindfold.

Elio smiled in return, habitually, an expression that just touched the corners of his too-thin lips and died. "It's me." Something was bothering Elio; he couldn't stand still, shuffling from foot to foot as if he were anxious to be somewhere else. I'd often noticed that reaction in my presence, but at least this time I didn't seem to be the cause of it. Elio turned away from Ghost. "Anaïs, has Euzhan been in here?"

"Haven't seen her, El." *Your Geeda Dominic doesn't exactly encourage your Family's children to be around me*, I wanted to add, but didn't. With my own Family having no children at the moment, if I had a favorite kid in the settlement, it would be Euzhan, a giggling, mischievous presence. Euzhan liked me, liked me with the uncomplicated trust of a child; liked me—I have to

admit—with the same unconscious grace that her mother had possessed. It was impossible not to love the child back. I began to feel a sour stirring in the pit of my stomach.

“Damn! I was hoping...” Elio’s gaze went to the door, flicking away from me.

“El, what’s going on?”

He spoke to the air somewhere between Ghost and me. “It’s probably nothing. Euz is missing from the compound, has been for an hour. Dominic’s pretty frantic. We’ll probably find her hiding in the new building, but..”

I could hear the forced nonchalance in Elio’s voice; that told me that they’d already checked the obvious places where a small child might hide. A missing child, in a population as small as ours, was certainly cause for immediate concern—Dominic, the current patriarch of the Allen-Shimmura family, would have sent out every available person to look for the girl. Elio frowned and shook his head. “All right. You’re in the middle of something, I know. But if you do see her—”

His obvious distress sparked guilt. “This has waited for a few thousand years. It can certainly wait another hour or two. I’ll come help. Just give me a few minutes to put things away and scrub.”

“Thanks. We appreciate it.” Elio glanced again at the Miccail’s body, still eclipsed behind me, then gave me a small smile before he left. I was almost startled by that and returned the smile, forgetting that he couldn’t see it behind the mask. As he left, I slid the examining table back into the isolation compartment, then went to the sink and began scrubbing the protective brownish covering of thorn-vine sap from my hands.

“A bit of interest there?” Ghost ventured.

“You’re blind, remember?”

“Only visually. I’m getting excellent audio from your terminal. Let me play it back—you’ll hear how your voice perked up—”

“Elio’s always been friendly enough to me, that’s all. I’m not interested; he’s *definitely* not, or he hides it awfully well. Besides, El is...” *Ugly*, I almost said, and realized how that would sound, coming from me. *His eyes are nice, and his hands. But his face—the eyes are set too close together, his nose is too long and the mouth too large. His skin is a patchwork of blotches. And the one time we tried...* “At least he doesn’t look at me like...like...” I hated the way I sounded, hated the fact that I knew Ghost was recording it all. I hugged myself, biting my lower lip. “Look, I really don’t want to talk about this.”

Ghost flickered. Her face morphed into lines familiar from holos of the Matriarchs: Gabriela. “Making sense of an attraction is like analyzing chocolate. Just enjoy it, and to hell with the calories.” The voice was Gabriela’s, too: smoky, husky, almost as low as mine.

“You’re quoting.”

“And you’re evading.” A line of fire-edged darkness sputtered down Ghost’s figure from head to foot as the image began to break up. “Doesn’t

matter—I'm also drifting out of range. See you in three days this time. I should have a longer window then. Make sure you document everything about the Miccail body."

"I will. You get me those age estimates from Máire's uploads when you can."

"Promise." Static chattered in Ghost's voice; miniature lightning storms crackled across her body. She disappeared, then returned, translucent. I could see the murdered Nomad's body through her. "Go help Elio find Euzhan."

"I will. Take care up there, Ghost."

A flash of light rolled through Ghost's image. She went two-dimensional and vanished utterly.

CONTEXT:

Bui Allen-Shimmura

"Bui, Geeda Dominic wants you. Now." Bui felt his skin prickle in response, like spiders scurrying up his spine. He straightened up, closing the vegetable bin door. Euzhan wasn't there, wasn't in any of her usual hiding places. Bui looked at Micah's lopsided face, and could see that there was no good news there. He asked anyway. "Did anyone find her?"

Micah shook his head, his lips tight. "Not yet," he answered, his voice blurred with his cleft palate. "Geeda's sent Elio out to alert the other Families and get them to help search."

"*Kbudda.*" Bui didn't care that *da* Micah heard him cursing. The way Bui figured it, he couldn't get into any more trouble than he was already in. If he found Euzhan now, he might just kill the girl for slipping away while he was responsible for watching her. It wasn't fair. He'd be ten in half a year. At his age, he should have been out working the fields with the rest, not babysitting.

"How's Geeda?" he asked Micah.

"In as foul a mood as I've ever seen. You'd better get up there fast, boy."

Bui's shoulders sagged. He almost started to cry, sniffing and wiping his nose on his sleeve. "Go on," Micah told him. "Get it over with."

He went.

Geeda Dominic was in the common room of the Allen-Shimmura compound, staring out from the window laser-chiseled from the stone of the Rock. A dusty sunbeam threw Dominic's shadow on the opposite wall. Bui noticed immediately that no one else from the Family was in the room. That didn't bode well, since the others sometimes managed to keep Dominic's infamous temper in check. "Geeda?" Bui said tremulously. "Micah said you—"

Dominic was the eldest of the Allen-Shimmura family, a venerable eighty, but he turned now with a youth born of anger. His cane, carved by the patriarch Shigetomo himself, with a knobbed head of oak all the way from Earth, slashed air and slammed into Bui's upper arm. Surprise and pain made Bui cry out, and the blow was hard enough to send him sprawling on the rug.

"*Hakuchi!*" Dominic shouted at him, the cane waving in Bui's face like a club. "You fool!"

Bui clutched his arm, crying openly now. "Geeda, it wasn't my fault. Hizo, he'd fallen and skinned his knees, and when I finished with him, Euzhan—"

"Shut up!" The cane *whoomped* as it slashed in front of his face. "You listen to me, boy. If Euzhan is hurt or...or..." Bui knew the word that Dominic wouldn't say. *Dead*. Fear reverberated in Bui's head, throbbing in aching syn-copation with the pain in his arm. "You better hope they find her safe, boy, or I'll have you goddamn shunned. I swear I will. No one will talk to you again. You'll be cast out of the Family. You'll find your own food or you'll starve."

"No, Geeda, please..." Bui shivered.

"Get out of here," Dominic roared. His hand tightened around the shaft of his cane, trembling. "Get out of here and find her. Don't bother coming back until you do. You understand me, boy?"

"Yes, Geeda Dominic. I'm...I'm sorry...I'm awful sorry..." Bui, still sobbing, half crawled, half ran from the room.

Dominic's cane clattered against the archway behind Bui as he went through.

VOICE:

Anais Koda-Levin the Younger

"*Euzhan!* Damn, it, child...." I exhaled in frustration, my voice hoarse from calling. Elio sagged tiredly near me. He rubbed the glossy stock of his rifle with fingers that seemed almost angry. "It's getting dark," he said. "It's near SixthHour. She'll come out from wherever she's hiding as soon as she notices. She always wants the light on in the creche, and she'll be getting hungry by now. She'll be out. I know it."

Elio wasn't convincing even himself. There was a quick desperation in his voice. I understood it all too well. All of us did. Our short history's full of testimonials to this world's whims—as our resident historian, Elio probably understood that better than I did.

Mictlan had not been a kind world for the survivors of *Ibn Batutta*. Two colonies—one on each of Mictlan's two continents—had been left behind after the accident that had destroyed most of the mothership. The colonies

quickly lost touch with each other when a massive, powerful hurricane raked the southern colony's continent in the first year of exile, and they never resumed radio contact with us or with Ghost on the *Ibn Battuta*.

Another storm had nearly obliterated our northern colony in Year 23, killing six of the original nine crewmembers here. I suppose that was our historical watershed, since that disaster inalterably changed the societal structure, giving rise to what became the Families. Local diseases mutated to attack our strange new host bodies, stalking the children especially—the Bloody Cough alone killed two children in five by the time they reached puberty. I know: I see the bodies and do the autopsies. There are the toothworms or the tree-leapers or the grumblers; there are the bogs and the storms and the bitter winters; there are accidents and infections and far, far too many congenital defects. Most of them are bad enough that nature itself takes care of them: miscarriages, stillbirths, nonviable babies who are born and die within a few days or a few months—which is why none of the Families will name a child before his or her first birthday. I also know the others—the ones who lived but who are marked with the stamp of Mictlan.

I knew *them* very well.

The rate of viable live births—for whatever reason: a side effect of the LongSleep, or some unknown factor in the Mictlan environment—was significantly lower among the ship members and their descendants than for the general population of Earth. Just over a century after being stranded on Mictlan, our human population nearly matched the year; there'd been no growth for the last quarter of a century. Too many years, deaths outnumbered births.

Mictlan was not a sweet, loving Motherworld. She was unsympathetic and unremittingly harsh.

I knew that Elio's imagination was calculating the same dismal odds mine was. This was no longer just a child hiding away from her *mi* or *da*, not this late, not this long.

Euzhan was four. I'd seen the girl in the clinic just a few days ago—an eager child, still awkward and lisping, and utterly charming. Ochiba, Euzhan's mother, had once been my best—hell, one of my only—friends. What we'd had....

Anyway, Euzhan had been a difficult birth, a breech baby. All of Ochiba's births were difficult; her pelvis was narrow, barely wide enough to accommodate a baby's head. On Earth, she would have been an automatic cesarean, but not here, not when any major operation is an open invitation for some postoperative infection. I could have gone in. Ochiba told me she'd go with whatever I decided. Ochiba had delivered three children before—with long, difficult labors, each time. I made the decision to let her go, and she—finally—delivered twelve hours later.

But Ochiba's exhaustion after the long labor gave an opportunistic respiratory virus its chance—Ochiba died three days after Euzhan's birth on

97 LastDay. Neither Hui Koda-Schmidt, the colony's other "doctor," nor I had been able to break the raging fever or stop the creeping muscular paralysis that followed. Our medical database is quite extensive, but is entirely Earth-based. On Mictlan-specific diseases, there's only the information that we colonists have entered, and I was all too familiar with that. Ghost had been out of touch, the *Ibn Battuta's* unsynchronized orbit trapping the AI on the far side of Mictlan. I don't have the words to convey the utter helpless impotence I'd felt, watching Ochiba slowly succumb, knowing that I was losing someone I loved.

Knowing that maybe, just maybe, my decision had been the reason she died.

I'd been holding Ochiba's hand at the end. I cried along with her Family, and Dominic—grudgingly—had even asked me to speak for Ochiba at her Burning.

A damn small consolation.

Euzhan, Ochiba's third named child, was especially precious to Dominic, the head of Family Allen-Shimmura. Euz was normal and healthy. As we all knew too well, any child was precious, but one such as Euzhan was priceless. The growing fear that something tragic had happened to Euzhan was a black weight on my soul.

"Who was watching Euz?"

"Bui," Elio answered. "Poor kid. Dominic'll have him skinned alive if Euz is hurt."

Nearly all of the Allen-Shimmura family were out searching for Euzhan now, along with many from the other Families. The buildings were being scoured one more time; a large party had gone into the cultivated fields to the south-east of the compound and were prowling the rows of white-bean stalks and scarlet faux-wheat. Elio and I had gone out along the edge of Tlilipan. I'd been half-afraid we'd see Euzhan's tiny footprints pressed in the mud flats along the pond's shore, but there'd been nothing but the cloverleaf tracks of skimmers. That didn't mean that Euzhan hadn't fallen into one of the patches of wet marsh between the colony and Tlilipan, or that a prowling grumbler hadn't come across her unconscious body and dragged her off, still half- alive, to a rocky lair along the river....

I forced the thoughts away. I shivered under my sweater and shrugged the strap of the medical kit higher on my shoulder. I've never been particularly religious, but I found myself praying to whatever *kami* happened to be watching.

Just let her be all right Let her come toddling out of some forgotten hole in the compound, scared and dirty, but unharmed.

The sun was prowling the tops of the low western hills, the river trees painting long, grotesque shadows which rippled over the bluefern-pocked marshland. Not far away was the pit where we'd dug the Miccail body from the peat. Behind the trees, the chill breeze brought the thin, faint sound of

voices from below the Rock, calling for Euzhan. I turned to look, squinting back up the rutted dirt road. There, a tall blackness loomed against the sky: the Rock. The first generation had carved a labyrinth of tunnels in the monolithic hill of bare stone perched alongside the river; from the various openings, we'd added structures that poked out like wood, steel, and glass growths on the stone, so that the Families lived half in and half out of the granite crag. Now, in its darkness, the familiar lights of the Family compounds glistened.

The Rock. Home to all of us.

"Let's keep looking," I told Elio. "We still have time before it gets too dark."

Elio nodded. Where his light skin met the dark cloth of his shirt there was a knife-sharp contrast that stood out even in the dusk. "Fine. We should spread out a bit..."

Elio looked so forlorn that I found myself wanting to move closer to him, to hug him. As much as I might have denied it to Ghost, the truth was that Elio was someone I genuinely liked. Maybe it was because he was so plain, with that pale, blotchy skin, his off-center mouth and wide nose, and his gawky, nervous presence. Elio was not one of the popular men, not one of those who spend every possible night in some woman's room, but we talked well, and I liked the way he walked and the fact that one side of his mouth went higher than the other when he smiled. I liked the warmth in his voice.

He was tapping the rifle stock angrily, staring out into the marsh. I touched his arm; he jerked away. Under the deep ridges of his brows, his black eyes glinted. I could read nothing in them, couldn't tell what he was thinking. "Let's go find Euz," I said.

The light had slid into a deep gold, almost liquid. The sun was half lost behind slopes gone black with shadow. If we were going to continue searching, we'd have to go back soon for lights. Elio and I moved slowly around the marsh's edge, calling Euz's name and peering under the low-hanging limbs of the amberdrop trees, brushing aside the sticky, purplish leaves. Darkness crept slowly over the landscape, the temperature dropping as rapidly as the sun. The marsh steamed in the cooling air, the evening fog already cloud-thick near the river. Our breaths formed small thunderheads before us. Neither of the moons—the brooding Longago or its smaller, fleeter companion Faraway—were up yet. At the zenith, the stars were hard, bright points set in satin, though a faint trace of deep blue lingered at the horizon. Near the compound, outside the fences, someone had lit a large bonfire; the breeze brought the scent of smoke.

"El? It's way past SixthHour, and it's getting too dark to see..."

"All right," Elio sighed. "I guess we might as well—"

Before he could finish, a grumbler's basso growl shivered the evening quiet, sinister and low. "Over there," I whispered, pointing. Elio unslung the rifle. "Come on."

I moved out into the wet ground, and Elio followed.

The grumblers were scavengers, nearly two meters in height, looking like a cut-and-paste, two-legged hybrid of great ape and Komodo dragon, though—like the Miccail and several other local species—they were probably biologically closer to an Earth marsupial than anything else. They walked upright if stooped over, their clawed front hands pulled close, slinking through the night. They were rarely seen near our settlement, seeming to fear the presence of the noisy humans. Sometimes alone, sometimes running in a small pack, they were also generally quiet—hearing one meant that the creature was close, and that it had found something. Grumblers were thieves and scavengers, snatching the kills of other, smaller predators or pouncing on an unsuspecting animal if it looked tiny and helpless enough. I hated them: they were ugly, cowardly, and mean beasts. They invariably ran if challenged.

If one had crept this close to the compound, then it had spotted something worth the danger to itself. Elio and I ran.

The grumbler was leaning over something in a small hollow, still mewling in its bass voice. Hearing us approach, it stood upright, turning its furred snout toward us and ex-posing double rows of needled teeth. The twinned tongue that was common in Mictlanian wildlife slithered in the mouth. Straggling fur swung under its chin like dreadlocks. Shorter fur cradled the socket of the central lens—like that of the Miccail—placed high in the forehead. The grumbler glared and cocked its head as if appraising us.

It growled. I couldn't see what it had been crouching over, but the grumbler appeared decidedly irritated at having been disturbed. The long, thin arms sliced the air in our direction, the curved slashing claws on the fingers extended. They looked sharper and longer than I remembered.

"Shoo!" I shouted. "Get out of here!" I waved my arms at it. The few times I'd met grumblers before, that had been enough; they'd skulked away like scolded children.

This one didn't move. It growled again, and it took a step toward us.

"Hey—" Elio said behind me. He fired the rifle into the air once. The percussive report echoed over the marsh, deafening. The grumbler jumped backward, crouching, but it held its ground. It snarled now, and took a step forward. I waved at it again.

"Ana..." Elio said warningly.

The grumbler gave him no time to say more.

It leaped toward me.

Improvisation, my great-grandmother Anaïs has often told me, *is not just for musicians*. Of course, Geema Ana usually says that when she's decided to use coarse red thread rather than thin white in the pattern she's weaving. I don't think she had situations like this in mind. Or maybe she did, since she was talking about using the materials at hand for your task. For the first time in my life, I demonstrated that I had that skill: I swung my medical bag.

The heavy leather hit the creature in the side of the head and sent it reeling down into the marsh on all fours. The bag broke open, the strap tearing as the

contents tumbled out. Shaking its ugly head, the dreadlocks caked with mud, the grumbler snarled and hissed. It gathered itself to leap again. I doubted that the now-empty bag was going to stop it a second time, and I had the feeling that I'd pretty much exhausted my improvisational repertoire.

Elio fired from his hip, with no time to aim. A jagged line of small scarlet craters appeared on the grumbler's muscular chest, and it shrieked, twisting in midair. The grumbler collapsed on the ground in front of me, still slashing with its claws and snapping.

Elio brought the rifle to his shoulder, aimed carefully between the eyes that glared at him in defiance, and pulled the trigger.

The grumbler twitched once and lay still. Its eyes were still open, staring at death with a decided fury.

"What was *that* all about?" I said. I could hardly hear over the sound of blood pounding in my head.

"I don't know. I've never seen one do that before." Elio still hadn't lowered the rifle, as if he were waiting for the grumbler to move again. His face was paler than usual, with a prominent red flush on the cheeks. I could see something dark huddled on the ground where the grumbler had been.

"Elio! There she is!"

I ran.

Euzhan was unconscious, lying on her back. "Oh, God," Elio whispered. I knew he was staring at the girl's blouse—it was torn, and blood darkened the cloth just above the navel. I knelt beside her and gently pulled up the shirt.

The grumbler's claws had laid Euzhan open. The gash was long and deep, exposing the fatty tissue and tearing into muscles, though thankfully it looked like the abdominal wall was intact. "Damn..." I muttered; then, for Elio's benefit: "It looks worse than it is." Euzhan had lost blood; it pooled dark and thick under her, but the wound was seeping rather than pulsing—no arterial loss. I allowed myself a quick sigh of relief: we could get her back to the clinic, then. Still, she'd lost a lot of blood, and the unconsciousness worried me.

I quickly probed the rest of body, checked the limbs, felt under the head. There was a swelling bump on the back of her skull, but other than that and the grumbler's wound, Euzhan appeared unharmed. As I tucked the girl's blouse back down, her eyes fluttered open. "Anaïs? Elio? I'm awful cold," Euzhan said sleepily. I smiled at her and stroked her cheek.

"I'm sure you are, love. Here, Anaïs has a sweater you can wear until we get you back." Euzhan nodded, then her eyes closed again. "Euzhan," I said quietly but firmly. "Euz, no sleeping now, love. I need you to stay awake and talk to me. Do you understand?"

Long eyelashes lifted slightly. Her breath deepened. "Am I going to die, Ana?"

I could barely answer through the sudden constriction in my throat. "No, honey. You're not going to die. I promise. You lay there very still now, and keep those pretty eyes open. I need to talk to your *da* a second."

"I think we found her in time," I told Elio, covering Euzhan in my sweater. "But we need to move quickly. We have to get her back to the clinic where I can work on her. What I've got in the kit isn't going to do it. Go get us some help. We'll need a stretcher."

Elio didn't move. He stood there, staring down at Euzhan, his eyes wide with worry and fear. I prodded him. "I need you to go now, El. Don't worry—she'll be fine."

That shook him out of his stasis. Elio nodded and broke into a run, calling back to the settlement as he ran.

She'll be fine, I'd promised him.

I hoped I was going to be right.

CONTEXT:

Faika Koda-Shimmura

"They found Euzhan, Geema Tozo." Faika was still breathing hard from the exertion of climbing the stairs to Geema's loft in the tower. Faika, who'd been part of those searching near the old landing pad, had been with the group that helped bring Euzhan bade to the Rock. She was still buzzing from the excitement.

Tozo lifted her head from the fragrant incense burning in an ornate holder set on top of a small Miccail stele Tozo used as an altar, but she didn't turn toward Faika. She kept her hands folded together in meditation, her breathing calm and centered, a distinct contrast to Faika's gasping. Several polished stones were set around the base of the stele. Tozo reached out and touched them, each in turn. "I know," she said. "I felt it. She's hurt but alive."

Geema Togo's tone indicated that her words were more statement than question. But then Tozo always said that she actually talked with the *kami* that lived around the Rock. There were others who were devout, but Tozo lived *Njia*—The Way—as no one else did; at least it seemed so to Faika's somewhat prejudiced eyes. Faika was sure that when the current Kiria, Tami, chose a replacement this coming LastDay, Tozo would be the next Kiria. Faika was a little disappointed that her news wasn't quite the bombshell she'd hoped, but she was also proud that her Geema could know it, just from listening to the voices in her head.

"They took her to the clinic?" Tozo asked. She turned finally. Her face was a network of fine wrinkles, like a piece of paper folded over and over, and the eyes were the brown of nuts in the late fall. Both her hands (and her feet, as Faika knew from seeing Tozo in the Baths) were webbed with a thin sheath of pink skin between the fingers, and the lower half of her face was squeezed

together in a faint suggestion of a snout. Faika thought Tozo looked like some ancient and beautiful aquatic animal.

"*Hai*," Faika answered. "Anaïs and Elio found her, and Anaïs was taking care of her. There was a lot of blood. A grumbler—"

"I know," Geema Tozo said, and Faika nodded. The incense hissed and sputtered behind Tozo, and she closed her eyes briefly. "There's trouble coming, Faika. I can feel it. The *kami*, the old ones, are stirring. Anaïs..." Tozo sighed.

"Come help me up, child," she said to Faika, extending her hand. "Let's go downstairs. I can smell Giosha's dinner even through the incense, and my stomach's rumbling. What's done is done, and we can't change it."

INTERLUDE:

KaiSa

KaiSa stood on the bluff that overlooked the sea. As Kai expected, BieTe was there: the Old-Father for the local settlement. He was squatting in front of the *nasituda*,¹ the Telling Stone. In one hand he held a bronze drill, in the other was the chipped bulk of his favorite hammerstone. The salt-laden wind ruffled his hair. The sound of his carving was loud in the morning stillness, each note brilliant and distinct against the rhythmic background of surf, separated by a moment of aching silence and anticipation: *T-ching. T-ching. T-ching*. Bie was wearing his ceremonial red robes: the *shangaa*. Flakes of the translucent pale crystal of the stone had settled in his lap, like spring petals on a field of blood.

Bie must have heard Kai's approach, but he gave no sign. KaiSa sniffed the air, fragrant with brine and crisp with the promise of new snow, and opened her mouth wide to taste all the glorious scents. "The wind is calling the new season, OldFather," he said. "Can't you hear it?"

Bie grimaced. He snorted once and bared the hard-ridged gums of his mouth in a wide negative without turning around. *T-ching. T-ching*. "I hear—"
T-ching. "—nothing."

Bie put down the hammerstone. He blew across the carving so that milky rock powder curled into the breeze and away. He stood, lifted his *shangaa* above the hips and carefully urinated on the column. Afterward, he wiped away the excess with the robe's hem to join the multitude of other stains there, a ceremonial three strokes of the cloth: for earth, for air, for water. Where Bie's urine had splashed onto the newly-carved surface, the almost colorless rock slowly darkened to a vivid yellow-orange, highlighting the new figures

1 See Appendix 'A' (page 275) for a detailed glossary of terms.

and matching the other carvings on the stele, while the weathered, oxidized surface of the Telling Stone remained frosty white. Kai could read the hieroglyphic, pictorial writing: the glyph of the OldFather, the wavy line that indicated birth, the glyph of other-self, the slash that made the second figure a diminutive, and the dark circle of femininity.

I, BieTe, declare here that a new female child has been born.

"I decided to take a walk after the birth," Kai said. "Has MasTa named the child?"

"I've not heard her name. Mas said that VeiSaTi hasn't spoken it yet."

Where there should have been joy, there was instead a hue of sullenness in Bie's voice, and Kai knew that ke was the cause of it. Kai nodded. "Mas will give the child strength." Then, because ke knew that it would prick the aloofness that Bie had gathered around himself, ke added: "Mas is a delight, very beautiful and very wise. We're both lucky to enjoy her love."

Kai could see Bie's throat pulse at that. "I know what you're thinking," Bie said. "I know why you came to find me. You're telling me you want to go." Bie's gaze, as brown as the stones of the sea-bluff, drifted away from Kai down to the surging waves, then back. "But I don't want you to leave."

Kai knew this was coming, though ke had hoped that this time it would be different, that for once ker love and affection might emerge unmarred and free of the memory of anger or violence. But—as with most times before—ker wish would not be granted. Kai's mentor JaqSaTu had warned ker of this years ago, when Kai was still bright with the optimism of the newly initiated.

Jaq handed Kai a paglanut and closed ker fingers around the thin, chitinous shell "Each time, you will think your hands have been filled with joy, but you will be wrong." Jaq told ker. Ke increased the pressure on Kai's fingers, until the ripe nut had broken open. The scent of corruption filled Kai's nostrils—all but one small kernel of the nut was rotten. Jaq plucked the good kernel from the mess in Kai's hand and held it in front of ker. "You will learn to find the nourishment among the rot, or you will starve."

Kai looked at the weathered, handsome face of Bie Old-Father, at the creased, folded lines ke had caressed and licked in the heat of lovemaking, and ke saw that Bie's love had hardened and grown brittle.

"I'm only a servant of VeiSaTi," Kai answered softly and hopelessly. "BieTe, please, you don't want to anger a god. I love you. My time here has been wonderful and for that I wish I could stay, but I have my duty." Kai indicated ker own *shangaa*, dyed bright yellow from the juices of pagla root: VeiSaTi's favored plant, that the god had spewed upon the earth so that all could eat. "Mas has her child. HajXa and CerXa will deliver soon. I have given your people all that a Sa can."

A cloud, driven fast by the high wind, cloaked the sun for a moment before passing. The *brais*, the Sun's Eye high on their foreheads, registered the quick shift in light and both of them crouched instinctively as if ready to flee

from a diving wingclaw. Kai watched the scudding clouds pass overhead for a few seconds, then glanced back at Bie. His face was as hard as the Telling Stone, as unyielding as the bronze drill he'd used to carve it. "You should not leave yet," he said. "Tonight, we will give thanks to VeiSaTi for the new child. You must be here for the ceremony."

"And then I may go?"

BieTe didn't answer. He was staring at the Telling Stone, and whatever he was thinking was hidden. He picked up the hammerstone from the ground and hefted it in his hand. "You'll walk back with me now," he said.

There didn't seem to be an answer to that.

BieTe left Kai almost as soon as they reached the village, going off to examine the pagla fields. His mood had not improved during their walk, and Kai was glad to be left alone. Ke went into the TaTe dwelling. "MasTa?" ke called softly.

"In here, Kai."

Kai slid behind the curtain that screened the sleeping quarters. "I'm so happy for you," ke said. "May...may I see?"

MasTa smiled at Kai. Almost shyly, she unfastened the closures of her *shangaa*, exposing her body. Sliding a hand down her abdomen, she opened the muscular lip of her youngpouch and let Kai peer inside. The infant, eyes still closed and entirely hairless, not much longer than Kai's hand, was curled at the bottom of the snug pocket of Mas's flesh. Her mouth was fastened on one of Mas's nipples, and her sides heaved in the rapid breath of the newborn as she suckled. "She's beautiful, isn't she?" Mas whispered.

Kai reached into the warm youngpouch and stroked the child gently, enjoying the shiver ker daughter gave as ke touched her. "Yes," ke sighed. "She's beautiful, yes." Reluctantly, ke took ker hand from the pouch and stroked Mas's cheek with fingers still fragrant and moist from the infant. Ke fondled the tight, red-gold curls down her neck. "After all, she's yours."

Mas laughed at that. She let the youngpouch close, fastened her *shangaa* again, and reclined on the pillows supporting her back.

"Tired?" Kai asked.

"A little."

"Then rest. I'll leave you alone to sleep."

"No, Kai," Mas said. "Please."

"All right." Kai settled back into the nest of pillows piled in the sleeping room. For what seemed a long time, ke simply watched Mas, enjoying the way the sunlight burned in her hair and burnished the pattern of her skin as it came through the open window of the residence. As ke gazed at her, ke could feel that part of ker did indeed want to stay, to watch this child of kers and Mas and Bie grow, to see her weaned from the pouch when the weather turned warm again, to listen to her first words and watch the reflection of kerself in the new child's eyes. Mas must have guessed what ke was thinking, for she spoke from her repose, her eyes closed against the sun.

"I know that you must leave. I understand."

"I'm glad someone does." Kai said it as unharshly as ke could.

Her large eyes opened, that surprising flecked blue-green that was so rare and so striking. A knitted covering tied around her head shielded her *brais* from the afternoon glare. "Bei loves you as much as I do. Maybe more. He told me once that you have made him feel whole. He's afraid, Kai That's all. He's afraid that when you leave, you'll take part of him with you."

"I'm leaving behind far more of myself than I'm taking," Kai answered. Ke stroked ker own belly for emphasis. "I'm leaving behind your child, and Haj and Cer's. I've given you VieSaTi's gift. Now I must give it to others."

"Why?" Mas asked. Her bright, colorful eyes searched ker face.

"Now you sound like BieTe," Kai said, and softened ker words with a laugh. "I'm a Sa. I've been taught the ways of the Sa. After I leave, other Sa will come here."

"And if they don't?"

"You'll still have children," Kai said, answering the question ke knew was hidden behind her words. "With BieTe alone."

"I had three other children before you came," Mas said. "Only one lived, a male. Bie sent him away." Mas averted her eyes, not looking at Kai, and her skin went pale with sadness. Kai's own brown arms whitened in sympathy. "The others...well, my first one lived only a season. The other, a female, was wild and strange. She never learned to talk, and she was fey. She would attack me when I was sleeping, or kill the little meatfurs just to watch them die. A wingclaw took her finally, or that's what BieTe told me. I...I found it hard to mourn."

"Mas—" Kai leaned forward to hold Mas, but she bared her gums.

"Don't," Mas said. "Don't, because you'll only make me miss you more. You'll only make it harder." Mas brought her legs up. Arms around knees, she hugged herself, as if she was cold. "The sun's almost down. Bie will be starting the ceremony soon. I need to sleep, so I'll be ready."

"I understand," Kai said....*the smell of the rotten paglanut, breaking in ker hand...* "I understand. I...I'll see you then."

Reaching forward, ke patted the youngpouch through her *shangaa*. "Sleep for a bit. Rest." Ke rose and went to the door of the chamber. Stopping there, ke looked back at her, at the way she watched ker.

"I love you, MasTa," ke said.

She didn't smile. "I love you also," she said. "But I wish I didn't."

VOICE:

Anaïs Koda-Levin the Younger

“Clean Euzhan up and get her into a bed,” I told our assistants. “She should be waking up in about ten minutes or so—let Hui or me know if she isn’t responding. Hayat, we’re going to need more whole blood, so after you get Euzhan comfortable, round up three or four of her mi, da, or sibs and get some. Ama, if you’d take charge of the cleanup...”

As they rolled Euzhan away to one of the clinic rooms, I went to the sink and scrubbed the blood and thorn-vine sap from my hands. Hui shuffled alongside me, using the other spigot. When I’d finished drying, I leaned back against the cool wall, frowning through the weariness. Hui shook water from his hands, toweled dry, and tossed the towel in the hamper as I watched his slow, deliberate motions.

I knew what he was going to say before he said it. We’d been working together for that long.

“You did what you could, Anaïs. Now we wait and see.” Hui stretched out one ancient forefinger and tapped me gently under the chin. “We can’t do anything else for her right now.”

“Hui, you saw how close that was.” I shivered at the memory. “The descending oblique was nearly severed. If those claws had dug in a few millimeters deeper...”

“But they didn’t, and Euzhan will fight off infections or she won’t, and we’ll do what we need to do, whatever happens. Ana, what did I tell you when you first started studying with me?”

That finally coaxed a wan, grudging smile through the fog of exhaustion. “Let’s see... ‘Is that expression normal for you, child, or does catatonia run in your family?’ Or how about: ‘I’m afraid to let you handle a broom, much less a scalpel’ Oh, and I couldn’t forget: I’m sure you have *some* qualities, or they wouldn’t have sent you to me. Let’s hope we manage to stumble across them before you kill someone.” I shrugged. “Those were some of the milder quotes that I can recall. I was sure you were going to send me home and tell my family that I was hopeless.”

Hui snorted. The wrinkles around his almond eyes pressed deeper as he grinned. “I very nearly did. You have a good memory, Anaïs, but a selective one. You’ve forgotten the one important thing.”

“And what was that?”

I could see myself in his dark eyes. I could also see the filmy white of the cataracts that were slowly and irrevocably destroying his vision. Not that Hui would ever complain or even admit it, though I’d noticed—silently—that he’d passed nearly all the surgery to me in the past year. “I once told you that

no matter how good you were, you are only a tool in the hands of whatever *kami* inhabits this place. You're a very good tool, Anaïs, and you have done all the work that you're capable of doing for the moment. Be satisfied. Besides, it's no longer you that I'm hounding; it's Hayat and Ama." His forefinger tucked me under my chin once more. "Come on, child."

"I'm not a child, Hui."

"No, you're not. But I still get to call you that. Come on. Dominic will be going apoplectic by now, and we can't afford that at his age."

Hui was right about that. As we came through the doors into the clinic's waiting room, half of the Allen-Shimmura family surged forward toward us, with patriarch Dominic at the fore. I avoided him and tried to give a reassuring smile to Andrea and Hizo, Ochiba's other two children, both of them standing close behind the bulwark of Dominic.

"Well?" the old man snapped. He was as thin as a thorn-vine stalk, and as prickly. His narrow lips were surrounded by furrows, his black, almost pupilless eyes were overhung by folds. His voice had gone to wavering with his great age, but was no less edged for that. The grandson of Rebecca Allen, he was one of the few people left of the third generation. My Geema Anaïs once described Dominic as being like a strip of preserved meat: too salty and dry to decay, and too tough to be worth chewing. "How is she?"

I noticed immediately that Dominic was looking at Hui rather than me, even though the patriarch was aware that I had been in charge of the surgery.

Hui noticed it as well. He was wearing what I thought of as his "go ahead and make your mistake" face, the expressionless and noncommittal mask he wore when one of his students would look up quizzically while making an incision. Hui leaned against the wall and folded his arms over his chest. "Anaïs did the surgery. All I did was assist." He said nothing more. The silence stretched for several seconds before Dominic finally sniffed, glared at Hui angrily, and turned his sour gaze on me.

"Well?" he snapped once more.

"Euzhan's fine for the moment." I found it easier, after the first few words, to put my regard elsewhere. I let my gaze wander, making eye contact with Euzhan's *mi* and *da*, and favoring Elio with a transient smile. "We cleaned up the wound—nothing vital was injured, but we had to repair more muscle damage than I like. She's going to need therapy afterward, but we'll work out some schedule for that later. Actually, she should be waking up in a few minutes. She's going to be groggy and in some pain—Hui's already prepared painkillers for her. Dominic, I'll leave it to you. It would be good if there were some familiar faces around her when she comes out of the anesthetic. But no more than two of you, please."

Dominic's grim expression relaxed slightly. He allowed her a fleeting, brief half-smile. "Stefani, come with me. KaWai, take the rest of the Family home and get them fed. Tell Bui that he's been damned lucky. Damned lucky."

With those abrupt commands, he left the room with his shuffling, slow walk that still somehow managed to appear regal. The rest of the family murmured for a few minutes, thanking me and Hui, and then drifted from the clinic into the cold night. Eventually, only Hui and myself were left.

“He really doesn’t like you, does he?”

That garnered a laugh that might have come from the eastern desert. “You noticed.”

“So what’s the problem between the two of you?”

“What do you *think* is the problem?” I answered shortly, hating the bitterness in my voice but unable to keep the emotion out. “He knows about me, just like you do. ‘Poor Anaïs—from what I’ve heard, there’s no chance *she’s* going to have children. And what about her and Ochiba? Don’t you think they were just a little too *close*...’”

I stopped. Blinked. I was staring at the wall behind Hui, at the pencil and charcoal sketch of Ochiba I’d done years before, while she was pregnant with Euz. Hui had taken the piece without my knowledge from the desk drawer into which I’d stuffed it. He’d matted and framed the drawing, then placed it on the clinic wall as a Naming Day gift. *Don’t ever be timid about your talents*, he’d said. *Gifts like yours are too rare on this world to be hidden. And don’t hide your feelings, either, girl—those are also far too rare.*

Well, Hui, that’s a wonderfully idealistic statement, but it doesn’t fit into this world we’ve made for ourselves. There are some things that are better left stuffed in the drawer.

“You can’t let him intimidate you,” Hui said. “I don’t care how old and venerated he is...”

“That’s *khudda*, Hui, and we both know it. What Dominic says, goes—and that’s true even for the other Families, too. With the exception of Vladimir Allen-Levin and Tozo Koda-Shimmura, Dominic’s the Eldest, and poor Vlad’s so senile—” I cut off my own words with a motion of my hands. “Hui, we don’t need to talk about this. Not now. It’s really not important. Euzhan should be coming around about now. Why don’t you go back and check on her? Dominic would be more comfortable if you were there.”

He didn’t protest, which surprised me. Hui touched my shoulder gently, pressing once, then turned. I sat in one of the ornate clinic chairs (carved by my *da* Derek when Hui had declared me “graduated” from his tutelage) and leaned my head back, closing my eyes. I stayed there for several minutes until I heard Dominic and Hui’s voices, sounding as if they were heading back into the lobby. I didn’t feel like another round of frigid exchanges with Dominic, so I rose and walked into the coldroom lab.

It was warmer there than in his presence.

I set the pot of thorn-vine sap over the bunsen to heat, put on a clean gown and mask, then scrubbed my hands. I plunged still-wet hands into the warm, syrupy goo, then raised them so that the brown-gold, viscous liquid coated my fingers and hands, turning my hands until the sap covered the

skin evenly. After it dried, I pulled out the gurney holding the Miccail body. I stared at it (*him? her?*) for a time, not really wanting to work but feeling a need to do some thing. I straightened the legs, examining again the odd, inexplicable genitalia.

“Ana?”

The voice sent quick shivers through me. I felt my cheeks flush, almost guiltily, and I turned. “El. *Komban wa*. I thought you’d left.”

“Went out to get some air.” Elio stepped into the room. “I, ummm, just wanted to thank you. For Euzhan. Dominic, he...he should have told you himself, but I know that he’s grateful, too.”

“He didn’t need to thank me. Besides, Euzhan’s rather special to me, too.”

“I know. But Dominic still shouldn’t have been so rude.” Not many in his Family dared to criticize Dominic to anyone else; the fact that Elio did dampened some of my irritation with him. Elio tugged at the jacket he wore, pulling down the cloth sleeves. “So that’s your bogman, huh? Elena told me about how she found it. Pretty ugly.”

“Give the poor Miccail a break. You’d be ugly too if you sat in a peat bog for a couple thousand years. It’s hell on the complexion.”

Elio grinned at that. “Yeah, I guess so. Might give me some color, though. Couldn’t hurt.” He leaned forward for a closer look, and I felt myself interposing between Elio and the Miccail, as I had earlier. Elio didn’t seem to notice. After another glance at the body, he moved away.

“You planning to become the next Gabriela?” he asked, then blushed, as he realized that he’d given the words an undercurrent he hadn’t intended. “I mean, you work too much, Ana,” he said quickly. “You’re always here. When’s the last time you did a drawing or went to a Gather?”

Ages. The answer surfaced in my mind. Far too long.

But I couldn’t say any of the words. I only shrugged. “Elio, if I’m going to get anything done...”

“Sorry,” he said reflexively. “I understand.”

He didn’t leave. He watched as I worked patiently on the hand I’d uncovered earlier, straightening the fingers and the ragged webbing between them. When, sometime later, he cleared his throat, I looked up.

“Listen,” Elio said. “When you’re done here, do you have plans? I thought, well, we haven’t been together in a long time...”

Two years. I haven’t been with anyone in almost two years. “El...” The unexpected proposition sent guilty thoughts skittering through my mind. *You’re the last of the Koda-Levin line, unless Mam Shawna gets pregnant again—and she’s already showing signs of menopause. If they heard that you turned someone down, after all this time -*

And then: *Ochiba would tell you to do it. You know she would.*

“El, I just don’t know.”

“Think about it,” he said. Muscles relaxed in his pale face; he gave a faint smile. “It’s not because of today,” he told me. “Just in case that’s what you’re thinking.”

It had been, of course. Anaïs: the charity fuck. “No. Of course not.”

“That’s good. It’s just that I haven’t seen you much recently with all your work, and being with you today, even under the circumstances, I’d forgotten how much I enjoyed talking with you.”

I wondered whether he’d also forgotten the miserable failure the last time we tried to make love.

“I’m sorry, Ana. I don’t know what the problem is,” he said, even though we both knew well enough. I kissed away the apology, pretending that I didn’t care. I think I even managed to smile.

I was fairly certain he’d only asked me as a favor to Ochiba.

“No,” I said. “It’s me. Not you. It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.” But we both had, and Elio had slipped away from my bed as quickly as he could, pleading an early morning appointment we both knew was a fiction.

I had spent the rest of the night alternating between tears and anger.

“Elio, I’m afraid tonight...well, it wouldn’t be good. I’m tired, and I was planning to stay here, just in case Euz needs some help.” I lifted my sapstained fingers. “I was hoping to get some of this work done, also.” The excuses came too fast and probably one too many; I saw in his face that he realized it too. Guilt warred with anxiety over the battle-ground of conscience and won an entirely Pyrrhic victory.

“El, I’m sorry. It’s just that I...” I stopped, deciding that there wasn’t much use in trying to explain what I didn’t fully understand myself. And there was the guilt of turning down an opportunity when I’d yet to become pregnant and those chances seemed to come less and less. “Anyway, I *can do* this some other time, and chances are Euz is going to be fine. Give me a bit, just to make sure that Euz is stabilized and to clean up again...”

I wasn’t sure what it was I saw in his face. “Sure. Good. I’ll come by then. At your Family compound?”

I nodded. We were being so polite now. “I’ll meet you in the common room.”

“Okay. See you then.” Awkwardly, he leaned over and kissed me. His lips were dry, the touch almost brotherly, but I enjoyed it. Before I could pull his head down to me again, he straightened. Cold air replaced his warmth. “See you about NinthHour?”

“That would be fine.”

After Elio had left, I halfheartedly cleaned some of the clinging peat from the folds of the Miccail’s face. “What were you like?” I asked the misshapen, crushed flesh. “And do you have any advice for someone who isn’t sure she just made the right decision?”

The ancient body didn’t answer. I sighed and went to the sink to scrub my hands.

Ama Martínez-Santos

There were times that Ama regretted having been apprenticed to Hui. However, Geema Kyra had given her no choice in the matter, and an elder's word was always law. Hui was never satisfied—no matter how fast Ama moved or how well she did something, Hui always pointed out how she could have done it faster, better, or more effectively another way. Hayat was given the same harsh treatment, but that didn't lessen the impact. Ama was fairly certain that it was not possible to satisfy Hui.

And then there was Anaïs. She was just fucking weird. A good doctor, yes, and at least she'd give out a crumb of praise now and then, but she was... strange. The way she used all her free time lately examining that nasty body Elena had found....

Anaïs had told her to put the Miccail's body back in the coldroom. Ama threw a sheet over the thing before she moved it—she couldn't stand to see the empty bag of alien flesh; she hated the earthy smell of the creature and the leathery, unnatural feel of its skin. The thing was creepy—it didn't surprise Ama that it had been killed.

Ama had heard her *mi* and *da* talking—there was a nasty rumor that Anaïs and Ochiba had been lovers, though as Thandi always pointed out, Ochiba had died after giving birth to Euzhan, so if Anaïs was a *rezu*, then it hadn't stopped Ochiba from sleeping with men. Ama sometimes wondered what it would be like, making love to another woman....

She shivered. That was a sure way to be shunned. That's what had happened to Gabriela—the second and final time she had been shunned. .

Ama wheeled the gurney into the coldroom. She slid the bog body into its niche and hurried out of the room.

She didn't look back as she turned out the lights. Afterward, she scrubbed her hands at the sink in the autopsy room, twice, even though she knew that would make her late changing Euzhan's dressings and Hui would yell at her again.

VOICE:

Anais Koda-Levin the Younger

Most of my erotic memories don't involve fucking. I suppose the wet piston mechanics of sex never aroused me as much as other things. Smaller things. More intimate things. I can close my eyes and remember.....at one of the Gathers, dancing the whirlwind with a few dozen others out on the old shuttle landing pad, when I noticed Marshall Koda-Schmidt watching from the side in front of the bonfire. I was twelve and just a half year past my menarche, which had come much later than I'd wanted. Marsh was older, much older—one of the fifth generation—and in my eyes appeared to be far more sensual than the gawky boys my own age. He stood there, trying to keep up a conversation with Hui over the racing, furious beat of the musicians. I kept watching him as I danced, laughing as I turned and pranced through the intricate steps, and I noticed we both had the same stone on our necklaces. I thought that an omen. During one of the partner changes, there was suddenly an open space between us, and Marsh looked up from his conversation out to the dance. His gaze snared mine; he smiled. At that moment, one of the logs fell and the bonfire erupted into a coiling, writhing column of bright fireflies behind him. I was caught in those eyes, those older and, I thought, wiser eyes. I couldn't take my eyes off him, and every time I looked, it seemed he was also watching me. I smiled; he laughed and applauded me. I felt flushed and giddy, and I laughed louder and danced harder, sweating with the energy even in the night cold, stealing glances to-ward Marshall. We smiled together, and as I danced, I felt I was dancing with him. For him. To him...

...Chi-Wa's fingers stroking my bare shoulder and running down my arm, my skin almost electric under his gentle touch, inhaling his warm, sweet breath as we lay there with our mouths open, so close, so close but not quite touching. When his hand had traversed the slope of my arm and slipped off to tumble into the nest of my lap, our lips finally met at the same time...

...sitting with Ochiba at the preparation table in the Allen-Shimmura compound's huge kitchen, peeling sweet-melon for the dessert. We were just talking, not saying anything important really, but the words didn't matter. I was intoxicated by the sound of Ochiba's voice, drunk on her laugh and the smell of her hair and the sheer familiar presence of her. I'd just finished cutting up one of the melons and Ochiba reached across me to steal a piece. She sucked the fruit into her mouth in exaggerated mock triumph while the orange-red juice ran down her chin in twin streaks. For some reason, that struck us both as hilarious, and we burst into helpless laughter. Ochiba reached over and we hugged, and I was so aware of her body, of the feel of

her against me, of how soft her breasts seemed under the faux-cotton blouse. Then the confusion hit, making me blush as I realized that what I was feeling was something I wasn't prepared or expecting to feel, and knowing by the way Ochiba's embrace suddenly tightened around me that she was feeling it as well, and was just as frightened and awed by the emotions as I was...

Moments. Those fleeting seconds when the sexual tension is highest, when you're alone in a universe of two where nothing else can intrude.

Of course, then reality usually hits. After the Gather, I turned down two other offers of company and went back to my compound alone, with one last smile for Marshall. I left my outer door open, certain that Marshall would come to me that night, but he never did.

Chi-Wa was so involved in his own arousal and pleasure that I quickly realized that I was nothing more than another anonymous vessel for his glorious seed.

And Ochiba, the only one of them who was truly important to me...well, in another year she was dead.

Tonight, I was keeping reality away with a glass of *da* Joel's pale ale, and trying to stop thinking that it was late and that I wished I'd just told Elio no. There was no one else in the common room; Che, Joel, and Derek had all grinned, made quick excuses, and left when I'd mentioned that I was staying up because Elio was coming over. I requested the room to play me Gabriela's *Reflections on the Miccail* and leaned back in the chair as the first pulsing chords of the dobra sounded. The chair was one of *da* Jason's creations, with a padded, luxurious curved back that seemed to wrap and enfold you—very womblike, very private: I'd never known Jason, who had died when I was very young, but his was my favorite listening chair. The family pet, a verrechats Derek had rescued from a spring flood five years before, came up and curled into my lap. I stroked the velvety, nearly transparent skin of the creature, and watched its heart pulse behind the glassy muscles and porcelain ribs. I shut my eyes and let the rising drone of the music carry me somewhere else. I barely heard the clock chiming NinthHour.

"I never thought Gabriela was much of a composer."

"She'd have agreed with you," I answered. "And I think you're both wrong. She was a fine composer; the problem was that she just wasn't much of a musician. You have to imagine what she was trying to play rather than what actually came out. Hello, Elio."

I told the room to lower the music and pulled the chair back up. The verrechats glared at me in annoyance and went off in search of a more stable resting place. Elio gave me an uncertain smile. "You looked so comfortable, I almost didn't want to interrupt."

"Sorry. Music's my meditation. I spend more time here than's good for me."

He nodded. I nodded back. Great conversationalists, both of us. I should have kept the music up. At least we could have both pretended to be listening

to it. “Any change in Euzhan?” he asked at last, just as the silence was threatening to swallow us. I hurried into the opening, grateful.

“When I left, she was sleeping. Hui’s keeping her doped up right now. When I left, Dominic was still there, but Hui was trying to convince him that camping out in the clinic wasn’t going to help. I’m not sure he was making much progress.”

“Geeda Dominic can be pretty strong-willed.”

“Uh-huh. And water can be pretty wet.”

Elio grinned. The grin faded slowly, and he was just Elio again. We both looked at each other. “Umm,” he began.

If you’re going through with this, then do it, I told myself. “Elio, let’s go to my room,” I said, trying to make it sound like something other than “And get this over with.” I was rewarded with a faint smile, so maybe Elio wasn’t as reluctant as I’d thought. I’d been planning to let him back out now, if that’s what he wanted, figuring that if this *was* simply a guilt fuck, we were both better off without it—for most women I knew, sex simply for the sake of sex was something you did the first year or two after menarche. By then, you’d gone through most of the available or interested males on Mictlan. In my case, that hadn’t been too many, not after the first time around. Since then, with one glorious and forbidden exception, the only regular liaison I’ve had has been with Hui’s speculum and some cold semen, once a month.

Even that hasn’t worked out.

All that was long ago. Forget it. The voice wasn’t entirely convincing, but I held out my hand, and Elio took the invitation without hesitating. Tugging on my fingers, he pulled me toward him, and this time he kissed me. There was a hunger in the kiss this time, and I found parts of me awakening that I thought had been dead.

I suddenly wanted this to work, and that increased my nervousness. I wondered if he could tell how scared I was.

Elio either sensed that fright, or he’d learned a lot since the last time. In my admittedly noncomprehensive experience, men tended to go straight for the kill, shedding clothes on the way so they didn’t snag them on rampant erections. Maybe that was just youthful exuberance, but I’d spent many post-coital hours crying, believing that the quickness and remoteness was because they wanted to get the deed done as fast as possible. Because it was *me*. ‘Just doing my duty, ma’am. Have to make sure that we increase the population, after all. Nothing personal.’

Except that sex is always personal and always intimate, no matter what the reasons for it might be. In the midst, I might look up to see my partner’s eyes closed, a look almost of pain on his face as he thrust into me, and I knew he was gone, lost in imagined couplings with someone else.

Not *with* me. Never *with* me. Never together.

Elio pulled away. I breathed, watching him. He was still here. “This way,” I said, and led him off.

I'd done some quick housekeeping before he'd come, and the room actually looked halfway neat except for the mirror, as always draped in clothing. Through the folds I caught a reflection of someone who looked like me, her face twisted in uncertain lines.

When I closed the door and turned, Elio was closer to me than I expected, and I started, leaning back against the jamb. He touched my cheek, stroked my hair. As *his* hand cupped the back of my head, he pulled me into him, his arms going around me. Neither of us had said anything. I leaned my head against his shoulder. He continued to stroke my hair.

I wondered what he was thinking, and when I turned my head up to look, he kissed me again: gently, warmly, his lips slightly parted. This time the kiss was longer, more demanding, and I found myself opening my mouth to him, pulling his head down even further. His hands dropped from my shoulders; his fingers teased my nipples through my blouse, and they responded to his touch, ripening and making me shudder.

When we finally broke apart again, his pale eyes searched mine with soft questions. I reached behind us and touched the wall plate, the lights gliding down into darkness as I did so. "I can't see, Ana."

"You don't need to."

"I'd like to look at you."

"Elio..."

A pause. Silence. He waited.

Biting my lower lip, I touched the plate again, letting the lights rise to a golden dimness. I stepped deliberately away from him. Standing in front of my bed, I undid the buttons of my blouse, of my pants. I held the clothes to me, hugging myself, then took a breath and let them fall to the floor. I stood before Elio, defiantly naked. I shivered, though the room wasn't cold.

I knew what he was seeing. I might keep my mirror covered, but I knew.

Under a wide-featured face, he saw a woman's body, with small breasts and flared hips. Extending below the triangle of pubic hair, though, there was something wrong, some-thing that didn't belong: a hint of curved flesh.

An elongated, enlarged clitoris, Hui had told my mother, who noticed it at birth: a paranoid, detailed examination of every newborn child is Mictlan's birthright. A slight to moderate hermaphroditism. I doubt that it's anything to stop her from reaching her Naming. Everything else is female and normal. She may never notice.

Maybe Hui would have been right had everything stayed as it was when I was a child. I certainly paid no attention to my small deformity, nor did anyone else. I didn't seem much different from the other little girls I saw. After menarche, though....My periods from the beginning were so slight as to be nearly unnoticeable and the pale spottings weren't at all like the dark menstrual flow of the other women. I also began to notice how sensitive I was there, how the oversized nub of flesh had begun to change, to swell until the

growth protruded well past my labial folds, pushing them apart before ducking under the taut and distended clitoral hood.

Over the years, even after menarche, the change continued. The last time I glanced at a mirror, I thought I looked like an effeminate and not particularly pretty young man with his penis tucked between his legs, pretending to be a woman.

Elio's gaze never drifted that low. I noticed, and tried to pretend that it didn't matter. I wanted to believe that it didn't matter. He took a step toward me. He cupped my breasts in his hands, his skin so pale against mine. I fumbled with his shirt, finally getting it open and sliding it down his shoulders. Elio was thin, though his waist rounded gently at the belt line.

His skin was very warm.

I pulled him into bed on top of me...and sometime later...later...

No, I'm sorry. I can't say. I won't say.

JOURNAL ENTRY:

Gabriela Rusack

Gwas a slow learner when it came to the difference between love and sex. Oh, I knew that people could enjoy sex without being in love with the person they're with at the moment. God knows I experienced that myself often enough...and often enough kicked myself in the morning for paying attention to whining hormones.

As I grew older, I slowly realized that the reverse was also a possibility—I could be in love with someone and *not* have sex with them, if that wasn't in the cards. I needed friends more than I needed lovers, and I found that sex can actually destroy love.

Lacina was my college roommate, and my friend. At the time, I was still mainly heterosexual, though I'd already had my first tentative encounters with women. I think Lacina suspected that I was experimenting, but we never really talked about it. I dated guys and slept with some of them, just as she did, so if on rare occasions a girlfriend stayed overnight, she just shrugged and said nothing. One Friday night in my junior year, neither of us had a date. We were drinking cheap wine and watching erotic holos in our apartment, and the wine and the holos had made us both silly and horny. I remember putting my arm around Lacina, playfully, and how sweet her lips were when I finally leaned over to kiss her, and her breathy gasp when I touched her breasts... We tumbled into my bed and I made love to her, and showed her how to make love to me. But the next morning, when the wine fumes had cleared....

After that night, it was never the same between us. There was a wall inside Lacina that had never been there before, and she flinched if I'd come near her or touch her. I don't know why she was retreated. I don't know what old guilt I'd tapped; afterward, it wasn't a subject on which she'd allow discussion. She pretended that our night together had never happened. She pretended that things were the same as they had been, but they weren't, and we both knew it. At the end of the semester, she moved out.

No, sex and love are basically independent of each other. Not that it matters for me, not anymore. My closest friends are dead, and those here on Mictlan that I thought were friends won't talk to me at all anymore.

No more sex. No more love. I spend my remaining days with the only passion I have left, the only passion allowed me: the cold and dead Miccail.

Now if sex, love, and passion are intricate, varied, and dangerous for us, then the sexuality of the Miccail must have been positively labyrinthian. I can only imagine how convoluted their relationships were, with the midmale sex complicating things. I wonder *how* they loved, and I try to decipher the answer from the few clues left: the stelae, the crumbling ruins, the ancient artifacts. I wonder why this world saw fit to add another sex into the biological mix, but the past holds its secrets too well.

What frightens me is that I'm certain it's important for us to know. The Miccail died only a thousand years ago. With all the artifacts, all the structures they left behind, none of them we've found are any younger than that. From what I've been able to determine, the collapse and decline of the Miccail began another thousand years before their extinction, possibly linked with the rapid disappearance of the mid-males, all mention of whom vanish from the stelae at that point. One short millennium later—barely a breath in the life of the world and the Miccail's own long history—and the Miccail were gone, every last one.

It's almost as if Something didn't like them.

And now *we're* here, filling our lungs and our bodies with Mictlan-stuff. Yes, we sampled and tested Mictlan's air, water and soil, let it flow through the assorted filters and gauges until the machines stamped the world with their cold imprimatur. The proportion of gases was within our body tolerances. We could taste the winds of this world and live. Our lungs would move, the oxygen would flow in our blood. But Mictlan is not Earth. The atmosphere of a world holds its own life, and life moves within it.

So we take a deep breath of Mictlan and we bring the alien presence into our lungs because we have no choice. We will slowly become Mictlan. Mictlan will become us.

And the Something that obliterated the Miccail will take a long look at us: because we are here, because we breathe, because we drink the water and eat the plants.

I wonder if that Something will like us better than it did the Miccail

INTERLUDE:

KaiSa

After leaving Masta, Kai had gone directly to ker rooms in the TeTa house and packed the few belongings which were truly kers into ker traveling pouch: the well-used grinding stones for herbs and potions which JaqSa had given ker as a parting gift the first time ke'd left the sacred Sa island called AnglSaiye; the parchment book of medicines, written in the private language of the Sa with the sacred inks only the Sa knew how to make; the relic of VeiSaTi which was ker authorization to move freely outside the island; the tools of sacrifice. Ke left behind the fine anklet BieTe had carved for ker from redstone, with crystalline images of BieTe and MasTa's sacred animals set in the swirling, ornate patterns. Keeping the jewelry would only remind ker of Bie and Mas, and of the children ke had helped to sire here.

It was painful enough to leave. It was even more painful to have to remember.

Kai shouldered ker pack and pushed open the door. A hand pushed ker back inside: NosXe, one of BieTe's adopted sons. Kai stumbled and fell backward, striking ker left shoulder hard on the flagstone floor. "My father said you would try to leave," Nos grumbled. "You don't know how much BieTe and MasTa care for you, KaiSa."

"I know all too well, Nos," Kai answered. "And if I didn't love them in return, I wouldn't be leaving now. Cycles from now, if you become Te, you will understand that. Tell me, Nos, did BieTe or MasTa send you here?"

NosXe didn't have to answer; the grim stubbornness on his face told Kai that the young son of Bie had acted on his own. Kai rubbed ker sore shoulder, knowing it would shame Nos even more to see that he had injured a Sa.

"I thought not. Your Ta and Te know that it's the curse of Sa to always travel, to leave those they love most. Your Ta and Te know that no matter how much they would like me to stay, I cannot. And they cannot make me stay, not without raising the wrath of VeiSaTi Kerself. Is that what you're willing to risk, Nos? Are you willing to defy a god?"

Always before, that had worked. It was the threat of VeiSaTi's anger that kept all Sa safe. Kai thought that the warning, a doctrine taught to all of the CieTiLa—The People—from childhood, had worked now. Still rubbing ker shoulder, ke got to ker feet and started to walk out past the grim-faced Nos, who still blocked the doorway. But as ke brushed past, Nos reached out with a hand and grabbed Kai's shoulder with his right hand, his talons slightly extended.

"No," Nos started to say, but Kai had already reacted.

Kai slapped ker left hand on top of Nos', claws out. At the same time, ke turned ker hip back and brought ker right arm on top of Nos', dropping ker weight. Cloth tore on Kai's shoulder, but Nos howled in pain as his wrist was torqued. The much larger Xe collapsed to his knees to escape the pressure, and Kai completed the pin, taking the struggling Nos down to the floor. Holding Nos' wrist with one hand, ke reached out with ker long fingers and pressed them on either side of Nos' neck, just below the ears—closing the arteries. Nos' struggles became weaker; a few seconds later, he went limp.

Kai released the pin. Ke checked to make sure that Nos was still breathing, then stood. "The Sa are also taught to protect those they love," Kai told the unconscious Nos. "That is another thing you must learn. What you love most is also the most dangerous to you."

Ke stepped over Nos. Ke found that now that it was over, ke was shaking from the sudden encounter. The settlement of BieTe and MasTa, which had once seemed so peaceful and welcoming, now frightened ker.

Ke walked away, almost at a run.

BieTe had started the ceremonial fire on the bluff over-looking the sea. KaiSa could see the smear of dark smoke against the twilight sky and the silhouetted figures of BieTe's people as they moved in the preliminary dance of welcome to the new infant. But Kai saw them only in the distance.

Ke moved quickly from the settlement into the woods. A few of the Je and Ja saw ker, but—under the bonds of servitude and at the bottom of the social structure of the CieTiLa—there was no chance that any of them would, like NosXe, challenge Kai's right to go where ke wanted, whenever ke wanted. One of the Ja watched as ke moved away from the cluster of wood and stone buildings; Kai knew that the word would get to BieTe, either from the Ja or from NosXe, as soon as he returned to the ceremony, but by that time it would be too late.

I'm sorry that it had to be this way, Kai told the distant image of the fire. BieTe, MasTa, I'm sorry to miss the ceremony for my own daughter, but in your hearts, you understand. You must understand, You know the laws as well as I do, A Sa must give ker Gift to all CieTiLa, and that means I must hurt the two of you,

It means I must hurt myself,

KaiSa put ker back to the fire, to BieTe and MasTa, and to ker daughters and sons, and moved into the forest.

Under the canopy of sweet-leaves, the twilight quickly shifted to full night. The wind was from the west, shivering the leaves with its chill and bringing the scent of flowers. A wingclaw called from its night roost high in one of the trees, the creature's ululating whoop raising the hairs on Kai's arms. The phosphorescent mosses on the many-trunked trees framed the darkness, and the double moons were up, Chali just setting, though Quali was well above the horizon in the east, bright enough that ke could almost see the colors of the leaves. The sound of ker feet shushing through the fallen leaves

seemed the loudest sound, though the rhythmic *kuh-whump* of the slickskins calling for their mates in a nearby pond was a constant backdrop.

It was tempting to stop, to try and listen to the voice of VeiSaTi in the rustling and chirping of the world, but there was no time for that now.

Kai knew that there was a wayhouse not far distant. Until ke had actually made the decision to leave, ke had given no thought to where ke might go next. Now, ke determined to stop for the rest of the night at the wayhouse. Ke lengthened ker stride, falling into ker quick walking pace.

When Quali had reached the zenith, its silver light painting the edges of the leaves, Kai came upon the High Road and the wayhouse. The High Road was the main artery through the CieTiLa lands, a trail of flagged stone, a path between all the settlements of the CieTiLa designed by the legendary Sa leader NasiSaTu over six *terduva* ago, and completed by ker successors after NasiSaTu's sacrificial death. The various segments of the road were maintained by the Te and Ta of the lands through which they passed, part of the payment for the services of the mendicant Sa order.

The *nasituda* set in front of the wayhouse declared it to be on the border of the territory of GaiTe and CiTa. For the first time since ke had left, Kai felt ker muscles relax fully, releasing a tension ke hadn't even known ke'd been holding. A light from an oil lamp glimmered behind the translucent window, made from the *brais* of one of the huge but slow thunderbeasts: someone else was already in the wayhouse. Kai gave a low, warbling call of greeting as ke approached the building, waited the polite sequence of sixteen slow breaths, then entered, brushing aside the thunderbeast hide door covering.

The wayhouse was built along typical CieTiLa lines: a large common room where travelers could talk and eat; a small kitchen to the left for food preparation and storage, and three tiny sleeping cubicles to the right. The privacy curtain was drawn on one of those, and a Sa poked ker head out as Kai entered, rubbing ker eyes sleepily.

"Kai?"

"AbriSa!"

Abri tumbled out of the low sleeping cubicle and ran to Kai. The two Sa embraced, laughing. Kai had come to the island some time after Abri's arrival, and the older youth had been one of Kai's mentors, comforting the disoriented and frightened child of three cycles and helping to teach Kai the intricate structure of Sa life. It was Abri who, when Kai had taken First Vows, had taken an inked needle to Kai's chest and marked ker with the symbol of AnglSaiye. Kai's debt to Abri had been paid long ago, when Kai had kerself taken one of the arriving children as ker special project, passing along the knowledge Abri had given ker. Abri had left the AnglSaiye sanctuary long before Kai had been given JaqSaTu's blessing and ker own sanction to begin ker travels through the CieTiLa lands. Kai held Abri at arm's length, looking at ker. ke could see the cycles and the pain of many separations in ker face, in the flesh-hewn valleys of experience VeiSaTi had etched there.

"Where are you traveling to, Abri?" Kai asked when they finally pulled apart. *Where are you going? Where have you been?* Those were the eternal questions of Sa meeting on the road.

"Actually, I was looking for you, among others."

"For me? You're joking. Why?"

Abri didn't answer. Instead, ke pulled away from Kai, and the furrows in ker face deepened as ke frowned. "Let me fix some *kav*. You looked tired," ke said.

Kai watched Abri as ke went into the kitchen and poured the bittersweet, herbal brew into two wooden mugs. "I've been on the island for the past two cycles," ke said as ke placed the pottery jug back into the coldbox sunk into the kitchen's floor. Ke brought the mugs out and handed one to Kai. Ke sipped carefully—"once for TeTa, again for XeXa, and last for JeJa," three being the sacred number of VeiSaTi—then sank down onto one of the large pillows at the edge of the eating pit. "There have been disturbing rumors, Kai," ke said finally. "I'm just one of several who have been sent out by JaqSaTu to bring all Sa back to the island."

The words sent the *kav* swirling, almost spilling from the mug as Kai started. *To bring all the Sa back to AnglSaiye, bring all of us back from our journeys....* It was something that had never been done before, in all the cycles upon cycles written down on the *nasitudas* set on AnglSaiye's shores. It was something Kai could very nearly not comprehend. "I don't understand..."

"You will, when you get back there." Abri sipped ker *kav* once more, staring into the brown depths of the mug. "I really can't say more, except to say that it is becoming a dangerous world for Sa."

Kai, remembering BieTe and MasTa, and ker departure of only a few hours ago, opened hard-ridged lips in a grin. "Love is always dangerous, AbriSa. I have the bruises to prove it."

But Abri didn't share in the jest. Abri's dark, expressive eyes regarded Kai's, and there was pain in ker gaze.

"This is different, Kai," ke said. "This is something no Sa has faced before."

CONTEXT:

Masafumi Martinez-Santos

Masa grunted as he slung the fish onto the kitchen's well-used preparation table. The river grouper was a meter long and nearly twenty-five kilos. A steel cable ran through the mouth and out

the gill slits, and thin streamers of blood trickled from the flank and dripped from Masa's overalls onto the stone-flagged floor.

Masa leaned his gig and spear against the wall, and pulled the straps of the stiff, sap-impregnated overalls from his shoulders. Stepping out of the legs, he tossed the overalls down the stairwell to the washing rooms. He stood in the kitchen in soggy woolen underclothes.

"I suppose you expect me to clean that?" his *mi* Adja said. She was pulling loaves from the oven, and the yeasty smell of warm bread fought the river scent of the grouper. Adja moved stiffly—her spine had fused in early childhood, not allowing her to bend over or to turn without moving her whole body. She turned like a marionette lashed to hidden strings, using her legs to move up and down.

"I did the hard work. Should've seen it fight. The groupers are running back to the sea early this year. The swarm knocked me down twice before I snagged this one, and you know how fucking cold the river is. The overalls leaked—Luis needs to put more thornvine sap on them. I'm freezing and wet and hungry." He started to reach past Adja to the bread steaming on the counter.

Adja slapped his hand away. The *crack* of her hand on his was surprisingly loud. "There's your dinner, dripping all over my clean floor. You can have *sashimi*, or you can help me gut and fillet the beast."

"Damn it, Adja..."

"Damn it yourself, Masa. Just because it's my rotation in the kitchen doesn't mean I do all the work."

"I need to go *out*, Adja."

Adja sniffed. "So who are you seeing now?"

Masa grinned. "Whoever wants to see me. I'm not picky."

"So I've heard." Adja removed another tray of loaves from the oven, rotating her whole upper body as she set the bread on the cooling racks. "Masa, you need to be careful. There's talk in the Baths."

"What kind of talk?"

"That you're sometimes rough. That you can hurt. Masa, I've told you—with your past, you can't afford that."

"*Khudda*," Masa said. "Who's saying that crap about me?"

Adja shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'm just telling you for your own good."

Masa grimaced. "All right, so I'm told. If they don't like me, they don't have to fuck me, do they?"

Adja's face hardened. Her eyes narrowed, the lips pursed. If Masa noticed, he pretended not to care. She opened a drawer and rummaged in it. Steel clashed. She pulled out a filleting knife and laid it alongside the grouper. "Take care of the fish. Then you can do whatever you want to do."

Almost, Masa refused. But that would have led to Adja complaining to his mam Seela, and then Geema Kyra would have gotten involved, and the

rest of the Family. Too much trouble. Instead, as he scraped the scales from the grouper and slit open the belly, he pretended that it was one of *them*, one of the women talking about him in the Baths.

The thought gave him an erection that lasted until long afterward. . .

VOICE:

Elio Allen-Shimmura

Dominic wouldn't talk to me for three days after I was with Anaïs, enclosing himself in an atmosphere of cold, silent fury. Whenever he saw me in the compound his eyes narrowed until they looked like Tlilapan: black ponds nearly hidden in the folds holding them. His lips pressed together until they appeared to form more of a sphincter than a mouth, and he would make sure I noticed his glare, which was damn near incandescent.

For my part, I made certain that he noticed that I noticed, and didn't give him the reaction he wanted. I may love Dominic, but I don't *like* him.

A lot of the Family feel that way, even if very few of them will admit it.

At the table at SixthHour, where he always ruled the conversation, I was pointedly not invited to offer my opinion on the subject *de jour*, and when I deigned to do so anyway, there was a quick silence as everyone paid rapt attention to the food on their plates. Not that it mattered—the subject was always Euzhan and her progress. Funny how Dominic managed to avoid mentioning Anaïs's name during those conversations, even though I knew Ana was tending Euz as if she were her own child.

I'm certain that word was judiciously leaked to Dominic from the others in my Family that I spent a night with someone else the night *after* I'd been with Anaïs. It didn't require a hell of a psychological background to figure out the reasons underlying that decision. Even so, I was amazed at the relief I felt when, yes, the equipment still worked, thank you very much.

Finally, on the fourth day, as I was sitting in the common room talking with young Dominic and Sarah a little past FirstHour, Geeda Dominic came into the room. He dismissed Domi and Sarah with a barely perceptible nod of his head; they scattered. Andrea, Bui, and Hizo, noisily playing jack-stones in a corner, judiciously decided to continue the game somewhere else.

It was suddenly very quiet in the room. I could hear the soft hissing of the peat brick fire in the stone hearth. I watched Dominic sit—no one else ever dared sit in *that* chair, one of Jason Koda-Levin's intricate creations. The chair was (very quietly) called "the throne" by most of us. Dominic grumbled and muttered to himself until he was comfortable, holding his hands out

toward the glowing peat, then took a long, slow inhalation that wobbled the loose skin under his chin. I waited. Finally, he looked at me.

“Well, is it true?”

“Is *what* true, Geeda Dominic?” I knew what he wanted to hear, but I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction.

He snorted. Whatever anyone might think of Dominic, his advanced age hadn’t made him senile, at least not in that way. “You’re not stupid, Elio, though you are often an ass. I’m too old to enjoy playing games that simply waste time, and I’d appreciate it if you don’t indulge in them.”

“All the nasty rumors to the contrary, Anaïs is female, Geeda,” I told him. “A woman. Pretty damn good in bed, too.”

Dominic nearly hissed at that—that was obviously not the answer he wanted. He rose from his chair faster than I’d seen him move in years.

“I don’t understand you, Elio,” he barked, standing in front of me, leaning heavily on his cane; I could see his hand on the copper-plated knob, with the extra vestigial finger jutting uselessly from the side. “You know what she did to Ochiba.”

“Anaïs didn’t do anything to Ochiba, Geeda. Ochiba died from complications after childbirth. It’s a damned shame, but it happens.”

“No!” Dominic spat, as I hit the nerve I’d aimed for. “Ochiba was *killed*, killed because of that...that *rezu’s* jealousy. Ochiba told me that. She stood in my room and said that Euzhan would be her last pregnancy—all because Anaïs had told her it was ‘dangerous.’ She said that Anaïs didn’t even want her to have this one. Anaïs didn’t want Ochiba to have another child so she could have Ochiba for herself. And when Ochiba had a child anyway, the vile woman took the opportunity and killed her.”

I’d heard parts of this horrible speculation of Dominic’s before, in whispered gossip from the older Family members. He’d begun to voice these suspicions not long after Ochiba’s death, and the theory had grown and solidified over the years. This was the first time he’d spoken of it openly to me; the blind anger in his voice was nearly visible. “Geeda, we both know that’s not what happened,” I said. He didn’t listen. He was full into his tirade now, and no mere truth was going to dam the vitriolic flood.

“...and yet you went to her, I’ve talked to Diana, who has seen Anaïs in the Baths, even though she tries to hide herself. She’s deformed, she’ll never have children, and because of her, Ochiba—who gave us four named children and would have given us more—is dead. Dead because she and Anaïs were—” He started to say the word. I saw him form it, and then close his mouth before it could emerge. *Lovers*. “Yet you’d lie for her,” he finished.

“She saved Euzhan.” *And I like her*, I should have added. *She and Ochiba may have been more than our little society wants to tolerate, but I don’t care—I never saw Ochiba happier than she was during those months when she and Anaïs were close. I enjoy Anaïs’ company. I think she has a wonderful laugh, on those rare occasions when you can manage to coax one out of her. She works harder than any-*

one around here, and at least a dozen people we can both name wouldn't be here if Anaïs wasn't the best damned doctor we have. I think she's been hurt enough, and she doesn't deserve the crap you've handed her over the last few years.

But I didn't say any of that. Dominic wouldn't have listened, anyway.

"Hui saved Euzhan," Dominic snapped back, his mouth closing sharply on the last syllable. "Anaïs is a freak, and she's responsible for Ochiba's death. I know it, you know it. She shouldn't be tolerated, or she'll corrupt someone else the way she did Ochiba. We can't afford that. No Family can."

"Geeda, Ochiba was her own woman. Any decisions she made, she made on her own. Anaïs didn't kill Ochiba; Mictlan killed her."

"Phab!" Dominic slammed the end of the cane on the floor for emphasis. "I won't stand betrayal, Elio. You remember that, boy. I won't stand it. The time is coming when Families will need to make hard decisions. Hard decisions—do you hear me?"

Dominic left the room with a last glare at me. I heard him snarling like a grumbler at the children in the hallway as he passed. They gave him meek, quick apologies. I sat in the chair assessing my various mental wounds; none of them seemed mortal. I figured I was set for at least another week of the Distant Glares, though.

I did wonder why I'd lied. *Anaïs is female, Geeda...* Well, honestly, Geeda Dominic, I'm not certain. A few years ago when I was with her, that extra ridge of flesh—like a featureless, thick finger shielding her opening—had confused me. Defeated me. Distracted as I was by it, well, I just *couldn't*... That wasn't Anaïs' fault; it was mine.

This time...I still wasn't sure what had happened.

This time, I'd managed to get beyond her deformity, to put it out of my mind. I concentrated on her face, her breasts, her skin, her kiss. And once I was inside her, hell, she didn't feel much different than any other woman I've been with, and we were both responding. I was getting close...then I remember her shriek, which I think was more surprise than pain. There was a quick, strange hardness intruding between us, like a cock but smaller. I came at almost the same time.

And so did she. I heard her gasp, and cry out. And then...

I rolled away from her, shocked at the sudden sticky wetness all over my stomach, all over hers. As Ana sat up, her eyes frantic, I caught a glimpse of something in the tangle of pubic hair, like a child's uncircumcised cock. There was blood, too, at the tip, as if it had just torn free from wherever it had been attached. The fold of flesh guarding her opening was gone. I said something, I don't really remember what—probably something inane and stupid like "Are you all right?"

She was frantic, but again I think it was more from fear than any pain. Or maybe that's just rationalization, because I didn't go to her. Hell, if something that weird happened to me...Anyway, I stood there, that stuff dripping slowly down my stomach, thicker and more yellow than my come. She kept saying,

“What’s happening to me?” over and over, wiping at herself with the sheet and then clutching it to her like a shield. She turned away from me. “Get out, Elio,” she said harshly, then more gently: “Please, Elio. Please go.”

Her naked back was to me. I could see her shoulders begin to shake with the first tears.

A truly compassionate person would have stayed with her. A person who wanted to be her friend as well as a lover would have stayed, would have shown her some compassion. Half the people in our generation have physical defects of one kind or another, varying from trivial to serious. So this one shouldn’t matter—look at the spots on my skin.

“Please go,” she told me. “I really want you to go...”

...and, well, I *went*.

I’ve tried to figure that one out, and the truth is that for that one moment, I was as disgusted and repelled by what I saw in front of me as Dominic would have been. I felt, I don’t know...

Dirty. Unclean. Contaminated.

I left. I took a long shower afterward, cleaning myself over and over again, and hating myself for the fact that it mattered.

It wasn’t Ana’s fault. None of it was her fault—I don’t know *what* she is, but she didn’t ask to be made that *way*. I could see that much in her eyes, in the way she acted with me just before. Maybe that’s why I lied to Dominic now, trying to make up for past failures. Trying to do penance for some of the guilt.

Too fucking bad I didn’t feel particularly absolved.

CONTEXT:

Hui Koda-Schmidt

“S ince Elio has been seeing her, I demand to know—as eldest of my family, Hui—whether Anaïs is a woman or an abomination.”

Hui grimaced. On his desk was a crystalline card. The light from his desk lamp coaxed a three-dimensional, moving image of a smiling oriental woman from the card’s surface: Akiko Koda, his ancestor. The card, his mam Melissa had told him, had been her ID card for the *Ibn Battuta*. Melissa had been given the card by her mam, Eleanor, who had been Akiko’s daughter.

Lately, the card was Hui’s meditation in times of stress. He’d certainly never known Akiko, who had died in the Great Storm of 23. Eleanor had given Hui the card just before her final illness a few years ago. “I look at this sometimes and pretend that she’s still there, listening to me, even though I

was only a year old when she died," Eleanor had told Hui. "Maybe she'll be there for you, too. I will be. I promise."

Hui wondered if Akiko's *kami* was watching, and what she might think of Mictlan now. Akiko's image turned toward him, slightly blurred through his cataracts, and smiled its eternal smile. Decades ago, Eleanor had told him, the card could speak: Akiko's voice, giving her name. No longer. There was only the silent presence of his great-grandmam.

"Anaïs is a fine doctor, Dominic. That's all you need to know. That's all I'm telling you."

"*Khudda*, Hui." Dominic waved his cane, his six-fingered, knobby-jointed hand clutching the polished knob of wood at the end. "I'm not asking much of you. You know her; you examine her every few months. You know damn well that she and my Ochiba were...involved. I want to know. It's my *right* to know."

Dominic's lips were pulled back, the dark eyes squinted, and his head was tilted back arrogantly, his nostrils flared.

Outrage Personified. The expression on the ancient face might have made Hui laugh, under other circumstances. Under other circumstances....But this was now, and he found himself rising from his chair and matching the old man stance for stance. Akiko's card clattered on wood as he let it drop.

"You're old, Dominic, and you had the privilege to actually know some of the Founders. That gives you a certain status in this society, and grants you certain privileges, but it grants you no *rights*. At least none that I'll acknowledge. I'm going to tell you this once, then I expect you to leave. Anaïs is a fine person and a fine doctor, and without her, one hell of a lot of people here would not be walking around spreading nasty rumors. Even if Ochiba and Ana were lovers—and I'm saying *if*, Domi—that obviously didn't stop Ochiba from conceiving children, so what does it matter? As to what I've seen in my examinations of Anaïs, that's my business, not yours."

Dominic sniffed. "But if she were normal, you'd say so, wouldn't you? And you won't. You can't."

Hui felt his cheeks coloring. He slapped his hand on the desk. "There are *none* of us 'normal' here, Dominic. None. Not me, not you, not anyone. Now, get out of my office. I'm tired of talking nonsense."

Dominic slammed the end of his cane on the floor with an exasperated *huff*. He glared; Hui glared back. Finally, he turned and walked to the door, but stopped before he left. He spoke without turning around to Hui again. "We live in a fragile society," Dominic said. "As an elder, it's my job to protect us from things that threaten what stability we have. And I *will* protect us, Hui—no matter who it hurts."

Hui had no answer to that. He touched the card, and Akiko's image sprang to life. His ancestor smiled wordlessly at him as the sound of Dominic's cane slowly faded down the corridor.

VOICE:

Elio Allen-Shimmura

The snow was orange-red with algae the storm had picked up from Crookjaw Bay. The world appeared to have rusted. The flakes tasted vaguely sour. Both Masafumi and I looked like we'd been bleeding where the snow had melted.

"Did you really fuck Anaïs?"

I was beginning to wonder if everyone was going to be asking that question, albeit a little more politely. "Yeah," I answered tentatively, the word lifting at the end into almost a question as I squinted into the flake-infested wind. "I did."

Masafumi raised thick eyebrows at that. He hefted the rifle he was carrying and flicked some clinging snow from the barrel. "I heard that old Dominic was mightily pissed."

I frowned. "Who told you that?"

"Your sib Sarah." Masa paused and gave me a grin I wished I could give back. "I was with her last night."

Masafumi Martinez-Santos looks like something hewn from a block of wood rather than born. Everything about Masa is thick and rough: the ledges above his eyes, his cheek-bones, his chin, his hands. His skin is dry and scaly, as if some ancient reptilian ancestor infested the coils of his DNA. Bundled up as he was now, he looked like a troll.

Too bad there wasn't any damn sun.

"Sarah should keep her mouth shut." *And her legs.* I thought nastily. Sarah rarely turns down any offer of sex. Of course, she also has four named children, and at 29, is angling for another. Still, *Masa*...

"Maybe you should keep your pants buttoned," Masa retorted. He smiled, showing teeth too big for his mouth, but there was a challenge in his voice and the smile was just a twitch of his lips. "I wouldn't stir that Anaïs's pot for nothing. From what I hear, she ain't exactly a woman. Maybe she's even a *rezu* like Gabriela. Maybe you like that, huh?"

His mouth twitched again. Snowflakes hit the incisors and expired.

I didn't like being with Masa when he had a weapon. After all, Masa was that rare animal on Mictlan: a killer.

Masa had murdered Kiichi Koda-Schmidt back in 96, shooting him in the leg and then bludgeoning the crippled man repeatedly with a convenient hunk of shale until his face was an unrecognizable pulp. Evidently, the two had argued while out hunting, and the argument had turned both physical and deadly. Old Anaïs, Ana's Geema, had been judge for the trial. No one was much surprised that Masa had killed someone, nor that Kiichi was the

one dead—both men had demonstrated evil tempers in the past, and neither had demonstrated any inclination to control them. No one was even appalled by the lame excuse Masa trotted out—the quarrel had begun when he and Kiichi couldn't decide who was going to eat the last bit of sugarpaste in their packs, and Kiichi (Masa claimed) had tried to brain Masa with the same rock first; they'd also both been roaring drunk when the fight started,

People have been killed for poorer reasons, I suppose, and Masa seemed genuinely remorseful afterward, though that was no doubt small comfort to Kiichi or the Koda-Schmidt family.

If the triteness of the reason for Kiichi's murder wasn't enough, what really pissed off old Anaïs was that Masa had left behind the game they'd killed, choosing to lug back Kiichi's body instead.

"It wasn't enough to kill a man," she told him, and her anger honed the voice until it cut. "You had to see if you could *starve* a few of us at the same time. You're not only violent, you're stupid."

Had Kiichi been a woman, Masa might have been summarily executed for the murder—there being no excuse for that level of stupidity. But Kiichi was a male, and thus not overly valuable. Instead, Anaïs had declared Masa shunned for five years.

Shunned. The word itself made me shiver. I can't imagine the isolation one of the Shunned must feel. For five years Masa performed field work. For five years, all his communal and conjugal privileges were revoked. For five years, no one—under penalty of being shunned themselves—would even speak to him or acknowledge his presence except when absolutely necessary. He was given just enough food to survive, and had to live apart from all the Families, in the caves near the river.

For five years, Masa was alone, exiled in the midst of the Families.

Being shunned could drive people crazy. Kees Allen-Levin had been shunned for two years for stealing food. During SixthMonth, he walked to the summit of the Rock. There, with only the Miccail stelae to see, he'd thrown himself from the high cliffs. Samuel Koda-Schmidt had vanished into the wilderness before his shunning was over; Lynnèa Martinez-Santos had been shunned for only six months, but afterward, she was never the same and died within a year.

And Gabriela Rusack, the first one ever shunned, and shunned not once but twice...well, that's a tale we all know, a cautionary fairy tale told to children from their infancy.

In the year since the restoration of his position, Masa had been in a few altercations, but they'd been empty-handed affairs, none serious enough to cause the Families to ask old Anaïs to shim him once more. Still, no one—even his Family—wanted to be around Masa alone. Wangari Koda-Shimmura had started a pool to see when he'd finally step over the line again.

I didn't particularly want to be the reason to change Masa's status quo—definitely not when the man was armed.

“*Nei*. You’re my role model, Masa. Didn’t you know that?” I grinned back at Masa, and left him to chew on that—I figured it would take him a while to work it out and see if it came out to an insult.

We were sweeping the fields near Rusack’s Trail for grumblers. After the attack on Euzhan and the way the grumbler came at Anaïs and me, a lot of people were understandably paranoid about the creatures, and Kim-Li Allen-Levin had spied a mating pair of them prowling the fields this morning; Johanna, her Family’s matriarch, had insisted that the grumblers needed to be chased away or killed, especially since this was a Gather night. No one argued with her, not even Dominic. We’ve all seen how quickly Mictlan’s creatures can change.

The Family Elders tell tales of the redwings filling the sky each autumn; it used to be their sign that it was time to begin the harvest. Now, barely seventy-five years later, redwings are rare. When I was born, there were summer bloomings of piercing white blossoms on the sweetmelon vines along the edges of Tlilipan, and they always swarmed with small, electric-blue curltongues, lapping at the flowers with their long, namesake feature. Now the curltongues ignore the sweetmelons, preferring instead the midges clouding the air above the black water. And we’ve all seen how the land barnacles changed their patterns from bright purple to stone brown in the course of less than a decade, as soon as they decided to infest the compounds rather than the trees around us.

For that matter, snow had usually been pale yellow until six or seven years ago; now it is more often this iron-oxide red. That’s just a few examples. Anyone could give you a dozen others. Nothing on Mictlan stays the same for very long. Nature seemed to have gunned the twin motors of mutation and evolution here. Grumblers suddenly turning aggressive?—it wasn’t much of a leap.

So we plowed on between the rows of faux-wheat, dusting ourselves with colored snow.

We spotted grumbler spoor about ten minutes later: brown-black droppings near a crumpled section of wheat. Masa crouched alongside the scat and carefully prodded the nearest mound with a wheat stalk. The stalk went in easily, and as soon as the surface was broken, the *khudda* steamed.

“Fresh,” Masa grunted. “The sons of bitches are right here.” He straightened, looking at the lines of wheat. We both saw the line of crumpled stalks at the same time, not twenty paces ahead. The grumblers had pushed through the row down which we were walking, heading toward the river. The stalks were rising back up as we watched. “Right fucking here,” Masa repeated in a hoarse whisper. He unshouldered his rifle and checked the chamber. The metal bolt snapped back into place with a oiled, sharp *clack-clack*. I checked my own weapon, remembering the way the grumbler had come at Anaïs, remembering the way the beast had torn Euzhan open.

We followed the trail.

The grumblers must have been moving fast, probably scenting us in the field. The knot in my stomach loosened slightly—that was typical grumbler cowardice. With any luck, we'd find that they'd hit open ground and bolted for the cover of the forest.

We weren't graced with that kind of luck. I came out of the wheat field a few steps ahead of Masa. The grumblers had halted out in the strip of open meadow between the field and the river trees. It was snowing harder, and I blinked into the bloody flurries. The grumblers were staring back at me, a female and her pup, with the mam making the standard mumbling challenge as I emerged, though she was still backing away as she growled and chittered in my direction, pulling her youngster with her. Kim-Li had said there were three of them, but it looked like daddy had already taken off.

Masa came huffing out of the field about then. "*Kbudda*," he said when he saw the two, and his rifle snapped up. I pushed the barrel up and over before he could squeeze the trigger. "Hey!" Masa shouted. "What the fuck—"

"There's no need to kill them," I said. "They're leaving. Let them go."

"You're joking."

I still had hold of his rifle. "I said, we let them go if they want to go. Fire a few shots in the air if you want to get them moving, but I don't see any need to kill them."

"You still say that after what happened to Euzhan?"

The female grumbler was still backing, still facing us, her deadlocked chin—longer than the male's—wagging with the motion. She pushed the child in back of her with her hand, and the gesture looked no different than something we might have done, trying to protect the children from some threat. "*Hai*," I told him. "I still say that."

"Then let go of my rifle."

I let go. Masa put the stock on his shoulder, the barrel pointed up at the ruddy clouds over the grumblers' heads; I should have known, but before I could move, Masa brought the rifle down sharply, his finger coiling around the trigger. The female went down in a heap with the explosive report of the shot. Masa laughed. "Damn it, Masa!" I shouted.

Daddy grumbler came hurtling out from behind us, howling. He hit Masa from behind, cloth tearing as the beast's claws dug into his coat, and both of them went down, the grumbler tumbling as it hit the icy ground. Masa's rifle went flying somewhere off into the swirling snow. Masa shook his head, groggy; the grumbler was already on his feet.

I shot him. He went down with a hard thud. The youngling grumbler was howling now, snarling and hissing near the body of its mother.

There was a third shot, and the pup crumpled, silent. I looked at Masa, who'd recovered his rifle. He cocked his head toward me, still sighting down the barrel. "They're leaving," he said mockingly. "Let them go. I'll be sure to remember that, Elio, next time."

Masa's face, twisted and distorted in fear and distaste as he looked down at the body of the grumbler, reminded me of something...someone...For a long time, I couldn't think of where I'd seen that look before. Then, as he grimaced and turned away from the carnage, his eyes narrowed and hard, I knew.

His was the look Dominic had worn this morning when we talked about Anaïs: the same unfocused anger, the same loathing of the unknown, of the different.

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