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STEPHEN LEIGH

WINNER
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AWARD

DARK WATER'S EMBRACE

“Gripping”—*Starlog*

“Haunting and thought-provoking”—*Library Journal*

“Intriguing, intelligent”—*Mysterious Galaxy*

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DARK WATER'S EMBRACE

STEPHEN LEIGH

PHOENIX PICK

an imprint of



Rockville, Maryland

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ISBN: 978-1-60450-401-9

www.PhoenixPick.com
Great Science Fiction at Great Prices

Visit the Author's Website at:
<http://www.farrellworlds.com>

Published by Phoenix Pick
an imprint of Arc Manor
P. O. Box 10339
Rockville, MD 20849-0339
www.ArcManor.com

Printed in the United States of America / United Kingdom

To Becca and Guy
Because.



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



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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.

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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 'Anaïs' 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



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Discoveries



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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."

"*Khudda*." 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 Kodá-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."