DIVISION OF PAWNS: DANCE OF THE TUAC'A'PILI

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We certify that we have read this thesis and that, in our opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of English.
Keltorr was not a welcoming planet. The aft section of the Elissa IV tore away during the descent, allowing much of the Terran flora and fauna we'd transported to escape to the surface of the super continent. Some of these thrived and adapted to the conditions of the planet, while others were never seen again, no doubt devoured by its endemic species or annihilated in the plunge to the surface. Due to the extremity of the disaster, long years passed before we could evaluate what effect the ecological influx had had upon the various ecosystems found on the planet, or how Keltorr's only sapient, self-aware creatures, the Riapannai, dealt with the drastic changes in plant and animal life.

The Planetfall Journals

Chapter 1: Adulthood.

The chaol, or bridal spiral, had been laid upon the tamped soil before me, readied by my House tlat'acons in preparation. The decision whether I would disturb it was mine alone. Here, one short step before my front feet, the beginning fern knot of the spiral lay, each tight fist beside it forming the greater pattern across to my opponent before turning inward and back towards me, then across to him again. Like each individual fern knot, the form of the chaol is one of power not yet realized; quiescent, as water flows. A Riapannai's life is wrapped up in this form, and mine was no different—as I saw it, the furled leaf form was the border I needed to cross for adulthood.

A doec of paces across, my opponent waited. Tuathi. His smooth, ash-grey skin was pocked and slashed from previous rounds of combat, all gained in his bid for the right to take me as his life-mate. Despite the overwhelming number of 'pani surrounding us from all houses of Li'qui'pal, I had already learned his scent. It stank of pepper and freshly cut vegetation. Interest and excitement, without a drop of fear. His large, ovoid
eyes watched me without a flinch or blink, although his flat nose twitched, either from
the sickening stench of the rotting jungle floor or in response to the changing facets of my
pheremones. As I watched, his smooth-skinned skull tilted to watch me, his massive oval
eyes slitted, while his powerful square jaws ground sideways slowly. Back and forth,
back and forth, regular in its precision. He probably chewed a fresh dose of sil’anth, to
be primed if I gave challenge. I’d finished mine some time ago although the sweet mint
flavor still perfumed my mouth. From his scent alone, he didn’t expect me to step
forward against him.

I was hesitating in my decision. This single moment was definitive, and the rest
of my life as a ‘pani was dependent upon my move. I could simply kneel to Tuathi, and
accept him as my mate, and none would dare speak against my choice. He was a healthy
adult male of a legitimate house. He wielded the spear and thrusting dagger with grace
and power. Earlier, I’d watched his combats against other ‘pani willing to fight for me as
a mate, and he’d defeated them easily. The one from House Tlemitl that dared to
compete Tuathi had killed—an inevitability since Tlemitl was a weakening house ranked
higher than Tuathi’s. Obviously, our children would be strong and healthy, and Tuathi
would not neglect their education in the ways of our people. This I understood, without
doubt.

But while Tuathi was a robust warrior, his House Rok’h withered away. No
tuec’qual had clawed its way forth from House Rok’h in generations. Tuathi was a fluke,
one leaf in sunlight’s painful glare. If I were grafted onto his house, my children would
be isolated, picked off through circumstance or mated off to stronger houses. His
enemies would become mine, and they would always have the higher perch in any
struggle against us. That limb was weak and dangerous, and not one I wished to take if avoidable.

My own House Kahn could perhaps become one of those enemies. I desired not the possibility of facing my blood-kin in a yaoyotl, or house war; the chance was remote, since Kahn stood among the greatest tier of houses in our community, led by my grandfather Kualitl, but none could predict the threads of house wars in our community as the smallest event could launch bloodshed. My housemates and blood-kin were a hardened people, tough and dangerous—spears exposed to tempering fire. If I defeated Tuathi for my womb I could remain within the house, able to choose my own mate and path.

I contemplated this while poised upon all four legs, neither moving forward beyond the edge of the fiddleheads nor showing my neck in subservience. The memory of another chaol was smoldering in my mind, when my mother Li'sham had been forced to defend her right to remain in House Kahn, fifteen floods previous. Since she'd refused combat against my father long beforehand, she'd joined the house as his mate, but after his death another had challenged for the right to her womb.

Her challenger had been from House Anath'pah. Like House Rok'h, it was a lower ranked house, one that would have been crushed in a direct yaoyotl against the power of Kahn. But the chaol is a respected event, and I and my brother were old enough that her possible graft to another house was tolerated. However, rather than show subservience to her challenger, as she'd done for my father, she chose to fight.

The memory of her struggle kindled strongly in my mind, surrounded as I was by many of the stimuli encountered that memorable night—the moist, breathing presence of
the forest floor, the clots of Housemates glaring down from their perches upon the trunks of the falamei, and the feel of the rotting leaves and mud beneath my calloused pads. At the time, I'd been under the tutelage of my grandfather, but he'd allowed me the abna'hei of watching my mother fight. This wasn't weakness on his part, as he wished me to see firsthand whether my mother remained in the house. As a youngling only a few years beyond my first tasting of sil’anth, I was not allowed to hang upon the limbs of a falamei. Instead I waited upon the filthy earth with the tlatacons, wishing I could have shared words with my mother, or rubbed paws with her in case she left Kahn. However, these were actions only acceptable for a 'pani still counting to their first decade, and I was more than halfway to reaching my second.

She'd been nervous. To and fro she'd stalked before the edge of her spiral, glaring across at her challenger Mishet. Her familiar scent, laced with a salty tang, spoke her intention stronger than any utterance could. She would fight her opponent without hesitation. On all sides a mélange of hisses passed between housemates, guessing at the victor or perhaps discussing their hatred of an opposing house, but I paid little attention. I was watching Mishet. I could not interfere, but perhaps by watching him I could discern some weakness and pass it on to my mother.

It was a feeble hope. He was a hulking member of House Anath’pah, a seasoned veteran of yaoyotls and forays against the lesh’pah far to the south. When he rose to his back legs, he stood taller than the length of a spear, and his calves were thicker than an average pani’s thighs. This was no unscarred tlai’min she faced, and it made little sense why he’d choose my mother as a replacement mate. Mishet’s scent was hard to discern amongst so many other ‘pani all releasing similar pheromones of excitement and interest,
so I was left to wonder what his real reasons were. Within the odor stream permeating the air, the salty anger of Li’sharn’s emotion was the only one of its kind.

She’d tried her best to live up to the reputation of Kahn. My mother originally came from House Cihuahcoatl—their wars won with numbers in place of skill, and their members are known to move into outlying Houses with regularity. Perhaps it would have been better if she’d retained the beliefs of her birth house, instead of absorbing the ideals of my own. If so, she would have recognized the futility of that fight, and waited for another chance.

But Li’sharn did not. Instead, she stepped into the spiral, and fought hard. A trio of strikes, Mishet touched her in a pishqui, or mock killing blow, and each time she ignored the defeat. When the fourth opening came, her scent now rank with the deadly hate odor of rotting wood, he tore out her throat. At least her suffering was short, and she died with honor. And Mishet was forced to find another as a mate.

Now I found myself in the same predicament. I could show subservience, accept a cleaving to House Rok’h. However, I would never be able to choose my path, and unlike my mother, I’d been raised from birth for this moment, coarsened to constant pain. Looking at Tuathi straight on, I knew I could not sicken the memory of my mother’s death by bowing to a member of a lower house.

I rose to two legs, the position still awkward despite the floods my teachers spent training me for this moment, and stepped over the verdant spirals. I followed with the other leg, and did it without a quiver of remorse. For this moment at least, whether I were defeated, returned to the soil or victorious, I was a full member of House Kahn. An adult.
Immediately, the watching crowd of Riapannai screamed, their shared chorus tearing through the forest. The few remaining in their homes upon the falamei limbs above would hear the shrieks of acceptance, and know I had challenged Tuathi’s right to my womb. As the forest swallowed the sound like it devoured all things, my opponent rose from his squat and stepped into the spiral before me. The pepper scent of his excitement intensified.

Quickly before the fight began in earnest, I spared a glance to the right. My eyes met the blistering glare of my third and final teacher, my brother Li’li’shen. He hung vertically upon the bark of a falamei trunk, using all four of his claws for easy purchase. If I lost, we’d never share living words again save perhaps in some rote communication in an inter-house council. Kahn and Rok’h were not on speaking terms. As the last of my teachers, he would be shamed by my defeat if Tuathi managed to succeed. He might even spit upon me for my failure, and the shame of such an act would be hard to stomach. I must not fail. Not living up to the expectations of my relatives, both living and those returned to the soil would curse me to live in the shadow of Tuathi until he or I were dead.

For some reason, my brother stank of unease. It was hard to avoid sneezing at his warning scent, so I swiveled my head back to Tuathi. He’d shown respect by allowing me the moment to look at my brother, but he was a fool if he believed that mattered.

He hissed at me, revealing a space in his teeth where one of the forward molars had been knocked loose in a previous duel. Another tooth would emerge quickly to fill the gap, so the injury was only a slight inconvenience. His pepper odor strengthened
enough to almost block out the sickening odor of rot and decay prevalent on the jungle floor. “I knew you were worth the challenge, Lier’kar,” he hissed.

Tuathi struck first. He took two steps, and the tensing of his legs warned me to move before his fore claws were in range of my throat. Several steps to his left from where he’d landed, I showed my teeth. “Too slow. Pitiful.”

He turned to face me, again, his scent becoming, if it were possible, even stronger with excitement. “I won’t hurt you much, lasana. My house needs healthy younglings.” Although I couldn’t see the change in color of my olive skin, I knew it was paling in rage at his impertinence—the fight was barely joined, and already he dared call me mate! “My house shall welcome your entry, and already our bower is prepared.”

I spat, careful not to move my eyes from the tendons of his rear legs. “Your house is trash, Tuathi. It wallows in the mud for scraps.” Around us, claws rattled together in appreciation of the insult. I glanced up to see if my brother were one of those giving respect—his eyes were on me, but his hands were still.

The scent of my brother’s unease was stronger now. Did he lack faith in my abilities? The distraction proved costly, as my focus upon what bothered Li’li’shen allowed Tuathi to lunge close. I dodged back in time to avoid a serious wound, but the tips of his claws traced a furrow along the edge of my left shoulder. First blood. The pain was negligible, but the sound of claws rattling together, louder this time, burned much deeper than physical pain could reach. A moment more and he might have scored a pishqui against me. Whatever was bothering my brother, I had to ignore it.

A second, throbbing beat had begun to pulsate in the base of my spine. It was the familiar effect of sil’anth upon me, a sensation I welcomed. Its coming fury would meld
with my own heartbeat soon. If my own abilities alone couldn't defeat Tuathi, the effects of sil’anth would crush him and send him reeling from the spiral. That is, if he didn't gain its benefits first.

He'd paused to give me room, licking at my blood rimming the oval egg-white of his front right claw. "You taste good." He spread his arms wide in an exaggerated posture of dominance, as if expecting me to kneel so early in the conflict.

Tuathi had much to learn of the members of House Kahn, if he thought such a trifling wound enough to make me succumb. "Remember it. You'll not taste it again." I balanced on the balls of my back feet, ready to dodge his next charge.

Instead, he dropped from his posture to all fours. He sidled laterally, then back the other way while moving forward in half steps, as if to bully me to retreat from the spiral. I wasn't going to fall for such a ridiculous plan—I had learned the exact size of a chaol through floods of preparation, and could pace the length with my eyes shut. If I stepped outside after entering, he'd win by default rather than through defeating me with abna'hei and blood.

Rather than backing away I lunged forward towards his face, plunging in downward arcs with my fore claws. Tuathi reared up upon his back legs to avoid the swipes, and when I flung myself forward to try and gouge out his stomach, he rolled alongside my body like a spinning leaf as I was airborne.

Before I reached the ground, his knee struck me in the hindquarters, flinging me off-balance across the spiral. Pain more intense than the slash across my shoulder exploded through my side and rear, from his hit and the unbalanced fall upon the filthy
earth. I crouched on all fours as I turned to keep him in my sight while trying to fill my lungs with air since the fall had knocked the breath from me.

No longer did I notice the sickening stench of rot, or fungi that grew upon every surface here deep in the primal filth. The edges of my vision were becoming tinged with red, and slight spasms were twisting their way up my backside and along all four of my limbs, as the second heart of the sil’anth vied for control of my body. I could sense the tide rushing to possess me, given force through each ache and tear, and the sweet mint taste thickened in my mouth.

Tuathi apparently didn’t notice my burgeoning rage. He trilled his tongue against the roof of his mouth, laughing at my failed attempt to gut him. “Weak as a tlat’acon,” he hissed. “A youngling barely off its mother’s back fights better.” He stepped closer, no longer attempting to conceal the direction his next attack would come from.

“Your entrails upon the ground,” I cursed before rising to my back legs. The crimson haze suffused everything except for Tuathi’s form, and the spasms became a full-fledged clench. I embraced it, and bit down hard upon the inside of my mouth, mixing the sweet taste of sil’anth and the unpleasant tang of blood together, just as the plant’s own spirit mixed with the blood flowing through my body.

Whether he noticed no longer mattered. All I desired was to tear into the flesh of my enemy; were he not there, I would have turned upon myself. I raked the air where he’d stood, missed—not feeling his blood upon my claws filled me with anguish enough to gouge out my own heart.

He’d moved. Behind me. I dropped to my front legs and kicked back towards his stomach, missed again. A ripple of pleasure shivered my outer thigh, and I felt blood
swell and drip from where his claws had dug into my skin. I ached for—no, needed—more, every single mote of my being desperate for the ecstasy of exquisite pain, either my own or that of another. He couldn’t back away quickly enough when I turned towards him, tearing deep into the muscles of his shoulder.

He knocked me to the ground. I clawed at him again, striking soil instead of his soft, supple flesh, but with one of my back legs I kicked out a knee and toppled him beside me. Tuathi grabbed my front claws when I lunged; he was strong, but I could sense him weakening, unable to match the merged hearts of the sil’anth and my own. He and I rolled back and forth upon the earth; he above me, then I with advantage. He lashed out with his forehead against mine, but the impact only intensified the pool of red burning my vision.

With my front claws entangled against his and my rear legs pinned beneath his, I used the only part of my body still free of his grappling holds. I bit deep into the meat of his right front leg, the flesh grinding to pulp under the power of my chewing molars and filling my mouth with more fresh blood. I heard shrieking, and the arm pulled itself away from my mouth before I could bite again.

I looked up, seeing shock in the long features of my enemy as he tried to pull away from my hungry mouth. I could see his large pupils dilating now as the sil’anth in his own blood attempted to take control, and Tuathi froze as he fought against its possession. With my right forelimb, freed now from his controlling grasp, I curled the middle and fore fingers into a raptor’s talon and reached up towards his face.

His eyes shifted from his trifling arm wound. The orb saw its end coming too late, a squirrel freezing as the shadow of a predator plummets down. The tips of my
claws easily pierced his eye’s sheath, scooping in and down. It was a flower growing on 
a vine, and I wished to smell its fragrance. I plucked it free.

I applied pressure upon the organ, disregarding his screaming as he pulled up and 
away. The claw of my forefinger popped it first, releasing its liquid over the sole of my 
front foot and drizzling it down over my chest, as if I’d caught a passing cloud and 
frightened it into dropping rain. It was warm as blood but smelled different, exotic and 
not entirely pleasant.

The dim realization of what I’d accomplished took time to push through the 
sil’anth haze altering my consciousness, as the effect of the plant continued to blaze fire 
through my veins. Its pulsing heart was still competing with my own, but each beat 
pulsed less strongly while my own kept its endless pace. Thus, I did little to stop 
Tuathi’s attacks when he used the full length of his front claws upon the smooth olive 
skin of my upper chest. In moments his flaying reached bone, each stroke a dim runnel 
of pleasure in my consciousness from the lingering effects of the sil’anth. His claws 
moved up to excoriate my cheeks and forehead, and finished their lashing upon the skin 
of my shoulders and upper arms. Each winnowing blow tore ribbons of fresh blood from 
me and across the dying fern hearts of the chaol.

It was fitting, my blood mingling with the decaying green spirals, as soon enough 
the ferns and I would nourish the earth, as my mother did before me. The sanguine haze 
was dripping from my vision, replaced by a spreading obsidian pool that started at the 
edge and moved inward, like a pool of water drying in the sun. I tried hissing defiance 
one last time at the form kneeling above me, but my tongue was swollen, glued to my 
mouth’s canopy. The black devoured me without teeth.
With three fourths of the inhabitants of Elissa IV killed in the cataclysm, attempts to retrieve data, equipment or life forms from the aft section were abandoned. Things may have proceeded differently were people sequestered in those quarters. Major problems presented themselves contiguously in those stark years after the crash, with the most devastating the realization that the pelagic thermal vents we'd planned to use for energy released heat intermittently instead of at a constant rate. Our original target site for a population center was, therefore, unacceptable.

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Chapter 2  Out of the Spiral.

For the people of the falamei, we who call ourselves the Riapannai, physical suffering has meaning beyond a warning of bodily injury. Pain has power; life cannot exist without it, and individuals or species which strive to avoid it are doomed to live in terror of those with mastery. Watch the younglings of any sarcophile creatures, and it is visible that the ability to kill is learned rather than innate. Having the capacity to inflict pain, or its more powerful sister death upon another is the greatest source of control, since the inflictor shapes their victim’s reality.

Although we do not eat meat, the lessons of pain, or napaluqui, are learned by every 'pani born to a legitimate house. Our people learn the veracity of pain while we still cling to our mothers' backs, and then have it driven into our flesh and inscribed upon our muscles long before our first taste of sil’anth. Weak individuals die quickly before they can become a hindrance to our people, and as we grow, we learn to inflict pain upon ourselves in order to master it. Pain granted to oneself comes without shame, as this is the only means to become a shaper of one’s own destiny.
I had believed myself ready to enter the chaol, and learn whether I was strong enough to remain in my birth house, or be mated to another. For five floods I had fought weaponless against the wooden staves of my brother and other warriors of my house. I had chosen when and where the blows would strike, learning tolerance of the pain of each heavy strike. I had lain in the full day’s glare of the sun until my flesh blistered and burned, sought out the nests of stinging insects and withstood their tormenting bites, and torn open my wounds each time they started to heal. When this became too simple, I hung for half a night by one forelimb above an open drop before switching to the other for the rest of the night. I thought myself ready.

Nevertheless, when I swam up from the tar of unconsciousness after tearing out Tuathi’s eye, the agony of my body surprised me with its teeth. Each gouge, rip and tear screamed their sorrow, competing for attention. I had to focus upon sucking in enough air to fill my lungs, rather than in stuttering gasps. My chest, face and upper forelimbs simmered as if I lay belly down over a pile of coals, and the rise and fall of each breath prompted fresh blood to course down my sides. I could feel the rivulets trickling down into the sickening earth along my undamaged ribs, where the nerve endings had not been brutalized in the combat. I couldn’t tell if it was my lifeblood, but I did know that despite the extreme tortures I’d subjected myself to throughout my life, nothing approached the anguish delivered upon me by Tuathi’s claws. Those punishments had been remote drops of water compared to the monsoon I weathered now. Surely I would die.

I cracked open my eyelids. Tuathi had left my eyes alone at least, surprising considering I’d taken one of his. My head lolled at an awkward angle, and I hated the feeling of the mud squelching beneath my back. A drop of blood dribbled into my open
right eye, but even by blinking rapidly I couldn’t remove the haze it gave the world. I
could barely discern the edge of the chaoi beckoning me, some three body lengths distant.

I hissed, or tried; the sound emerged as a bubbling gurgle. There was no sign of
my opponent. He’d left me for the scavengers, or else to nurse his wounded pride and
bemoan the loss of his left eye. I’d won already, since he’d left the circle first, but in
order to rejoin House Kahn I had to pull myself beyond the edge. No one could aid me. I
was sure the hundreds of eyes watching me from all sides were debating whether I would
survive, or be left down here to rot as my mother was.

I lifted my head from the soil, to better appraise the injuries to my upper chest,
which throbbed the heaviest. The powerful thrum of the sil’anth heartbeat was silenced
now, leaving me alone with the pain. Tuathi’s gouges on my chest were deep indeed.
My skin had been peeled away like that of a thin-skinned fruit to reveal spots of ivory
amidst the torn muscle. The blood spatters had dried so I knew some time had passed
since I’d fallen into unconsciousness, but the deeper hollows still throbbed with fresh
blood.

My upper forelimbs weren’t much better. The marbled red and white of muscle
showed in major tears in my flesh, although I didn’t notice any profuse blood flow
signifying a cut artery. I’d have returned to the soil already even from the slightest nick
to those, so I was lucky he’d not been more methodical in his rage. I turned my eyes
down to the tips of my front pads and twitched the muscle, to see if I still had function;
they reacted although a lancing line of fire warned of the damage from my shoulder down
to the pads. At least I still had the function of my front toes, even if the barest flinch felt
like some beast were ripping off the limb. Or more accurately, as if I'd dropped twenty paces through space and grabbed onto a tree limb with the leg.

I concentrated on taking a deep breath and focused on the act, rather than upon the agony warning me to stop. I needed to breathe if I wanted to live. In tandem with my next breath I pulled my front legs in close to my sides and placed the soles down upon the unclean earth for leverage. Breathe out. I took my next breath, and pulled my backside free of the mud. It was bizarre, to see the exposed muscles of my front leg tense without the covering of skin to protect it. If I'd not seen the muscles remaining in place, the pain would have led me to believe I'd torn it free from the exertion.

At last my head was free of the squalid, rotting earth, although the mud still clung to the rear of my skull. My face burned as if ants were biting in orderly lines and more blood wormed its way into my eyes. I blinked to clear it. Next breath—I arced my spine in the curve of a strung bow while pushing off against the soles of my front legs and pulling in my knees to my chest—I rolled forward and breathed out. I paused for several more deep breaths to keep the rhythm balanced, and my tongue learned I had a new hole in my cheek. I wondered if it were from Tuathi's claws or that half-remembered moment as the sil'anth rush took control and I'd bitten myself. It didn't matter.

When I tried to pull my head up after five more breaths, to see how far to the edge of the chaol, the world smeared. Spots of red blossomed and exploded, while black petals spun and possessed the world. When the colors and shapes faded, my delicate nose was pressed down into the sickening soil. My stomach heaved at the realization although I couldn't smell anything; my body had apparently given up the nuanced task of detecting scents in its struggle to keep me alive.
I pulled my face free of the mire. I had to move slowly. If I passed out again, I doubted consciousness would return. The few clotting scabs that had formed were breaking apart from the exertion of my struggle and hastening my blood loss, but if I took too long to reach the edge of the spiral no amount of help would save me. Like all things in existence, I had to keep the balance. Move too fast, and I’d pass out and die. Too slow, and death would catch me like the mud that clung to my skin. Each breath traced fire upon the gouges and slashes upon my body, and moving made everything worse. But there was no other option. I crawled.

I edged back towards my house, no longer able to control my breathing. Each came in more of a wheeze instead of a deep inhalation, and my muscles were firing or shaking without intention. The crimson whorls were pressing in upon my vision again, wisps threatening to summon the petals of black to drag me off to unconsciousness again. When I paused to try to recover, I watched the lazy drips of blood trickle to the earth below, which sucked them in quickly despite the moist humidity. The sight forced me on. Soon holding my head up became too arduous, so I dropped it to my forelegs and used my back legs to dig and push. A cough rippled its way through my chest, and the phlegm I spat was tipped with blood. Whether it was from my mouth or somewhere deeper I couldn’t tell.

I glanced up once more. The edge of the choal beckoned one short lunge ahead, but I was spent. An infant could have crawled the distance without hardship, but it was too far. The ebony petals were gaining in size and power—competing with each other, obviously—and the pain was drifting away. It wasn’t that I was using the force of my
will to ignore the pain, rather my body was making the choice for me. Not gone completely, but blunted, like a blade wrapped in cloth pressed against skin.

Feet slapping upon the earth moved towards me. It must be Tuathi, come to finish me off, but I could neither smell nor see clearly enough to be sure. It didn’t matter. I’d be dead soon enough.

“Sister. Move.” One eye twitched at the command. “Don’t let him claim victory over you.” I lurched up my head, struggling to focus my eyes, but another ephemeral spray of spots glittered in my vision like spots of water hurled from a wave striking a rocky shore. Li’li’shen’s legs faded in the blur of distance.

I had won. It was urgent my brother realize this; even in death, I hadn’t faltered. I pulled myself towards the legs again. The earth gave way beneath my claws. I dragged myself on. Brother, I carried abna’hei to House Kahn.

My next reach padded down upon something different from the muck of the clinging soil, soft and forgiving. It was a fern heart, the edge of the chao!. I reached with my other front leg, but instead of the earth or another vulnerable fiddlehead, I touched supple flesh. The grasp was cautious, careful to grab the underside of my arm where I’d not been slashed. “It is enough, kar. Welcome back to House Kahn.”

Fifty six Terran years passed before construction finished at the alternate site. Most of the survivors, numbering 12,401 in total, returned to or remained in hibernal chambers during this period, as food reserves were scarce, and many of the pilgrims had few skills beneficial to the construction process of the sub aqueous habitation center. Its builders called it Ashram.

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Chapter 3: Recovery

I did not wake for five nights. On the sixth, as the sun fled to the soil far in the west, I woke. I was in a pile of freshly harvested leaves and recognized the interior of one of my house's bowers upon a falamei limb. Surprisingly I felt no pain, although on the edges of my vision cloth wadding obscured my view. The bindings must have been tight because I was completely unable to move.

It was odd, the lack of pain. Agony was familiar as the beating of my heart, which I could still feel thumping strongly in my chest, or the sight of my brother, but I realized something was incredibly wrong. I should have woken to a hurricane of torment, but my body felt dead. Floods past my grandfather had been angered at some remark or transgression I'd committed, and pinched the nerve of a leg. I'd not been able to use it the rest of the night and been tempted to gnaw it off for having to carry the dead weight. Now my entire body lacked sensation except for a small area around my open eyelids.

I was not alone. Two unfamiliar 'pani stood two-legged over my form, watching. Their nose still worked; their unfamiliar pepper scent revealed their excitement. I tried to tense, wondering if they were a threat, but my mind calmed when I saw the feather badges bound to their voomlish, the body straps all Riapannai, even tlat'acons, wear to mark their rank. They were honored healers, although their crimson and gold house feathers did not coincide with any found in Li'qui'pal. Outsiders, then. I calmed further when I caught the familiar scent, and then the sight, of my personal tlat'acon Feanas near the entryway.

The elder hissed in pleasure when he saw the pupils of my eyes react and move.

"You see, Sier'shen. She is strong," he spoke. With so many feathers bound to his
voomlish it was appropriate for me to rise and expose my neck in the dishlo, but the deadness of my limbs halted me again. He must have smelled my frustration. “Moving now would only endanger your health. We’ve coated your skin in a toxin which makes it impossible for you to move the areas we’ve placed it. This includes your throat to prevent you speaking, but your mind and organs will function without injury.”

Well. I’d never dare speak it, not that I could anyway, but they must have used too much. Even my tongue lay like an unfired lump of clay, and now as I awakened further I realized how desperately I craved something to drink. I was finally a cual’pir of House Kahn, and now more helpless than a youngling with unhardened claws. I felt ashamed at the realization.

I glanced away from the pair standing over me, to take stock of my injuries through sight since the lessons of napaluqui were useless to me for the moment. It was hard to see past the cloth wadding protruding in mountainous ridges around the hollows of my eye sockets, but by straining my eyes I could make out more strips of bandaging upon my upper chest. The damage was obscured, but I knew it was extensive.

Unbidden, the last few moments of Tuathi’s assault upon me flooded my thoughts—the blood, his rage, the wet sensation of his eyeball’s glistening death—it was incredible I had not returned to the soil. I had seen many other ‘pani beaten to death in the bridal spiral, or in duels for position.

The sound of claws digging into wood interrupted my musings. I recognized the scent of my brother Li’li’shen before he hauled himself into the bower. His scent spiked from the thick, dusty odor of unease to match the pepper of excitement when he saw my eyes open and aware. He moved before the two healers, who’d turned to face him, and
lifted his chin up and far to the side, exposing his neck towards them both in an extremely formal dishlo.

"House Kahn owes you a life, Sier'shen and Harl'sir of House Apith." As I'd believed, it was not a house from Li'qui'pal. I wondered why healers from a closer house had not been used, but once again I could not question anyone at the moment so I discarded the concern. I would ask when the chance came. "We have many tlat'acons that your house could take, or some of our harvest of sil'anth, if that is your choice.

Bananas, yams, millet as well. Part of the limbs of our falamei, if your house desires to send some of its members to live in Li'qui'pal." If my flesh could still react, I knew I'd be paling with shame, but the layers of cloth and leaves prevented me from knowing if my body was reacting in tandem with my mind. The display of subservience towards these healers on the house's tree, while I watched, should not have occurred. I'd never seen my brother display his neck so openly to another, not even his mate Bil'djin after she'd birthed twins.

"It is our duty to defend warriors against the foes they cannot battle alone," the elder, Harl'sir, said. Both inclined their necks to the side, although their dishlo were not nearly so open. They knew our house owed them. "Perhaps, however, there is one in your house that could be taught our ways. A youngling who has yet to taste sil'anth."

My brother hissed his understanding, his odor changing to sweet banana as the pepper scent faded. "A fair bargain. Were my own younglings not recently off their mother's back, I would offer one of them to you."

"Too young," admitted Harl'sir. If able, it would have been hard to suppress the desire to trill my tongue against the roof of my mouth. My brother was dedicated to his
children, and very protective. He'd never let one of them leave the settlement, but it was a successful gesture of abna'hei towards the healers.

"I shall lead you through the limbs so we may find one acceptable." The smell of bananas strengthened from my brother, no doubt at his relief his younglings were not of interest to the outsiders. "Meet me at the joining of this limb to the trunk. I must speak with my sister." The smell of the two healers also turned sweet as they dropped to all fours and padded their way outside the bower and onto the limb. The sounds of their descent faded into nothing before my brother moved beside me; he ignored the presence of Feanas in the corner, as she was a long-time tlat'acon of the house.

The scent of his relief changed subtly back to the choking, dusty scent as he looked at the bandages swathing my body. His constant unease was beginning to disturb me. In the ten floods he'd trained me to defend myself in the choal, I had never detected the odor once. Now, it seemed the only odor he was capable of emitting ever since I'd fought and defeated Tuathi. It was senseless. He went to all fours beside me, his expansive oval eyes flickering over my form. Li'li'shen's skin was much darker than my own olive, with very few scars. The rich virescence of his shoulders, eye ridges and jawbones were so dark they were nearly purple.

"You took too much sil'anth, kar." My brother was right, but it was an old dispute between us. He rarely touched it. I'd been edgy after seeing Tuathi defeat so many for my womb, and had swallowed three handfuls of the leaves and petals while the tlat'acons had moved away the piles of debris. The most I'd eaten before that had been less than two fists.
“It appeared to help, though,” he conceded. “Your fight was glorious, giving much abna’hei to yourself and the house. He was a much better warrior, but you sent him fleeing.” He hissed appreciation, but his scent didn’t alter. “We could all smell the burning sap stench of his fear.

“He’ll never recover from that injury to his eye. Your timing in the strike was perfect…a moment more and he’d have been too far affected by sil’anth to care.” My brother paused for a deep inhalation, turning his gaze to the bower’s entryway, and beyond. I could discern some pinpricks of light on the limbs where tlat’acons were preparing the cooking fires for shren, the second meal of the night. I didn’t feel much appetite, possibly the result of the poultices applied by the healers, but I would have killed a pallahid for a draught of rain.

The scent of his unease thickened and became cloying in the small confines of the bower. “There are events in the house, sister…” he began. A strain of vinegar joined the scent trail, exposing his frustration. “When I saw Tuathi beat all other suitors for you, sister, I thought you lost long before you fought him. Dead, or taken from the house. It shames me. I doubted my teachings, and the strength of your will.”

“If you had asked me which limb to follow, I would have said to kneel.” I remained mute—there was nothing I could do—mastered by the toxin placed upon my skin. I saw his eyes flinch, and his scent changed subtly. I realized at least that my scent glands were working, as he’d noticed the salt odor pouring off me to signal anger. A Riapannai cannot smell their own odor, but through changes in the scents of those around us we can tell if our emotions are known. Especially blood relatives.
"There is more to the story. After you tore out his eye, Tuathi fled the chaol. It was good you didn’t take too long to awaken and pull yourself back to us. Soon after we dragged you up here for Harl’sir to sew you up, Tuathi returned to the spiral. What his purpose in returning was, we don’t know. He may have tried to take you for his own if he’d found you still inside, or returned to watch you die."

So. Even after I’d maimed him for life, and he’d nearly clawed me to death, Tuathi had wanted to bring me into House Rok’h. Although technically he severed all claims to me by fleeing the circle, the fact I was unconscious might have been enough to cause others to look the other way if Tuathi took me by force. A single word of protest from me would have been enough to prevent it, but lack of action can be interpreted as agreement according to some. Perhaps another of his family had appealed to him of their need. Or, he’d wanted me all the more, to force me to care for his maimed, weak self as an eternal punishment for causing his torment. Either way I was free of Tuathi’s influence, and it should matter little now. I didn’t understand why my brother spoke of it.

"Kualitl is especially proud of you. He and the rest of the house will come see you soon enough, but I wanted the chance to speak with you first. When you are recovered, we shall garb and induct you formally into House Kahn." He turned and crawled out of the aperture without another word. He’d still not explained why his odor stank of unease. There was more he’d decided not to say, it appeared.

When the sounds of my brother’s passage below had faded, Feanas moved from her position by the entry and crawled over to me. Her scent, known to me since birth, reassured me with its familiarity. Hers did not stink of unease.
She exposed her neck in a wide dishlo and averted her eyes, as was proper for a tlat’acon. “Mistress,” she hissed. “You must rest. Don’t be so angry at your brother. Even after teaching you for so long, the memories of your mother’s death were all he saw. He underestimated you, and you proved his mistake.” She carefully rubbed her front soles upon the undamaged sections of my back legs, apparently unaware that the toxin had been applied to the whole of my body; I felt no sensation from her touch. Her woods were soothing, but thirst, and the smoldering coals of rage at my brother’s words kept me from further rest.

Ashram’s construction required the cannibalization of vast portions of the Elissa IV, but the dictates of necessity forced our hand. Many of the ship’s employees were uncomfortable with the decision since they had never signed on to inhabit the planet itself, but in time came acceptance. Communication with Earth from such a distance was, in all practical respects, impossible, and the ship would never pull itself from the ocean, let alone survive the vacuum of space. As the city developed, and more numbers of the pilgrims were awakened from the hibernal chambers to inhabit newly constructed sections of the city, social problems developed in large part due to particular individuals unfairly swaying the emotions of the naïve.

The Planetfall Journals

Chapter 4. Exposed Roots

“It bruised his pride, mistress.” Feanas hunkered like some protective, domestic toad beside the bower’s drop stove, trying to calm me with her words and scent. Wartless, of course, but just as patient. The sullen glare of the stove’s coals limned her with their eldritch glare, as she’d begun stirring them to prepare my next meal, but I knew
her movements without having to watch. With nothing else to occupy my time while I had recuperated for the past thirty-five nights, I’d come to know her more personally than perhaps even my own blood; there are things tlat’acons are able to say which no cual’pir would dare utter, and my recent elevation to the rank had done little to diminish her outspoken mannerisms.

“The soil devour it,” I cursed. Since his proclamation, Li’li’shen had not visited me again. As the one that had admitted wrong, it was his responsibility to come to me, yet he continued to avoid it. The long nights of recovery, spent like a prisoner with only Feanas’ chatter filling the void, were almost enough to send me fleeing skull-first off the limb. I could be overreacting, but I was conditioned to a rigid schedule of exercise and combat, and losing its discipline turned me irascible and bitter over the long period of healing. I couldn’t understand how tlat’acons existed without the strife of nightly combat. At least it was nearly finished. My formal induction into House Kahn would happen tonight, and afterwards the final bandages could be torn off.

“When my mother trained for the chaol, what did House Cihuahcoatl do to prepare her?” I asked, turning to the subject we’d discussed more than any other. My mother. It was almost as if her spirit had clung to my own deep on the unclean soil, as I was relentless with my questions about her towards Feanas. She had been the personal tlat’acon for my mother almost since Li’sharn’s birth, and had moved to House Kahn together with her. Now she was mine.

Feanas thrummed her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “I helped train her,” she replied.
I stared. “You mean you watched her train.” Tlat’acon were forbidden to take part in battles of honor or status, and could only wield weapons against threats to the community. That included the ground dwelling lesh’pah.

“No, mistress.” She hissed, the bower sweetening with the scent of banana. “I trained with her. See this scar?” She edged away from the fire before lifting a front leg and pointing at the side of her right temple. A ragged saw of white danced in the spotted mahogany there above the edge of her eye, culminating in a deeper weal near the upper curl of her ear. “She gave me that cut.”

“What madness possessed her, to strike you?” I said, indignant. “I’m shamed to hear of the act, no warrior should strike a tlat’acon. She could have killed you, to say nothing of the consequences of letting you wield a weapon. Was this in secret, far from the eyes of her third guardian?”

She trilled again again. “In plain sight of the moons, and of her sushaquo.”

“You speak lies! It wouldn’t be tolerated.”

Feanas tilted her head and looked past me with her golden eyes; I’d come to understand it as a gesture of deep thought. “You may be a superior cual’pir compared to your mother Lier’kar, and certainly would throw me from a limb with ease, but you still have much to learn of manipulation.”

I bristled; she was stepping beyond the bounds of my tolerance. “No tlat’acon understands that word. Don’t pretend as if you could comprehend the web of struggle among the houses.”

She padded close before exposing her neck in a wide dishlo. “I meant no offense,” she hissed softly. “But it is truth, as water flows and all things die, that many
in House Kahn struggle to understand that art. It is a weakness you must remedy, my mistress.” She backed up towards the fire again, the vinegar odor of her frustration vanishing as quickly as it had soaked the air. “You know the story of Quihil, of course—do you think he was able to kill the ground dwellers and protect his master, if he’d never wielded a spear? As a tlat’acon?”

I didn’t speak, but my thoughts churned. She was right, I’d simply accepted the story of Quihil as the act of a tlat’acon desperate to protect its owner. “Perhaps the lesh’pah were injured, or tired from fighting.”

She hissed, careful not to point out my flawed logic. “The Pact demands tlat’acons cannot fight against other ‘pani for mates or abna’hei. We may defend the house against threats, whether they be lesh’pah or beasts of the forest.”

“I suppose,” I agreed, impatient. “But my mother wasn’t a lesh’pah, and she certainly wasn’t a threat to House Anath’pah. Where does your tongue slither?”

“Simpler than you believe,” Feanas replied. “Your mother had plans to fight humans at some point in the future, as water flows. I might have accompanied her. I helped teach her, and being able to defend myself might have prevented her return to the soil. If I were to fight, it wouldn’t have been for me.”

I rose from the leaf pile and stretched. A light breeze was swirling in from the entrance to the bower, and its fresh scent was revitalizing. “It still strikes me as odd, and uncouth that she lacked such control to injure you.”

“My mistake, not hers. I nearly leapt onto her claws, and was lucky to avoid a worse injury.” She moved aside to allow me past; in the close confines of the wood and
reed hut the two leaf piles and stove took up most of the space. I'd reached the entry when she spoke again. “Did you miss the hole in my story, mistress?”

“What?”

She hissed in satisfaction, the odor of freshly cut leaves dousing the air. “I warned you, the members of House Kahn are bad at manipulation. In a yaoyotl, who threatens a house?”

I hesitated; I had missed the hole in her story. “We both know.”

“House Cihuahcoatl is wise with the alliances it makes. Rarely is it drawn into a yaoyotl, but to bolster their chances in case of disaster, they made sure to train us all. The shuacuittl told us, that if we defended the house well, the stigma of tlat’acon would be stripped from us. We would be tlai’min.”

“It would have been foolish of you to take such risks, Feanas. You would have been slaughtered for resisting.” I stepped out onto the gnarled bark of the falamei, relishing the feel of the rough bark ridges beneath my pads. “The opposing house would have left you alone as tlat’acons, and enfolded you into its own stock if they destroyed Anath’pah. It pleases me to have you with me, and I’m sure my mother felt the same.”

I took several steps further down the branch, enjoying the night air. The season of flood was many nights past but some flowers, orchids and other aerophytes which clung to the falamei bark, still released their barely discernable fragrance. With my back claws I tore through the moss clinging to part of the limb to better sharpen them upon the tougher bark and wood beneath.

It was deeply satisfying—I’d not sharpened them in many nights—and I wanted to look my best for tonight’s ritual. There was little I could do for my wounds that hadn’t
already been done, but I could at least receive the feathers of a cual’pir with sharpened
claw. After finishing I sat back on my rear legs in a crouch and began removing the
bindings upon my chest.

I heard Feanas’ claws digging into the limb behind me. “How are your wounds?”
She moved closer. “I smell no fresh blood.”

“They’re fine,” I hissed in irritation. “I’ve spent enough time rotting in this
bower. Leave me be, I’m a youngling no longer.” The delicate aromas of the flowers
were overcome by a powerful citrus scent; I’d shamed Feanas in her worry.

“My frustration is with my body’s weakness, not over your concern. Ease your
thoughts.” The scent lessened, but lingered in my nostrils. “Tuathi isn’t the only one the
jungle predators will find easier prey.”

“They’re healing well,” she offered. “If you were older, you’d never have
recovered at all.”

I swiveled my head back over my right shoulder to glare at her. “This will never
heal, Feanas,” I touched a pad to the warped pink skin of my cheek; I still couldn’t
remember if Tuathi or I had been responsible for it. “Every flesh eater of the jungle will
spot the white and pink where Tuathi tore my flesh.”

“Extracts, crushed herbs will cover that. What, now that you’ve defeated all who
wanted you for their house, you think you won’t find a mate?” She trilled rapidly.

I paled, noticing in passing how the scars on my chest and upper breasts blended
as I did so, except on the two major scabs that had yet to heal. “No, that’s not it. During
hunts I don’t want to be a danger—“
“After what you did to Tuathi, no male would dare refuse. Besides, joining to House Kahn is a chance few are offered. You have nothing to worry about, you could even pluck one from House Linuipi.”

“Find my voomlish, Feanas,” I ordered instead of plucking the bait. “We must head to the pil’thir soon.” She turned back into the bower, but the scent of freshly cut leaves replaced the biting citrus scent of her discontent. She’d forgiven me.

These minor disturbances were resolved by refreezing the most rebellious. In the circumstances, it was the most humane option; we had no desire to taint our newly forged lives by murdering those that disagreed. We were distressed to learn our flight from earth had not freed us from interpersonal conflict; had the crash not occurred, perhaps we would have been successful in our venture. Many of the individuals we chose to freeze did come from the ranks of the shipwrights or their descendents, after all. For several hundred Keltorr years, freezing the seditious was an effective means of solving social ills, but in time the uncontrolled breeding of our pilgrims, and the power needs of the hibernal chambers, forced us to prevent the birthing of new children. A growing portion refused to see the logic of the decision.

The Planetfall Journals

Chapter 5: Helpless Against Time

After the ceremony upon the pil’thir, the central space of every ‘pani house, I climbed alone up to the bower I’d slept in during the ten floods I’d trained under my brother. He’d refused to speak to me after the ceremony, so it had been a bittersweet moment. I was convinced time was in my favor, healing the rift as it would heal the few
scabs still covering my upper chest, so I hadn’t taken the opportunity to break words first. My voomlish was strung with the single yellow and twin green feathers of House Kahn, and I carried another set in a woven pouch that I would attach to my spear. That was the only reason I headed towards this tangled section of the falamei limbs, as I had left my favored weapon there before preparing to fight Tuathi. Since then my long recovery had prevented its retrieval.

I was breathing hard by the time I pulled myself into the bower, located far above the pil’thir; this canopy level was reserved for younglings and tlai’min, generally anyone born to the house that hadn’t yet entered the chaol. The chance to exert myself was satisfying, though it proved how weakened I’d become. When I lifted my spear from the hooks upon the wall, I thrilled at the reunification. I tossed it from one front paw to the other to remember the weight.

"It needs lacquer," a voice hissed. I flinched. It was my grandfather Kualitl, the tuec’shili of our House and the one responsible for garnering our allied houses Blad’shoth and Shepil. I must have missed his odor following me up the limbs, and the sounds of his claws upon the bark. It reinforced how much my senses had dulled since my battle with Tuathi.

He finished pulling himself into the bower as I turned towards the entrance. I immediately went down on three legs while I spun the obsidian edge of my spear away and performed a wide dishlo. As I did so, I traced the delicate pads of my front foot upon the haft of the spear; he was correct. There were some grooves where I’d held the spear during the endless nights of training with my brother, and I’d forgotten to reseal it in my
worry over approaching adulthood. "Excuse the shoddy nature of my spear, tuec’shili. I shall lacquer it immediately, unless the house has a calling of more pressing importance."

"There is none, Lier’kar." He paused, his powerful eyes studying me. His smell was setting me on edge; it was a mix of freshly slashed leaves, and the dangerous scent of sawdust. It was entirely different from how he’d smelled during the ceremony upon the flat boards of the pil’thir. There had been few moments during the second decade of my life that I’d smelled the aroma of sawdust drifting from Kualitl. Once we’d been hunting pallahids, the scaled beasts from whom a single salivating bite kills before the next night. The spear I held was the same I’d used to snuff the life from a mated pair that night.

"What threatens you, grandfather?" I asked. He was making me uneasy.

"I must be rank with it, if your words tumble so quickly." He trilled, although the scent of wood paste didn’t dissipate. "I’ve never been able to hide my emotions."

"You always said only weaklings and the fearful should hide their purpose. Why would you suddenly wish to find yourself in their company," I pointed out.

The wood pulp scent faded some, the odors of thick dust and slashed leaves replacing it. "You remind me of your father, in ways of strength and weakness. He was overly ambitious, headstrong—always striving for abna’hei. Your form is cloaked in his spirit."

I blinked; I wasn’t sure if he meant it as a compliment or admonition. I’d heard little of him even from my mother, except that he’d died in a challenge against my uncle Ceel’ishi thirty years past, when I’d just survived past my first flood. But with your shuacuit, and especially anyone ranked higher, it was always better to err on the side of caution. "Thank you, grandfather."
“Don’t be foolish! I said you have the same weaknesses as him, and you thank me? Like you he relied upon sil’anth to win his battles for him...you were too young to gain a lesson from his death, so let me warn you now.” Salt suffused the air; I performed another dishlo hurriedly as I backed away.

He dropped to all fours, to better stare me down with his looming golden irises.

“Never allow your personal emotion to send you into the choal. Look for your enemy’s weakness, a flaw to present itself before you dare issue challenge. Keep yourself strong for that night, so a balance exists; if both are masters of the spear, or feeble tlai’min, both could end up dead.”

“There’s a reason you beat Tuathi, and it wasn’t just that you allowed sil’anth to swallow your heart. He underestimated you, believed you would give in. Tuathi wouldn’t have capered about like some strutting parrot otherwise—those other houses might not have seen it, but I saw where his eyes traveled before he joined you in the choal!” He was nearly shrieking his words; I was glad there were no others around to hear.

“I may not be a master at the game of manipulation, but I can spot well the machinations of others—and granddaughter, you have been caught.” A tincture of gall was strengthening in his scent. “The sap will be too thick if you cook it much more.” He looked pointedly towards the stove.

“What, grandfather? Oh!” I paled in shame at needing to be reminded, but I’d been intent upon his words. He watched me with critical eyes as I poured the runny liquid into a long, hollowed down piece of wood. While I let it settle to release any bubbles of air that may have been trapped by the viscous fluid, I stripped away the heart
vine binding the chipped obsidian triangle to the haft of my spear. I kept one eye on Kualitl, anxious he not find fault with my technique but I also didn’t want him thinking I was ignoring him if he decided to speak again. I was long out of practice, and the ability to craft and treat ones’ own weapons with ease was a requirement for any Riapannai of tlai’min rank and above; even the Shual’atlaltl, the Wielder of the Spears, constructed their own weapons. Tlat’acons are rarely allowed to handle, and certainly not make, any weapons besides those used in harvesting crops or chopping deadwood.

“Some night soon, I shall be challenged.” I paused in my task, stunned by the pronouncement. None had dared challenge his leadership since before my birth, and I’d heard no rumors of dissatisfaction from Houses Kahn, Blad’soth or Shepitl. It was the way of things that another should take his place were Kualitl leading us badly, but he was still healthy and strong despite living nearly 100 floods. I still recalled with chagrin some of the methods he’d used to teach me the path of napaluqui; I couldn’t fathom who would dare put themselves in the chaol against him.

“Who could dare challenge you and survive, grandfather? You would fling all challengers from the pil’thir with ease,” I interrupted. I’d unwound the heart vine from my spear and removed the obsidian blade; after speaking, I rolled the haft of my spear carefully in the heated sap until the entire piece submerged.

“Unfortunately, your brother is not ready for the abna’hei and challenges of leading Kahn. I had hoped he would show more dedication, but he cares little for leadership. As water flows, if he weren’t blood, I’d call him afraid.” He looked down at the wooden slats beneath us, speaking his next words in a hushed tone. “Your father failed to teach Li’li’shen well before dying.”
He looked back up. "I foretell Ceel’ishi shall issue challenge soon. He chafes at my commands like a shal’teuc asked to fetch soil." He exhaled loud through his nostrils, emphasizing his irritation, although his scent was heavy with it. "If he defeats me, your branch will shake in the storm. Perhaps even snap."

"Grandfather," I asked, "Why?" I couldn’t think of anything I’d done to bother my uncle; he’d rarely paid me attention, and oftentimes spent his time beyond the borders of the house. He’d reminded me of a chameleon on a tree; in sight, but not worth the time of attention, and certainly not a threat. He’d not been at the recent ceremony to induct me into House Kahn, if I recalled.

"There is a thread, Lier’kar, strung between us not just by blood." He moved up beside me, so close his breath was hot on my face. This close I could make out the strange pattern of birthmarks upon his cheek, similar to the spray of glowing points of light that emerged when the sun had gone to earth to feed; however, his were black upon the weathered green of his skin. I was uneasy to be this close, but dared not look away.

"It is the thread of our opposition to Ceel’ishi and his plans to dominate and destroy this house. When you defeated Tuathi in the chaol, you inadvertently tied the end of that string about yourself, and so tangled are you in it that you can never be free again."

"I don’t understand."

"Char’lashi’s death was his own cause. If your father accepted Ceel’ishi’s place as tuac’a’pili, he’d still be alive, disregarding him making some stupid decision. He was prone to many, after all. Do you know why House Shepil is among our allies, Lier’kar?"

"To avoid destruction, they pledged themselves to you," I answered.
“Essentially, yes,” he hissed. “Twenty five floods ago, do you remember the yaoyotl? House Chulip’s madness?”

“I do.” Like most memories, it was surrounded by scents, most importantly that of my mother. Her odor had been laced with the stink of rotting wood, and the air had been filled with shricks of warning from nearby bowers. The keening cries of other younglings were carried on the wind that fell night, as they were flung to their deaths or slashed apart by claw, spear or shochiku wielded by the invading warriors of House Chulip. We’d both expected to die in the same way against the force that had snuck above our canopy level to kill House Kahn’s vulnerable younglings, and females burdened by their young.

“Does your memory remain fresh enough to remember that Ceel’ishi’s youngling Pahuish was torn to pieces, the head spiked on the male’s first spear?”

“No, grandfather. I had forgotten Ceel’ishi ever had a child.” I wasn’t about to mention grandfather’s own mate had also died defending the bowers. I knew he remembered.

You were young when it happened. We lost much that night. Ceel’ishi and Seethon had both been with our assault upon the open paths to House Chulip, and were fighting with abna’hei against House Shepil. Both sides acted with pride, while Chulip took the way of infamy.”

Chulip’s actions had been birthed by desperation, but that still did not excuse it in the eyes of grandfather or myself. We could have negotiated a halt to our war before that moment, but the irrevocable act meant it would be to the death of their house or our own.
None of the Shepil House, although allied with Chulip for the yaoyotl, had participated in or known of the attack.

"After the assault, Shepil’s tuac’a’pili came to ask for succor, and admitted they had already torn themselves free of the tendrils of any alliance to doomed Chulip. I accepted their claim—they had fought us well, and always face to face. Ceel’ishi saw otherwise."

"That was the night when my control over him slipped. He has become lost to me since, and pursues alliance with other houses instead of keeping close to those I have created. Your mother’s death, and your battle against Tuathi, have been the inevitable results of his decisions. House Hoshimec and he are wound together as tight as the haft of your spear will be bound to the obsidian blade; although the ties are weaker, Hoshimec gains tribute from Rok’h and Anath’pah. Your brother has avoided the thread binding us; perhaps, as water flows, he shall find it cutting his flesh, but for now he appears free of it, unlike us. Have I parted the leaves for you, granddaughter?"

He had indeed. Tuathi’s bid for my womb was an attempt to bolster the hidden alliance of Ceel’ishi’s allies to Kahn. I’d avoided one snare and fallen into another. Kualitl obviously smelled my rage. "Yes, you see the dew upon the thread between us now. If Ceel’ishi challenges me and takes House Kahn, you’ll be nothing more than an irritant in the way of the alliance he desires. You must leave. Become a huaculi."

I turned away from him, my thoughts churning from the revelations.

Absentmindedly I noticed the sap in the mold had begun to cool, and looked for a pair of tongs to pull the falamei haft free. When I found the tongs I used them to hold the haft vertically in order to let the excess liquid run its way down the length and drizzle back
into the bowl I’d used to heat the sap; I could always use it next time the veneer had been chipped or worn away from use. After most had poured off I set the base into a fixture that angled it towards the sky, so as the sap dried it would not be unbalanced. Some warriors prefer one side to have a thicker coating of sap, as they believe it works more effectively to have a side better able to deflect obsidian, but I didn’t agree. I preferred equal balance.

With the task complete, I turned back to Kualitl. My eyes roved over his familiar face, the skin lighter even than my own as the result of his advancing age. I wondered if his color had been as rich and vibrant when he was my brother’s age—our skin does fade over the years, after all. His earlobes were smaller than normal for most Riapannai, and nicked and cut from years of battle. He looked back at me without blinking. “It is good you memorize my face, Lier’kar.”

“Your words sound of water, tuec’shili. Yet I doubt any would dare challenge you for long years to come, even Ceel’ishi.” I couldn’t hide my scent, but at least I could offer the words.

“Stop rounding your pronouncements,” he hissed. “Let words be sharp, and cut like the truth. You aren’t a child anymore, and you certainly shouldn’t be treating me like one.” I paled in shame, recognizing the foolishness of my reaction.

He rose to his back legs, stretching up on the tips of his back toes. “My blood shall return to the earth soon. I can sense it coming in the smells of the house, and in the insolent glares Ceel’ishi directs my way. To keep the house strong, you must challenge him, but the season is wrong...you aren’t ready, Lier’kar. You must leave, and let the
deep jungle harden you enough to destroy him, for daring to stand against my wishes. Let this thread that binds us strangler him."

He backed up to the entryway to the bower, continuing to look me in the eye. "I wouldn’t spend thought upon your brother. I’m convinced Li’li’shen will adapt to Ceel’ishi without question, and thrive in the House. You are different.” Kualitl did not speak again. He backed out of the entry and latched his claws into the thick bark. I listened intently as the sounds of his passage melted away in the night, swallowed by the urgent cries and songs of the other inhabitants of the forest.

So soon after joining House Kahn as an adult, and already I was part of its intrigue. I needed to speak with Li’li’shen—I knew he was stronger than grandfather believed. My slight disagreement with him was nothing compared to what I’d just learned. Stepping outside, the night air was soothing against my skin, sucking away the heat I’d absorbed from the embers. It would be some time before the sap hardened upon the haft, so I’d have more than enough time to find and speak with my brother. Far off above the falamei treetops, one of the moons was in full bloom, lending a silvered gleam to the surfaces of the leaves and trunks around me. The mating calls, screams of predators and prey, and the endless rustling of other creatures passing through the forest struck me with their force; they were always more prevalent when one of the moons was in full flower.

I padded my way through the sheltered folds and winding branches towards my brother’s bower. The tightness binding my chest thickened as I panted from the exertion. His bower was far to the east, almost in the territory of our neighbor House Laosith. Being in one of the lower canopies actually made it harder to reach; it is much easier to
climb with our claws than slide down branches, and the quickest way to reach it was to
crawl down one of the colony vines connecting the falamei my own bower had been on
with the one his bower clung to. I hissed in frustration at scraping my flesh against the
tree several times. It was easy to ignore the pain, but it was another irritant inflaming my
rage.

At last I reached his bower. A dim glow from the stove lit the interior, so I knew
someone was inside. I waited at the entryway to control my breathing and then peeked
in. His personal scent drifted out, but I didn’t see him. Instead, I saw only his mate
Bil’djin washing the skin of their oldest youngling while their tlat’acon tended some food
over the stove. All three sets of eyes looked up towards me.

“May the limb stay sturdy beneath your claws, Bil’dgin,” I said formally. “Is my
brother near? I don’t see him.”

“He has not returned since your entry into the house, Lier’kar,” his mate hissed.
“Perhaps he lingers near the sil’anth, as he does too often these nights. I thought he
might be spending time with you to discuss the issues of the House.”

Her scent was laced with gall, a scent I’d not noticed until she’d seen me. I
wondered whether she knew anything of what I’d heard from grandfather, or whether it
was my own odor that was having the effect upon her; obviously my scent was affecting
all three in the bower, even their youngling. “Thank you, sister,” I said before backing
away from the entrance. Our relationship had always been strained, possibly because she
disliked the amount of time Li’li’shen had spent training with me instead of working with
his children. At least, that’s what I’d always assumed.
The pil'thir wasn't far, but my shoulders and upper chest burned like fire by the
time I arrived. It was strange that my brother would always come to the sil'anth crop
when he was pensive or struggling with a decision, as he rarely touched its leaves but
he'd always paid an inordinate amount of attention to the plants themselves, and how
they were cared for. I'd never thought to ask him why, instead accepted it as a facet of
his character.

From the horizontal slats of the pil'thir I moved to the series of square boxes
heaped with dirt where the sil'anth was kept; it was too valuable to tend it in the distant
soil plantations where most of our tlat'acon's labored upon the banana, millet rice, sweet
potato and taro fields. As I moved through the conclave I could hear and smell many
other of my housemates, but they left me alone. It was nearly time for lanti, the fourth
meal of the night, and they must have been hungry. Or it was the scent of my irritation
and the blood that had begun dripping from my scabs again which kept them away.

I spotted him lounging on his belly near the lowest tier of earthworks, talking with
one of the cual'pir assigned to the patch. There is always a pair to watch, night or day,
and I believe there are few tasks as important in the house as protecting the sil'anth.
Theft of a crop can occur by other houses as a means of weakening opponents, and
huaculi and tlat'acon's will in desperation risk stealing a handful when unable to trade for
the plant legitimately.

My brother noticed me immediately, although like often happens in meetings
between 'pani I couldn't tell if he caught my scent before his eyes spotted me; here on the
pil'thir with so much traffic, let alone the overwhelming pleasantness of the oily
wintergreen scent emerging from the sil'anth, I couldn't discern. His eyes, and those of
the sil’anth guard watched me stalk towards them with unblinking intensity. “Do any
dare disturb the crop?” I asked, determined to at least show a pretext of formality. I
could smell the dusty scent of unease emerging from my brother, and Shochi’s
responding in turn.

“None dare the wrath of House Kahn,” Shochi hissed. I recognized him by his
scent this close, although the snarl of scar tissue upon his rear left leg had told me by
sight alone long before reaching him. He’d gained it while bearing witness on a foray
against the lesh’pah for another house, although I couldn’t recall which one. He hailed
from House Blad’shoth, the first house that had sworn alliance to Kualitl long before the
flood of my birth.

“How fight your children?” I asked.

“Not as well as yourself, Lier’kar. I can only strike them harder-wait.” His scent
moved from unease to a rich, nose-tingling pepper. “You should visit, tell them some of
what you did to prepare for your chaoi. Perhaps you could even be sushaquo to my elder
son-he is nearly past his first decade.” He exposed his neck in a dishlo. “I’m sure you
would harden him enough to keep him in my house, and strengthen us all with his skill in
time.”

My brother interrupted. “It is misleading to search for hardness; the greatest
survivors are the flexible trees that bend, but do not break.”

Shochi trilled. “Better to be hard obsidian than supple rope, as water flows. Both
are required for a killing thrust, but the blade gains the glory, not the cord binding it to
the haft. I don’t want to train my son to be a tlat’acon, Li’li’shen.”
I performed a dishlo; the words were well delivered. "I shall consider it, Shochi." The house would lose many warriors of skill and wisdom such as Shochi if Ceel’ishi had his way; the thought reminded me of my reason for dropping to the pil’thir. "But for now, I must share words with my blood."

Shochi bobbed his head in acceptance, no doubt curious at the reek of unease still reeking from my brother’s glands. He hobbled his way off into the sil’anth bushes, which obligingly covered his scent quickly with their powerful odor. He was a good choice for guarding the sil’anth; within several steps I was unable to spot the russet shades of his flesh amongst the glistening leaves. I’d also not noticed the other guardian, which reassured me concerning the safety of the plants. There was no treasure more important to the health of a house than a ready supply of the leaves and flowers of the plant; powerful houses of many generations had become tlat’acons or started yaoyotls in desperation for the plant when their crop was destroyed.

I turned to my brother. "I have been talking with our tuec’shili." He turned his gaze from the plants and paced away, towards the edge of the pil’thir. Smart, to be sure none could hear our words.

"Yes," he hissed, drawing it out slow and emotionless, although his unease was scenting the ether. He must have known.

"You know what he told me?"

"As your teachers, we discussed it the moment Tuathi entered competition for your womb."

No wonder he’d been acting so strangely ever since I slipped into the choal. He’d known everything. It sickened me. I’d thought I could trust my own brother, compared
to some in the house, but now he'd proven how closely entwined he was in the house
manipulations and his refusal to be as clear as fresh water when dealing with me. I was a
fool.

Nonetheless, it had been his voice that had called me over the edge of the spiral.
He could have remained perched upon the tree and waited for me to die within, but he'd
taken the risk of helping me reach the edge despite knowing what might occur. Li'li'shen
may have expected or even desired my defeat at the hands of Tuathi, but he hadn't
wanted me dead. It was cold comfort.

"I wouldn't have given myself to him even if you'd asked, brother."

He thrummed his tongue. "Of course not. It would have been beneath you, and
shamed our house. We didn't train you to show your neck to the first male willing to kill
for you, but we had no expectation of Ceel'ishi's tricks."

"If things pass as grandfather expects, my actions have endangered you, and
others loyal to his rule. I am shamed." I performed a dishlo, but he turned aside to avoid
the gesture. Humiliating, to do that to me.

"That remains to be revealed," he responded. "It wasn't a direct member of
House Hoshimec, so the house in power isn't weakened at all. House Rok'h now finds
itself in an even more servile position to Hoshimec, but it is unknown what Hoshimec
will value more; keeping you in Kahn as an individual, or pleasing House Rok'h." His
head swiveled left and right quickly, to make sure none listened to our words.

"Of course, that doesn't mean that should Ceel'ishi desire to keep you alive and
spurn House Rok'h, that you'll be safe from assassination, or some "accident" planned
by Tuathi," he continued. "Grandfather's words have value, and I agree. It's your
choice now as an adult, but should Ceel’ishi succeed, I would advise you to choose the
life of a huaculi. Or if the choices of the house are your first concern, throw yourself
before Ceel’ishi the moment he tears apart our tuec’shili.”

“Never! The moment I enter the house, and you ask me to leave it, or act as if I
were still a youngling,” I hissed. “Why don’t you challenge grandfather yourself,
Li’li’shen?”

He didn’t look at me. “I have sparred with grandfather, as you have. He defeats
me without effort. I am not ready to lead our house.”

“Is that because you saw our father die against Ceel’ishi?”

His shoulders twitched, as if a fly had lit upon them. “What makes you mention
him, sister?”

“Does it matter?”

His scent became heavier with the dusty odor. “The moon eats the sun.
Obviously Kualitl lit the fire within you, but he and I have never spoken of him since our
ancestor returned to the soil.” I tried to meet my brother’s eyes, but he continued to stare
out upon the falamei limbs and the twining vines, aerophytes, and other vegetation of the
canopy. It seemed he was looking in the direction of his bower, but I couldn’t be sure.
“He was overfilled with pride, sister. Like a spine fish that has swallowed too much
water. Only after he’d issued his challenge did he realize he had no chance of victory,
but refused to back away.”

“You make little sense,” I said.

“Our father, although he took Li’sham as his mate, had once tried to fight for the
womb of another. Her name is Seethon,” he replied.
I recognized the name of Ceel’ishi’s mate. “Her lissome form was legendary upon the boughs; it was said she could dance upon the leaves themselves, and many of the people came to court her, some from Shen’thocaopani itself. Char’lashi, our father, and Ceel’ishi both competed for her—they had long been rivals, almost from the moment their claws hardened. You’ve seen it happen between kin of the same sex often enough, sister.”

“Oh of the opposite,” I interjected.

“Yes. The ways their rivalry wove them together were numerous. Ceel’ishi killed more humans on a raid, Char’lashi would kill a hecatem without aid. It was endless, until their desire for Seethon brought their claws to touch for the same prize.”

“Whether she had a desire for either, or for any of the other suitors is of little concern. In the end, the choal spun about the two brothers, the final before the winner would combat Seethon herself.”

He hissed, finally turning to look me full in the face. “Char’lashi lost through his very ardor, betrayed by his passion. After a few sparring slashes between the two, Char’lashi charged his rival. Ceel’ishi waited to the last moment, dodged to the side, and pushed his opponent from behind beyond the edge of the choal. Seethon went to Ceel’ishi without contesting his claim.”

“Any pretence of neutrality between them evaporated. Our father released the scent of burning wood each time he neared Ceel’ishi after that. Although Char’lashi took our mother as a mate at the urging of grandfather, he continued to utter words of spite against his rival flood upon flood, muttering of the cheapness of Ceel’ishi’s tactic.” My brother’s odor began to taste of salt in my nostrils.
“I remember his rants. They were constant as breath. Once, he told me he’d saved Ceel’ishi’s life on a raid against humans, and swore upon water itself he would undo the action if he could.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps that was the reason Ceel’ishi had striven so hard to prove himself over our father, I am unsure. But this knowledge and his loss ate away at Char’lashi, replacing his ability with indolent pride. It was inevitable that when Ceel’ishi challenged for the position of tuac’a’pili, one step below grandfather’s rank, Char’lashi’s spear was raised in challenge against him. Ceel’ishi did not trick Char’lashi from the chaol that time. You were still clinging to our mother’s hackles when his blood flowed back to the earth.” He spoke no further for a time. “He had skills and strengthened the house, but he refused to accept his position. Perhaps the rivers would’ve flowed smoother if he’d slit the lesh’pah’s throat a moment after it killed our uncle, but spilt blood cannot be regained. Our father should have remembered his place in the hierarchy and accepted it, or trained to defeat Ceel’ishi rather than spouting rants and eating too much sil’anth.”

“Is this why you expected me to lose,” I interrupted. “You thought his influence strong in my blood?” He did not speak. “Yes—you accepted my loss to Tuathi as the continuation of Father’s death.”

“We are of the weaker bloodline, sister,” he said. “It is wisdom to realize and accept that.”

“Do you really wish to see our house turned into a tributary of Hoshimec?” I shredded the planks of wood beneath me, needing to scratch something.

“Ceel’ishi masters Hoshimec; Kahn shall remain the house in power, I’m sure. Blad’shoth and especially Shepil shall bear the brunt of his rage, and possibly you. Yes,
you fought well against Tuathi, sister. But your victory complicates things for us all.
That’s why grandfather said it’d be better if you left when he returns to the soil.”

“Why do you both speak of this as if it has already happened! Cowardice in the
house!” I hissed loudly, no longer caring much about privacy.

He stepped in towards me, hissing. “Lower your voice. No need to spout our
secrets to the listening night, or worse, to be caught by wandering tl’acons. You know
how they feast upon words for sustenance, as they have little else to live for.”

I thought of Feanas, and what she’d said to me before I was inducted into the
house. “I care not what they think,” I retorted. “I hear words of cowardice and
acceptance from my own blood, and you expect me to cover my mouth! What makes
you so willing to accept this ending?”

“Being adult is accepting your place, sister. Besides, I’m... not like you, Lier’kar.
I have others to protect, while you have no responsibilities.” He turned to me, locking
his gaze with mine. “I refuse to be like our father, abandoning my family in futile
challenge. If you wish that to be your ending, so be it. It shall not be mine.”

A pause lengthened between us into a divide, as we glared at each other. He
broke the contact first, looking out over the edge of the pil’thir. I understood his
reasoning, but it wasn’t nearly as simple as he seemed to perceive it. “You learned the
wrong lesson from father’s death, Li’li’shen. You swallowed his acceptance of failure—
he never would have failed if his spirit was strong. Perhaps it was better he faltered
against Ceel’ishi, after seeing how his training afflicted you.”

He snorted. “You’re the one that swallows sil’anth like father...you never saw
how he let it fill his mind with lies. He was weak, and Ceel’ishi stronger. He must have
known it before he stepped into the spiral, but still he plunged into the eddy. His failure drove him mad.”

“At least he tried! What he started, we must finish—the house will be weakened under his control. Together we can crush him.”

My brother trilled, but his scent was bitter and foul. The scent of defeat, one I’d never smelled coming from him before. “That is your flaw, sister. Tuathi’s defeat means nothing; it is a minor pinprick in Ceel’ishi’s struggle for power, of no real import. Perhaps, long from now, Ceel’ishi will weaken and his fortune change. But we two are not strong enough to change it, and there are no others in the house, or in the allies of grandfather, able to defeat Ceel’ishi in the spiral. It would be foolish to try.”

You are mistaken. We must strike now before he mantles himself as shuacuitl of House Kahn.”

“What would you do, sister? Murder him in his sleep?” he hissed. “While an admirable manipulation, Ceel’ishi is not so foolish as to sleep alone. Seethon would defend her bower, and there are others, watching all nearby limbs. Did you not think I thought the same, once? Grandfather’s wisdom helped me to see the flow of the rivers.”

“His thoughts were meant to caution you, not sicken you with doubt. You have swallowed poison and think the effects natural!” I turned, unable to continue. Here I’d believed the heartwood of my lineage hale, and now I discovered in the course of one night span the wood rotten inside. No wonder Kualitl had asked me to become a huaculi; I’d been mistaken in believing my brother had the personal strength and will to place himself in the path of our spiteful uncle.
I stalked off, not looking back as I grabbed onto the trunk of the closest falamei limb. I needed to focus on something I could actually affect; the finishing of my spear was all I could think of. As I climbed, tiny droplets of blood dribbled onto the bark from the two scabs I’d torn open from all my exertions of the night. Even the pain and agony of the climb couldn’t distract me from the turmoil of the recent revelations.

Halfway up, I paused to rest, and glanced down at the flat boards of the pil’thir below. The very night I entered the house, and now I found myself alone. It offered me no protection, and after learning the rotten truth of Ceel’ishi’s coming dominance of the house, and his attempt to use me as a pawn for cementing the bond with Hoshimec, I found my desire to remain weakening. Staying longer would only make it easier for his manipulations; ‘build beside the House of your enemy before that of your allies’ was a common phrase, after all, and Houses Linuipi and Tolcuah did exist side by side.

But leaving would injure my heart; there were many here that were trustworthy, and in time perhaps one would rise to challenge Ceel’ishi. I shouldn’t make a decision to leave lightly, and grandfather’s advice wasn’t the only course of action. Perhaps if enough of us backed him, my brother would be willing to act as a bulwark against Ceel’ishi’s actions, even if he didn’t challenge him directly. With training, and time wearing down Ceel’ishi’s skills and learning his fighting style, someone would be able to retake the house. I wasn’t willing to give up yet, not while grandfather still held power.

I resumed my climb up the tree. The smells of cooked yuca, bananas, beans and maize stirred my hunger; after I finished my spear I would have to hunt down Feanas to ask her to cook something. As I pulled myself up the limb below my former home, I thought I detected a familiar scent, but I couldn’t remember whose. A few claw grasps
below the entry to my bower I paused, trying to determine without success where I'd scented the odor before; whoever it was, they waited inside.

"Grandfather?" I asked, although I was absolutely certain it wasn't him; his scent was as known to me as my brother's. However, a 'pani's scent can change, sometimes drastically depending on what they've been eating, extreme emotion, or if they are in a state of sexual excitement. I'd be relieved if it was him, or another sent by him to find me, as I was vulnerable here on the angled trunk. The girth of the limb was over the length of a fully stretched Riapannai, but my wounds were still healing and I was exhausted from the climb and my reopened injuries. I also had no weapons upon me.

I heard the trilling of a 'pani's tongue against the roof of a mouth from the interior. My skin seethed, and my fresh scars tightened in realization. Tuathi. No wonder I'd not immediately recognized the scent; he'd been mating recently.

"I should stop underestimating you, Lier'kar." His head emerged from the recesses of the entryway, before he stepped out onto the limb itself. The empty hole his eye once had occupied was sickening to behold; I did not envy whatever female now shared his bower. Not even the silver light of the moons were able to assuage its ugliness.

"Use my house name when you speak, Tuathi. And leave my bower, as I don't desire you in it, or as a mate." I would not back down, although it was unnerving to find him so confident upon the territory of my house. There was little room for maneuver here on the branches, though; I would be at a serious disadvantage if he chose to attack me. To do so violated many laws, and could be enough to start a yaoyotl depending on
the circumstances, but after the earlier revelations, I was no longer sure of their strength.

In preparation of his assault, I dug my claws deeper into the bark below.

“You’d be mine if I wanted you still.” He moved further upon the limb towards me, and I hissed involuntarily. One leap closer from either of us and we’d be in the other’s reach.

“Don’t try to cloak your cowardice in false words. It was pain that sent you reeling from the spiral, not disgust. Your understanding of napaluqui is flawed.” I kept my eyes upon his rear claws, to warn me if he decided to spring. At least he wasn’t carrying any weapons.

“If I wanted you dead, the maggots would enjoy the feast. But there is a need for ferocity in House Kahn soon.” Now it was clear; Ceel’ishi was sanctioning this meeting. I was being offered the chance to be like my brother, slavish and subservient. I made a snap decision.

“I see you’ve been relegated to message bearing. Or, is tlat’acon a better title for you, since you can’t fight with only one eye?” If I kept slinging insults like that in his teeth, one of us would be flung from the tree this night, but I wanted my intentions clear.

He hissed, but didn’t move at the provocation. “We’ll serve the same master soon, Lier’kar.” Although his words were somewhat placating, his scent was heavy with salt, and the barest scent of burning wood. He was losing control, wriggling against his chains like a worm stabbed with a cutting knife.

“I serve no master, tlat’imin. And I already said once, use my house name.”

“Did I tear out your sense of smell along with what might have once passed for beauty? I’ve taken a mate, tlat’imin no longer.”
“A mud-crawling hen for you, then. I’m sure she’ll birth many worthless younglings for you and your house, as you once threatened upon me. She has my sympathies.” There was another branch off to the side; I’d jumped it so many times when this had been my home, I could do it with my eyes slit. I would move to it when he sprang towards me, and knock him from the sky if he dared follow.

“Your dragonfly tongue darts fast, Lier’kar. When it stings too many, I’ll take great pleasure ripping it flee, and staking your head outside my bower.” I saw his toenails clench and tightened my own, ready to jump the minute he moved forward—but instead of lunging forward towards me, he leapt off to the side, to the branch I’d been eyeing. I looked down upon him, his one eye luminous in the argent glare of the moons.

“Ceel’ishi will choke on his own blood when he bids for tuec’shili,” I spat.

“We’ll see whose blood chills on the night he issues challenge. If that tongue keeps dancing, you’ll find yourself alone.” He hissed back at me one last time, then plunged off through the branches. I watched him go until the distant leaves no longer shook from his movements.

*The Technocrat movement began small and insidious; it was some time before we discovered their goal of restoring our technological level to become a space-faring people once more. The plan, needless to say, was horrifying to us. Some of the elements and minerals that would be needed were located close to Riapanni civilization centers, and the mining and manufacturing required would have alerted the native species to our presence, and had unknown consequences for the falamei stands. This was unacceptable. Falamei trees were an enigma to us, much like the Terran panda or platypus—they are one of the most adaptable species of Keltorr. As an individual tree, the long-lived*
behemoth will adapt its size and shape to the environment it finds itself in; if there are others nearby, their limbs will merge together to form a single entity, spreading nutrients between them to shore up the weaker members. We could not allow the Technocrats to affect the development of these two species, especially after we'd been responsible for irrevocable changes already due to the release of Terran species upon arrival.

Chapter 6. Freefall

My bower stank of his odor. I couldn't help but be on edge with that smell suffusing my home, and the stench helped reinforce the decision I'd reached sometime during my conversation with Tuathi. I must retreat. Perhaps I could rally some individuals in the house against Ceel'ishi, but it was far more likely I'd be dead long before we could become threaten his manipulations. If he was sending Tuathi to my own bower to try and convince me to join him, I'd never have peace in the house unless I showed my neck, as my brother pointed out. They'd find another for me in a House he wished to show favor to. To preserve myself from the intrigues to come, I needed to leave. The earlier the better. I had no desire to watch my house fall apart while I stood upon its branches. I would be huaculi.

Huaculi occupy a bizarre place in Riapannai society. So many of us are dependent upon our house and settlement for that which we cannot, or will not provide for ourselves, and even the tlat'acons may rely upon a measure of safety as they labor for more honorable members of a house. The outsider life of a huaculi is starkly different, more akin to the life of an unthinking beast; at least, that's how I'd always heard it described. There is no support from others, no buckler to protect against the spears of misfortune; a huaculi is houseless, self-sustained. It is the weakest rank for a Riapannai
to occupy that has the privilege of carrying a weapon. Yet it also can be a position of unexpected power, since with the lack of demands of a house individuals are able to burn their own path. Some of our most daring Shual’atlats were huaculi at some point in their lives, learning on their own in the harsh forest before returning to take power in a house. Perhaps it would be the same for me. Or, perhaps I would be one of the numberless ‘pani destroyed by the jungle’s harshness; at least I wouldn’t be waiting for Ceel’ishi’s assassins to do the task.

I gathered together as much high energy food as I could carry in my back satchels. After preparing the pack I laid one of my front pads carefully against the haft of my spear. It had almost dried, and as I lifted it free I could detect no flaws in the weight except in the bottom, where I would attach the obsidian edge. I used sand to coat the haft for a better grip and filed out the resin that had filled in the nock. After, I reattached the obsidian chunk at the end with heart vine. I ignored the fresh cuts I accrued in my palms from my work, another sign of my time of weakness. In time, my front soles would regain their calluses.

Twice during the process I moved to the entryway and watched for movement. Each time I saw nothing to worry me, but Tuathi’s residual odor prevented me from calming down. It was good he’d fled instead of attacking me. He would have beaten me easily, but with grandfather still in charge of House Kahn, Tuathi might have paid for the assault with his life. His scent would have given him away to anyone coming to my bower to explore the reason for my disappearance.

My spear was ready. I grabbed a second one from the pile of secondary spears and strung both to the pack before stepping into the four straps, one for each limb.
Moving back outside was refreshing; at least here, the scent of Tuathi was lessened by the odors of food and falamei, and the many other creatures which shared our home in the middle canopy of the forest, the length of a thousand Riapannai high above the sickening muck of the rotting earth. I had a long distance to go before sunrise.

There was one more thing I needed to gather before leaving. I needed enough of a supply of sil’anth to preserve me in the wilds, for at least a full flood cycle. Wild patches of the plant are hard to find, and I had no desire to become a thief mere nights after leaving the limbs of my house. If it became necessary for me to eventually steal, I would consider the option, but for now it was worth the risk of another confrontation with my brother to forestall that choice. With the pack on, it was slightly more difficult to make my way back down to the sil’anth fields, but I did so despite the constant stabs of pain pulsating in my shoulders and chest. Hopefully I would not see Li’li’shen again. I had nothing to say to him; if he desired to remain in the house after Ceel’ishi took control that was his decision. It would not be mine.

There was little activity on the limbs and boughs, and even the pil’thir was deserted. Everyone was eating lanti, the fourth meal of the night out of six. I didn’t see either of the guardians of the field, so I shrugged off my satchel and moved close to the leaves. My nose flared at their lovely scent, and without hesitation I plunged into a space between two plants. I’d plucked and eaten two healthy leaves before I heard a whisper move behind me that wasn’t the wind, and smelled the presence of another ‘pani.

“T’ll have a right to the field now,” I said, not bothering to turn around. I knew who it was by scent alone.
“Of course, Lier’kar. I merely wanted to make sure you harvested correctly.” I turned at the nudging insult. It was Shi’shi’actli. His skin was an unhealthy white, a strange color indeed for a ‘pani. Difficult to miss. He’d covered up the unnatural brightness of his skin with some veneer of mud, obviously to hide his movements in the field all the better. I remembered him as a quiet creature, different from the restless, bickering younglings I’d grown and competed against during my first ten floods.

He watched me without blinking, smelling of freshly cut grass. He was curious what I was up to, or interested in having something to do—I wasn’t sure which. We both knew I understood the proper way of harvesting the plant. All Riapannai did, even tlāacons, although it was rare for one to be given the opportunity. “Are there any plants in flower?”

He exposed his neck. “There is one in bloom.” He stepped past me, the sil’anth leaves whispering against his skin. “Where do your soles fall?” Apparently he’d spotted the satchel I’d left outside the field.

“Where my claws bring me.” It already felt strange, to realize I was about to leave all I’d ever known, but I had little choice.

He hissed, his scent changing to the choking dust of unease. “You leave the house? Why? Plenty of males would accept you, if you made the offer.”

Awkward. I doubted he knew the circumstances of the coming storm to the house, and he obviously thought I left in search of a suitable mate, or one willing to accept my ugliness. “There are none I covet.”

“Ahh, you leave to find one worthy. When will you return to the house?” I said nothing in return as we moved through the leaves, but at least I noticed the choking dust.
scent had diminished in intensity. He stopped in the middle of the patch, before a healthy sil'anth plant wreathed in pale saffron blooms. A few moths hung upon the open flowers, sucking greedily at the interiors. “Please do not take too many—another sil'anth on the far side is near flowering, and I hope some of the latter blooms from this plant will be able to pollinate the other.”

Carefully I broke off a number of the flowers, where the effects upon us are concentrated. He watched me do so, silent, so I made sure to pick only the blooms that had begun to wilt. One of the moths lit upon my front claws, its long tongue thirsting for the sil'anth flowers I held. I raised my paw to the fresher blooms on the plant, to allow it the chance to crawl upon a fresher food supply.

“They are much like us,” Shi'shi'actli hissed. He'd moved up close, near enough for me to hear him breathe. “Night creatures, the sil'anth feeds them. In return, the moths are the only creature that helps the plant produce seeds. Other than ourselves, of course.”

“Good I didn’t kill it, then,” I said, watching the moth make its precarious way along the leaves of the bush. I continued to pluck the saffron flowers, but left the ones near the moths alone, curious at their movements.

“No, you should never kill one of those moths,” he admonished. “They are rare, and it is ill to harm something that helps the sil’anth. They disappear when no plants are in bloom. Despite their bright colors, I’ve never seen them except when a sil’anth flowers.”

“I hear your words, Shi’shi.” I thought of something. “If you see my brother, since he often comes here, tell him I’m gone.”
“Why not tell him yourself?” He looked at me a moment as if considering the request. “If you wish, I’ll do it. But you shouldn’t leave without saying farewell to your last teacher, especially since without his aid you never would’ve had the chance to choose a mate for yourself. Your battle against Tuathi—exceptional. I have never seen such a struggle in the chao! I hope that it has little connection to your hurried flight.”

“More so than I wish, Shi’shi.” He’d caught me. “The rope is tangled, and struggling will only tighten the noose about me. My brother would say I am stubborn.” I had enough blossoms and leaves to keep myself healthy until after the next flood at least. How long I’d be gone, I didn’t know, but I’d have plenty of time to find other sources.

“Be well, then. May the jungle harden you, and keep you fed.” He spoke the traditional farewell given to huaculi. I paled; he’d realized I wasn’t journeying to find a mate. “And look for the moths. They will guide you to sil’anth when you need it.”

“Keep the sil’anth safe, Shi’shi’actli. Weave through the manipulations of the house with caution. I fear House Shepil shall find the paths difficult indeed, in the coming floods.” He exposed his neck, and melted back into the leaves of the sil’anth.

I left the grove, but before I slung the satchel upon my back again I stripped the feathers of House Kahn from my spear and voomlish. Let my brother find them here, since this was where he came to bury his fears of becoming like our father. I took a moment to glare around at the boards of the pil’thir, before turning towards the falamei branch that would lead me towards the public route to the north.

I had some time before the sun rose, and I wanted to escape beyond the borders of the settlement, away from the influence of Ceel’ishi and Tuathi. They’d probably let me
go without incident, but I didn’t want to take the risk. It’s always better to kill your enemy before it leaves the nest, after all.

Five floods passed before my claws had the fortune to touch Li’qui’pal’s pathways again.

*Coterminous with the revelations of the technocrat mission was the rise of what we later termed ‘the anti-tech movement’. It was as if one extremist group begat the rise of one in opposition. In our folly, we believed this secondary group to be far less threatening. With energy resources pushed to the limit the desire of a large segment of the population to rip itself away from the use of technology, while not seeming very logical, did appear beneficial to our own survival. Fifteen thousand people followed their leader Davide to the islands he’d chosen as the new home for his movement, far to the east of the super continent. We gifted them with a supply of Terran plants and animals, believing the large distance between the super continent and these islands would prevent the exchange of any of the species, especially mankind. The twin moons, after all, churn the oceans to froth continuously; no vessel could possibly make it the several thousand miles of Charybdis conditions, at least of the kind they would have access to. After bringing them to the islands, we turned our attention back to the technocrats; we could now use additional hibernal chambers to prevent them from infecting other members of the population with their threatening ideas.*

The Planetfall Journals

Chapter 7. Return

“I offer myself upon the earth’s flesh to House Kaf’shou. May my bones shatter, my flesh decay, and my blood boil before I betray the house.” I sprinkled a claw’s grasp
of earth, gathered for me by Kaf'shou's tlat'acons earlier, upon the wooden planks
beneath me and lay prone over the soil. Some Riapanai might have tasted the bitterness
of an uncooked fama root in the words, but I found them banana sweet upon my tongue.

As a huaculi returning to a hostile house, alerting the members of Kahn, Rok'h or
any of the four houses now allied to Ceel'ishi of my existence, let alone prostrating
myself before them, would be tantamount to suicide. I would be killed where I stood by
numbers rather than in the ritual combat of a chaol spiral, and my brother and others
would be forced to take part. Ceel'ishi could always argue I'd tried to steal some of the
house's sil'anth, and there were few laws to protect lone huaculi. It was this reality that
brought me to the pil'thir of House Kaf'shou, a lesser house several trees distant from my
birth house.

"A strong cleaving to the house!" the current shuacuitl, or house leader, Flihoctl
called out. "Rise, and shed the burden of the huaculi." A duo of tlat'acons moved to my
sides and attempted to help me to rise to my back legs, but I shrugged them away with a
hiss. Another moved up behind me and wrapped the feathered mantle of House Kaf'shou
across my back, along with my newly decorated voomlish marking my rank of cual'pir of
House Kaf'shou and its colors of brown, green and red. On the sides of the pil'thir, all
ranking warriors had assembled for the gathering, approximately 30 in number. None of
their scents were familiar.

I performed a wide dishlo to my new shuacuitl. "The winds dance the leaves in
praise of your wisdom, allowing me to join with Kaf'shou. As your newest blood, who is
the heart that I serve?" I looked about at the voomlish of the nearest housemates,
searching for the marks that denoted the marks of a tuac'a'pili, at the same time trying to
distinguish the individual scents of the closest ‘pani. I wasn’t used to the scents of so
many of our people this close together; the time spent alone had weakened my ability to
discern one individual from another in clumps.

“Ahh, you haven’t smelled his scent yet, Lier’kar. The tuac’a’pili of House
Kaf’shou is Kala’zho.” The throng to one side parted to reveal a leathery ‘pani, the
russet skin of his shoulders and facial ridges lightening from age. I’d have guessed him
within half a doec of floods younger than my grandfather, the last time I’d seen Kualitl
alive. Without hesitation he stalked his way before me, close enough so I was able to
distinguish his scent without confusion. “We have much to discuss, new blood of the
house. Your fellow cual’pir shall wish to hear of your lineage, and test themselves
against your skill—"

“There shall be no need, my tuac’a’pili.” No use hesitating—I’d learned
grandfather had been wrong in believing it’s best to wait for pure balance before issuing a
challenge for the chaol—the situation required I drive myself as deep into the heart of my
new house as possible before Ceel’ishi learned of my return. “As a cual’pir of House
Kaf’shou, I issue challenge for your rank of tuac’a’pili.” I heard a chorus of hisses from
the sides at my audacity, and a mélange of fresh scents poured into my nostrils. Being
this close to Kala’zho, at least I could discern his odor from the stream, and I relished the
scent; he smelt of dusty unease, and I exulted in the realization.

Surprisingly, I heard Flihoctl trill at my words. “Already a challenge? You are a
bold one.” I examined the feather badges sewn into Kala’zho’s voomlish quickly, noting
his impressive years of service to Kaf’shou. He’d killed quite a number of lesh’pah, the
The ground dwellers I'd never even seen before, as well as several pairs of dangerous pallahids, the scaled quadrupeds able to kill with a single bite.

"It is my right, as part of the blood of the House," I argued.

"Be cautious, young one. While you've strengthened since your challenge against Tuathi, I have lessons to teach the forest neglected," Kala'zho spoke for the first time, his voice raspy from age. I hissed involuntarily at the mention of my enemy—apparently the memory of my battle in the chaol still leapt between the trees of Li'qui'pal. Or Kala'zho might have seen the fight itself, as I no longer remembered most of the people that had watched the combat. The jungle had erased many of those times with hasshesh to expose my neck, not to this hoary elder. I'd beat him with ease, and the scent of unease leaking from his glands only bolstered my confidence. Still, he might know he was beaten but he was also locked into his role. Any 'pani strong enough to reach the rank of tuac’a’pili, and know the intricacies of napaluqui so well, would probably rather be returned to the soil before bowing to a young challenger.

"I was taught by Li’li’shen of House Kahn, and before him my spear was guided by the great Kualitl. I need no lessons from you." I refused to break gaze.

He might be old, but he was still a warrior. He had no other choice, really. "I accept your offer of challenge. I shall teach you in the chaol, since you refuse to heed my lessons beyond its edge." He turned, breaking gaze first, and pushed his way through the nearest clot of housemates. I turned to Flihoctl, performed a proper dishlo, and left the planks of the conclave.

* * * * *

The following night, I met Kala’zho in the spiral upon the pil’thir. I took my time in arriving. I wanted to tickle him with the possibility I wouldn’t show.
Dangling the possibility of a reprieve and then destroying it could give me an edge. Victory was assured, but the easier my challenge, the more likely the other housemates would accept my position without too much grumbling or sedition. I was the stranger coming into their house, after all. I had to prove myself.

“How long has it been, Kala’zho?” I asked as we stared each other down. The uneasy dust scent was back. “How long, since your claws last grappled in the spiral?”

He stretched up, lifting himself up from the balls of his back toes. “Too long, Lier’kar. Too long indeed. None in the house had the courage to challenge. After I crush you, I’m sure they’ll remember the reasons.” His eyes swept the crowd, warning them of their place.

I’d figured out the real reason none had issued challenge the moment I saw Kala’zho. Two reasons, actually. Primarily it was respect for his leadership, same as I wouldn’t have issued challenge against my grandfather as long as he led the house successfully. There also didn’t appear to be any cual’pir attempting to gain dominance over the others, or I’d not noticed any. They huddled together in a clumped mass every time I saw them assemble.

“Who was your last?” I asked

“He was called Darish. Part of the slime the trees feed on now.” Some of the other housemates nodded—perhaps Darish was the cause for their weakling’clumping. The full house, tlat’acons included, had turned out for our battle. Almost sixty, a decent number but less than a third of the assembled forces of House Kahn were here. I had an upright battle ahead of me.
“Enough banter,” Flihoctl hissed from the side. “I wish to know if I have a fresh tuac’a’pili prepared to lead our house to greater glory. Enter the spiral.”

Two tlat’acons came up to Kala’zho and I to offer freshly cut sil’anth. I took two handfuls and chewed it fast, letting the second mouthful mix with my saliva some before I swallowed. It often affected me faster that way, and over time in the deep forest my tolerance to the plant had deepened. The moths pointed out by Shi’shi’actli had led me true when I needed more of the plant, and I’d always had more than enough. And if I wanted its edge in the battle, I needed to eat this much.

Kala’zho took only a small amount. “What bothers you, Lier’kar? Do you wish to be completely addled by sil’anth? Or did your former house have such wealth that they gulped it by the bucket?”

“I wish to make your death more memorable, Kala. So I don’t forget the sweetling words you gasp in desperation as I gut you.” I stepped into the spiral first, for I could already feel the tips of my toes and fingers tingling in familiar recognition. He joined me above the fern heads. On all sides, the other members of the house screamed the call of challenge, alerting nearby houses of an internal struggle for the position of tuac’a’pili. For a moment, I mused if House Kahn heard the challenge. Did my brother realize who had entered the spiral, returned from the exile he and our grandfather had orchestrated upon me?

I tossed aside the idle thoughts. There would be time for them later. The sil’anth helped focus me, to search for weakness in Kala as he circled in. He seemed to be favoring his rear right leg, the knee joint possibly, but it seemed too obvious—a ploy. Did that mean his left leg was weak, or that his right was particularly strong? There were
many possibilities with such a wily old warrior, so I didn’t want to take any large risks early on. I’d let him make the first strike.

I feinted towards his right, the one he favored. Immediately his hobble vanished and he lunged into the space I’d been playing towards. I had to admit, he was quick.

“You think me so foolish, Kala? The birds of the jungle feign a broken wing to lure enemies from their nest. My mother taught me that trick when I still clung to her back.”

I darted in quickly as I said the last few words, while he might be distracted by the insult. My leg sweep connected with the back of his calf, a glancing blow, but first strike was mine. I heard the sound of claws rattling on wood, as none of the housemates had worn their armor for our conflict.

“With one so young, I decided to begin with the most basic of lessons. Now that I’ve allowed you the honor of first blood to satiate your honor, I’ll tear you apart.” He hissed, but his breathing came ragged in the challenge. It had to be another layer of falsehood.

I kept my distance. I hadn’t even begun to feel the weariness from combat, and the heady rush of sil’anth was crouching at my spine, waiting to explode. I let its pleasant throbbing soothe my emotions and put me into a meditative state, like the sound of water oozing its fingers upon sand.

I stepped close—he backed away. “Can’t run forever,” I gloated. When chances came, I took light swipes at his stomach and legs, never really connecting solidly, but the light red traces I left must have been painful. Each time though, it took him longer to react, expending more energy in his wild jumping about, while I was still fresh. Kala appeared to be horribly out of shape, and I couldn’t believe none in his house had
challenged. He was embarrassing himself through his constant dodging and refusal to engage. The throbbing heart of sil’anth upon my back pulsating in my blood agreed with me—victory was assured. His upper legs were drooping towards the ground, and his head hung low. Every part of his body gave the impression of defeat, and his odor stank of bitter fear. The slashes on his ribs and legs throbbed and bled, and his eyes had lost the ability to focus. Kala was beaten; I stepped forward to finish it.

Misstep, I saw his calves tense—I’d misjudged him. The sil’anth throb pushed me forward instead of dodging to the side as I might have done without its presence, but I didn’t mind. Let it end now. We collided in the middle, his dangerous claws knocked high by my upward block. Before he could pull them down I slashed and tore at his ribs on both sides, leaving bloody gashes and bounding away before he could retaliate. His harsh breathing was no longer feigned.

“You wouldn’t have lasted a day in the deep jungle, Kala.” I stalked in and kicked him in the side of one knee—he didn’t even try to stop the strike, as his forward legs were protecting the nasty slashes I’d scored upon his ribs. He fell onto his side, his eyes wide with frustration. Kala’zho hissed up at me and tried to rise back to his feet, but collapsed before his head rose beyond the level of his shoulders.

The ebb and flow of the sil’anth heart beating within me added to the sense of giddiness I felt at the ease of my victory. One unexpected move, and I’d countered it easily. “What an easy challenge,” I hissed at his prone form as I stalked in to end it.

The sil’anth throb lessoned for a moment, and my grandfather’s words of advice drifted through my thoughts—“Do not be overconfident of your strengths.” I stopped
one body length away, curious why I'd thought of him at that moment, in the middle of my fight against this beaten elder.

The pause probably saved me. I only saw Kala's lunge when he'd already propelled himself off the ground towards my midsection. I had time to bring my legs up and kick him back and over me as he knocked me flat, and I felt the searing tears of his claws tear vertical lines down my chest. His teeth gnashed down a finger's span away from my throat before his momentum flung him over me, both of us scrabbling to our feet. From the mindless look in his eyes, he was in the throes of sil'anth rage.

He lunged upon me. I blocked his slashing strikes out and away, then planted both my clenched front forelegs into his midsection to knock the breath from his lungs. The force of the push threw him upon his back, and I followed with a leap onto him before he could recover. The sil'anth throb beat faster in my blood now, trying to send me into the same rage that possessed Kala. I resisted the urge.

He reared his head up to bit me, but I slapped his head hard to the side. I hit him again, full against the weakest portion of his skull. He went limp beneath me, but in case he was playing another ruse (which wasn't likely since the deep thought required for falsehood is impossible in the throes of a sil'anth fury) I struck him hard on the other side again. I shuddered at the sil'anth pleasure reverberating through me at the feel of my fist slamming against his head. He didn't move again.

I pulled myself off him and stood. The edges of my vision were crowded with red haze, but I mastered it, pushed it back. The haze retreated, and I noticed Flihoctl had moved to the edge of the spiral. "Aren't you going to return him to the soil? He'd probably wish for the end."

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“My choice is what matters, not his. The House needs every available member to be strong, and his knowledge will be of benefit. Kal’a’zho retaining that position was weakening you all, but I have rectified that mistake. It’s time to move on.” I dragged Kala to the edge and thrust one of his front legs over the edge, declaring myself the victor since I’d not killed him. I pointed towards two watching tat’acons. “Care for him.” Already the throb of sil’anth was fading, leaving behind the throbbing pain of the slashes on my chest. I was lucky they weren’t worse; that important pause had been vital in giving me enough time to react. I’d forgotten how dangerous a ‘pani becomes when a full-blown sil’anth fury takes hold. No doubt, there were many other things I needed to relearn about my people.

* * * * *

Two nights later, I asked all fighting members of the two ranks now beneath me—tlai’min and cual’pir—to assemble upon the pil’thir. Even before dropping to the planks I could smell their sullen nature, and irritation at being at the whim of an outsider. The crowd was rank with it. A bandaged, sullen Kala’zho stood in the back away from the rest, his blue feathers of rank now adorning my voomlish. “It pleases me to see you breathing, Kala,” I said in passing; the odor I recognized as his, now, changed to an embarrassed musk. I paced to the front before them all, noticing few would meet my eyes with their own. This would be dangerous.

“Before the next flood, House Kaf’shou will raid human lands for trophies, and to show other houses we have members of courage and skill,” I began. “I have spoken with Flihoctl, and he concurs. Too long the members of this house have avoided the chance of glory.” I let my eyes rove over them, looking for any signs of insolence or strength. The mingled odor was one of caution and stubbornness, instead of the enjoyable odor of
fresly cut leaves. "The group shall be small, less than ten, made of the best of the house." I paused again, letting tension build. "We shall not go alone."

"This night I shall ask House Rok’h if they wish to join us in the hunt. I am sure they shall accept, for they too desire to show their strength." I heard some hisses from the back, and the salty odor of outrage drifted to me upon the wind. Yes, they obviously knew my history with that house. "Only the very best shall go. I shall lead you. Every day from now until then, you practice. You have been allowed to soften your skin and muscles for too long, and the house has suffered from your indolence. The mission is not just to slaughter humans in droves, but also to show our superiority over House Rok’h."

I paced back and forth before them, seeing if I could isolate where some of the salt odor emanated from. "I am sure Tuathi will make it a point to go with his war band, as he is tuac’a’pili of House Rok’h." More hisses came from the assembled, issued loudly enough that I could see the pink flesh of the insides of their mouths.

I moved into the clots of housemates until I stood before one of the more audible dissenters. On his back legs he stood a head taller than myself, his skin tone a dull brown. His muscles were bulky, but had no tone like you find in the purely athletic. "Do you have words for me, causal’pir?" He looked at me straight on, and this close I could separate and memorize his personal odor, which hung heavy with salt. He obviously thought his larger size gave him an advantage, which only proved his lack of experience.

"Our strength will be proved by the raid itself, Lier’kar." He’d chosen not to acknowledge my rank at a formal meeting, relying instead on my name. This couldn’t be left unpunished. "What need have we of bringing a weaker house to try and steal our glory?"
I knocked him to the wooden slats of the pil’thir after he’d finished speaking.

"Use my rank when you address me, cual’pir. And don’t question my reasons. It shall be so because I wish it, but if you had much sense in your skull, you’d understand." I moved back to the front, cautious about having so many untested housemates surrounding me. I turned to face them. "No matter how loudly we proclaim our victories, our shrieks will seem hollow and shrill without the words of another house to add credence to our cries. And what better choice, than a rival? It shall make our enemies wary indeed to see such boldness and lack of fear on our part. That is why only the best may take part; the earth-walking lesh’pah will be the least of our concerns.

"Any desiring this task and the glory it carries, here." I pointed beside me. Immediately, four separated from the clots before me and came to the front; two were male, two female, and all were young. One of the males was the one I’d knocked down moments before. After a moment Kala’zho came forward and stood beside the others. Excellent. I’d counted on him being there for guidance, as my own knowledge of ‘lesh’pah was lacking. "Any others?"

Two more males stepped forward. The taller handsome one tried to stand next to one of the females that had come to the fore immediately, but she moved away and stood beside me. Her odor was doused with salt, but I doubted it had anything to do with me. "This is pitiful. Shaming. I had hope half of you were fearless members of the house, but instead I find nearly all of you are cowards. Very well, leave now. Go—back to your children’s bowers, or to the backs of your mothers if she will let you climb on." I hissed at them. "Or perhaps I should make all of you my tat’acon, to fetch buckets of earth and water for warriors willing to improve their house!"
I cursed and harangued them a while more, more for effect than any real belief it would accomplish anything. To be honest, I'd been surprised so many were willing to follow my plan; the reason most of the warriors were refusing to step forward was probably not due to any real lack of courage, but instead doubt in my leadership. That, I'd need to earn. I was pleased Kala'zho had decided to come along, since I'd left him alive for this very purpose. Defeating him had shown my prowess in battle, but being a good killer often has little to do with smart decisions; unfortunate indeed the house where they do not coincide.' The coming foray would really determine whether the house considered me a worthy leader.

"Leave my vision," I spat at the housemates refusing to put themselves at risk and then turned to the few volunteers. "This is your last night of rest. From now on, each night as the sun sets, we meet here to ready our flesh. Whether or not you believe yourself ready to kill the humans does not matter; the house must be strong. Leave, feast or rest. Mate, I don't care. Be here at the sun's dying next night."

They climbed off into the treetops in groups. I paced to the edge of the wooden platform, staring off in the direction of my former house. There were too many branches between here and there for me to see anything clearly, but I still found myself staring off. Far too often, I found myself wondering if my brother knew I had returned home. And, if so, did he really care? Despite his betrayal, I still worried how he fared in the house after my uncle returned Kualitl to the soil. When I'd lived alone in the deep jungle, moving from bower to bower constantly to avoid becoming easy prey for a stalking predator, I'd thought of him often, his motivations; in time I'd come to realize my view of Li'li'shen as strong and forceful had been mistaken. He'd merely been passing on the lessons he'd
learned from grandfather, who must have been watching my training from afar.

Grandfather had taught me directly for the second decade of my life, but in essence he'd been responsible for my learning for twenty of its floods. Still, with him returned to the soil, my brother was the only one I still felt a sense of direct empathy with. Other than Feanas of course, but our relationship had been different. Was the difference between my brother and I merely that he'd seen our father be killed, while I'd been too young to understand the lesson?

"It is a dangerous branch you have chosen, my freshly unfurled tuac’a’pili,” Flihoctl said behind me. I flinched; disturbed I’d been so deep in thought that I’d not noticed his moving about.

"I’m sure it’s a sturdy one,” I replied. “Even if I fall from it, the house will benefit. They need the sight of blood, or they will sicken and die.” I turned my sight to his lean form, the brown skin dark as a wet falamei branch, and blending as easily into the colors of the forest.

"Your words ring of water,” he agreed. “Kala’zho had taken ease for too long, and the rest of the house followed his example. I despaired of what I could do for my house, until you came along asking for shelter. No, I do not question the coming training, or your desire to raid the human squatters. I am only wary of the house you choose to give our attack credence.”

"That decision sends the greatest message of all,” I answered.

"Yes, but we both know Rok’h does not stand alone. A yaoyotl between our two houses would lead inevitably to our destruction or absorption into theirs. Neither of which I desire. Step carefully.”

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I performed a dishlo. "As you say, my shuacuitl. I shall do nothing foolish, but we can reap great benefits by having our rivals speak of our skill. It simply happens that the rivals of the house are the same as my own. If I’ve waited this long for vengeance, do you think me so oblivious that I would act rashly at this point? The lesson I learned above all from the deep jungle was patience, other than realizing my limitations."

He trilled. It bothered me, his laughter against many of the things I said in deadly seriousness, but I was sure it was a cover. No idiot would survive long in the rank of shuacuitl. "Ahh, at last you admit your goal. Those were both valuable lessons the jungle taught you, clear as water. But remember, if the falamei branch becomes rotted, it must be cut to protect the tree."

I nodded, looking dead on into his pupils. Some night, I knew we’d be looking at each other like this again over the chaol, for the leadership of the house itself. I’d take it from him as I’d defeated Kala’zho, but I didn’t know if I’d be so lenient upon Flihoctl’s life. But there were many other tasks for me to wrest with before that night came. "The branch is stronger than you think."

"Perhaps it is at that. But many hands can cut the densest limb."

I shrugged. This word play accomplished nothing. "I should return in time for lanti. I must present myself at the border of House Rok’h, to see if they will venture to kill lesh’pah." I stalked off, slightly angry at his last comment. The blow cleaved close to the heartwood; although I was tuac’a’pili, I did not have the trust of the house. I had to prove myself again before they would be there to protect my backside, and not slash it open.
The tree paths to Rok’h territory were long and meandering, and led by several other houses on the way. With the fourth meal coming up soon, I was held up by numerous tlat’acons upon the pathways, moving bundles of fresh leaves, tubers and bananas. Others carried water in woven baskets sealed with sap. I had little sympathy for the carriers, as it was reserved for the most recalcitrant of tlat’acons, a means of punishment for the laziest ones, but I still made sure to move aside for them. Carrying such a weight renders the natural agility and quick reflexes of a Riapannai practically worthless, and I didn’t want to provoke any incidents with another house by accidentally killing one. It would be even more disastrous if the tlat’acon belonged to House Rok’h.

After a winding tour through the trunks, and moving onto at least two different falamei, I reached the border of their territory, marked with two yellow stripes edging a thick smear of black. Several tlat’acons passed by me while I waited, so I knew one of them would alert their superiors if I’d not been noticed for some reason; it was generally accepted that tlat’acons would gossip about any possible fact or interest since they have little else of concern in their lives, and they’d love to carry the information of who hunkered at the edge of their territory.

It wasn’t long before a warrior of House Rok’h, his spear still slung across his back in its strap, clambered down the branch towards me. He eyed me, obviously taking notice of the badges upon my chest strap. “What do you want, tuac’a’pili? You aren’t welcome.” Something in the jut of his chin reminded me of Tuathi, although this ‘pani’s skin color was light beige.

“I must speak with your tuac’a’pili. Tell Tuathi I have a proposition he might find interesting.”
He glanced up to a large knot in the limb higher up the branch, which stood up and moved off. Interesting; I’d have to find out how they camouflaged their warriors without being spotted, as that would have been incredibly useful when I was huaculi. To keep myself busy while waiting, I tightened and released my muscles, starting at the toes and moving up to my ankles, calves and thighs. I hoped I didn’t appear too nervous over our potential meeting. The eyes of the Rok’h limb guard never left me; there looked to be a lineal resemblance, but I couldn’t tell how close. I wondered if he’d heard the story of Tuathi’s lost eye, then admonished myself. Everyone in his house would know I was the one responsible for his marred face and weakened ability to fight.

“Guardian.” His eyes didn’t flinch from mine. “How fares your house? I hear its fortunes have blossomed since the last time my feet touched your falamei.” I’d heard nothing concerning their house since I’d returned to Li’qui’pal, but I figured a show of respect might garner a better reaction.

“You’re Lier’kar, now of House Kaf’shou.” He showed his teeth, and the powerful scent of rotting wood drifted down to me. My hackles rose at the dangerous scent; I couldn’t recall ever meeting this one, and already he hated me as a sworn enemy. He had to be a relative of Tuathi, sending out waves of hate like that. “Tuathi will be pleased the jungle didn’t devour you. He’ll want to rip out your entrails and hang you with them, as you once threatened to do to him.” He didn’t even blink.

Hmm, I didn’t recall saying that, but I really didn’t remember much of what happened during my bridál fight. Tearing out Tuathi’s eye, the pain as I dragged myself beyond the edge. And my brother’s voice. That was all.
Well, obviously this one had been there. I couldn’t really refute him, and rising to
the bait of his insult while on his territory would be a mistake. I didn’t want to ruin the
next phase of my plan, since the second limb was much more precarious than this path.
So, I said nothing and waited, continuing to flex my muscles to try and stay relaxed.

It wasn’t much longer. I could hear hushed whispers and the sounds of furtive
movements amongst the tree branches all around me, so I knew Tuathi would be coming
soon. Obviously the camouflaged warrior had let his tongue wag on the way to speak
with his tuac’a’pili, or else the gossiping tat’acons had done their business. Who could
blame them? I almost felt like I were a respected guest, from all the eyes I could feel
twitching upon me. Well, not really. The mélange of scents drifting from nearby limbs
told me the real emotions of the watchers.

I caught a whiff of a familiar scent; Tuathi was close. A moment later, he crawled
down into sight, his remaining eye an ebony pool of hateful light. My muscles twitched
involuntarily at the old scent, which was layered heavily with the same rotting wood hate
stench I’d detected from the limb guard. I should have been prepared for the memories to
come flooding back. I wasn’t. Immediately I felt exposed, alone here at his border,
knowing that with the precarious nature of my position in House Kaf’shou, I had no one
to stand beside.

But I was used to it; I’d lived alone in the deep abyss of the jungle, fighting every
day to survive and not be eaten by all the feral beasts that thrived away from our
settlements. There were many worse things in those places than I now faced, and in truth
I had already proven myself over this threat. I mastered it, breathing deeply and evenly.
I was a tuac’a’pili now, fighting to regain abna’hei for my dead blood relatives. I could not falter now. “I see you haven’t returned to the soil, Tuathi.”

“Despite your fervent desire, yes—I still draw breath and cling to the trunk.” He moved closer, that eye appraising me while the scent of his hate became cloying and thicker. I noticed his ash grey skin was lightening from the effect of his emotions.

“Tuac’a’pili of House Kaf’shou, it must have been your challenge we heard several nights ago. I hadn’t even realized the jungle spat you back to us. It must have found you disagreeable.”

“I learned the lessons it could teach. It was time to return home.”

“Humbleness was apparently not one of its lessons, since I find you here upon my doorstep to torment me again.”

I hissed. “I come on orders of my house, not for personal reasons.” The lie tasted delicious; I savored it. “Before the next flood, House Kaf’shou desires to collect trophies from human lands.” His ashy skin lightened in hue, and the rotted wood scent was cut with freshly cut leaves—he was intrigued. I had him. “We wish to send a small group to hunt the lesh’pah, and ask you if House Rok’h wishes to join our foray.” The many pairs of eyes upon me suddenly seemed more intent upon me, almost hungry. One word, and I could be torn to pieces. I offered the prize. “I shall lead the forces of my house, as its tuac’a’pili. We await your answer.”

I exposed my neck, and scuttled backwards down the limb. He answered before I was able to go two lengths. “It has also been long since House Rok’h took trophies from lesh’pah. We shall leave them with nothing to eat but bitter ash and the rotten flesh of their own kind, instead of our own. We shall touch the earth beside you.”
Victory. “I shall alert my house.”

“One last issue, Lier’kar.” I paused. “House Kahn thrives under its leader. Why, upon your return from the deep jungle, did you not present yourself upon his pil’thir? He would have welcomed you home, I am sure, as the river welcomes the stream.” He couldn’t have put it better; the stream is devoured by the river and never seen again. Stop trying to shame me before your house, Tuathi. That decision was mine to make—

“Suspicious, is all. Why join a weakened house over one with your family, and the cautious eyes of your bower mates there to protect you?”

“Why rely upon it when I can forge my own path?” I answered. “Not all of us have mortal weaknesses that we need others to watch for us.” That was foolish of me to speak of his eye. Several hisses warned me from the limbs nearby, and I heard the ominous sound of spears being unstrung from their back-straps.

I changed tactics. “How fares my brother, Li’li’shen?”

“He does well.”

“Tell him I am the same.” I moved further down the limb, eager to leave the edge of their territory.

“You will not greet him?” He tilted his head, apparently still curious.

“No. Let him mull the reasons. He will understand.”

He trilled, and his scent changed to having a taste of banana. Tuathi knew the reason as well as I, and he took pleasure in seeing the division among my blood. “Send word when twenty nights remain before you plan on assembling for the foray.”
“I shall. Ready five, perhaps several more, and we shall do the same. More than fifteen and the glory would be spread too thinly, and even the blind dirt-crawlers might see us coming.”

I felt an intense sense of relief backing down that limb further. I’d done it! The eyes kept watch upon me, but none of the housemates made a move. Soon enough, I was away and on the paths back to Kaf’shou. Although I’d not heard Tuathi admit he would go, I knew clear as untouched rain he’d join us. His leadership demanded it; if he ordered another to kill me during the assault, Tuathi lost too much face amongst his followers, and a power struggle could move in favor of whoever he designated the task to.

Now, I needed to train my warriors, to ensure they were ready to defend themselves not just from the feeble forelimbs of lesh’pah, but also from the attacks of House Rok’h.

Our gaze turned from our kin upon the islands, while we dealt with rebellion. It was a blessing to reduce the energy requirements of Ashram, so we did not wish to look a gift horse in the mouth; we were sure the followers of Davide would thrive in their new home. In retrospect, this was the worst mistake we made, believing in their self-sufficiency. Four Keltorr sun cycles passed before we sent vessels to learn how their project was developing—what we discovered was shocking. Many of the Terran food species we’d gifted to them had been unable to thrive in the island conditions. His followers scoured the islands clean of anything edible before turning upon one another for what remained. Small pockets of these cannibals remained, but we dared not approach them; it was questionable whether the term “human being” could still be
applied to anyone willing to eat one of our own kind. The churning oceans would
prevent these abominations from moving beyond their cursed islands, so we left them to
their fate.

Chapter 8. An Opening for the Damned.

“No! Stop hacking like you hew wood!” I shrieked, frustrated at
Shulich’s gross manipulations. To burn off some of my frustration, I slapped the butt end
of my spear across his back. Hard. He hissed at the pain, but didn’t turn his broad
featured face to meet my eyes. “The shochimoatl’s heavy and capable of formidable
strikes, but its best application is in its sharpness. You don’t need power to bleed your
opponent, and tiring yourself with wild swings will only return you to the soil faster.”

Another wave of vinegar smote my eyes, strong with his personal scent.

He was hopeless. Fifteen nights of practice, and the volunteers had shown few
improvements. Shulich was the only one large enough to possibly wield a shochimoatl,
but so far he’d not demonstrated anything approaching skill with the blade. I had the
rest—Kala’zho, Tilipa, Houlit, Rhani and Moctemi—using the long spear I favored. As it
was the weapon they’d trained with their entire lives from the moment they’d first left
their mother’s back, each already had the requisite skills. I simply needed to hone them.

Houlit and Tilipa were a mated pair, but Tilipa refused to stand near Houlit and
insulted him at every faltering swipe; I’d been right that Tilipa’s vinegar odor hadn’t been
issued against me nights past. I was curious what the struggle was between them, but
knew with patience it would emerge like a tree snail’s feelers after the rain stops falling.
At the moment I was much more concerned with Shulich’s wild blows; it is said that a
ture shochikuo shows ability from the moment they first pick up the weapon. Whether it
were true was debatable, but Shulich was swinging it about like his opponents would stand in place to take the blows. I needed to inspire him.

An idea occurred. "Houlit, come here." He stepped forward obediently, eyes upon the wooden slats. I had to admit, he was an attractive male, with fine features unscarred by war; I didn’t understand why Tilipa had such anger against her mate. From studying her voomlish, after all, she’d chosen him, and he’d knelt to join Kaf’shou.

"Find me the strongest thl’acon in the house and bring it here. Quickly." I thought of Feanas, and what she’d told me of my mother’s house. Shulich would find it different facing an opponent fighting for its freedom. If Shulich lost, he’d never live down the shame either.

"Yes, my tuac’a’pili," Houlit said. He performed a quick dishlo and took off on all fours towards the nearest trunk. I trilled; he must have been relieved to escape my training, considering his speed.

The dusty, dried earth scent of unease coming from several of my companions distracted my musing. I turned to face them; even Kala’zho was releasing the scent.

"Why do you roll eyes to one another? I can smell your unease, speak!"

"Do you plan on hurting it?" Kala’zho asked. "That would be unacceptable."

"You don’t understand, tuac’a’pili," Tilipa interjected before I could respond. It was the first time I’d heard her speak to me, since she’d first volunteered for the venture south.

"I’m not a human—be patient," I replied.

"The thl’acon, he has not been one long," she explained. "He shed blood openly without challenge."
“He assassinated another? Was caught?”

“No, in plain sight of his house. Like a frenzied beast.”

Interesting. “You purchased him after this, or he was a member of this house?”

“He came from House Linuipi. We exchanged two for him, but it was more than advantageous. He does his tasks better than the slack-jawed pair we sent to his former house,” she added.

House Linuipi was the highest house among the settlement of Li’qui’pal, the founder of our home. Its members were numerous and strong, without weakness. If this tlat’acon had been a warrior among them, I might have thrown too great of a challenge against Shulich. “Has he done open violence again, since becoming tlat’acon for the house?”

“He hasn’t,” Kala’zho spoke again. The smell of his unease still spoiled the air. “But he is popular among them. Harming him won’t bolster your place among us.”


“What do you intend?” Kala’zho interrupted a second time. “Wasting that tlat’acon’s life serves little purpose.”

“Keep your place, Kala,” I admonished. “Rest, until it arrives.” I was intrigued now, over the actions of this open killer. I might not be in House Kahn any longer, but honest violence, rather than manipulative attacks during the hours of daylight, still appealed to me.
The only one not releasing that dusty odor was Moctemi, the other female that had volunteered when I’d first asked. Her color was a dark grey, similar to Tuathi’s skin tone, although Kala’zho had reassured me there was no known connection between the bloodlines. She was short for one of our kind, almost as tiny as Rhani, and the area beneath her large oval eyes had intriguing orange highlights. Unlike the others, she lay on her back with one front leg curled over her face, from all appearances and scent entirely bored with the proceedings. Her desire to assault human territory appeared to directly contradict her nonchalant behavior, but I did have grudging respect for her ability with a spear. When she was focused on a task, there were no distractions; it just appeared as if the task most important to her right now was having a nap. I let her be.

Houlit returned, leading the tlat’acon. It was an impressive specimen—taller than Shulich, with skin colored mottled beige. Beneath the skin rippled powerful, toned muscles, no doubt hardened by the constant toil of a worker or farmer tlat’acon. Despite towering over me, he kept his eyes down as he faced me. I took this as a good omen, as I’d had enough with rebellious housemates lately.

“What does the tuac’a’pili of the house wish of me?” His scent was lacking any emotion, similar to Moctemi’s.

“Have you been treated well by this house, tlat’acon? Are you satisfied with your place in it?” His odor changed, to having a tickle of freshly cut leaves. Interesting, as most tlat’acons would smell of fear at my interest, worried of punishment.

“Of course, tuac’a’pili. I have nothing to complain of.”

“Good,” I hissed. “This is Shulich; a cual’pir of the house.” I pointed with one fore claw for emphasis. “He wields the greatest of our weapons, the shochimoatl, as if he
were harvesting wood for the stove. He humiliates the blade with his wild, unthinking strikes. If he struck a lesh’pah’s water stone shield like that, the obsidian edges of the blade would shatter, and the clumsy strikes of his opponent would eventually overwhelm him.” I smelled Shulich’s deepening salt odor, laced with shaming citrus, but paid it no heed. “He fights without grace, and even worse, he doesn’t practice as if this weakness of his would kill him. He has shown little improvement over the past fifteen nights.”

I turned to keep Shulich in sight. His dark brown skin was lightening upon his face and shoulders, turning almost as light as the beige of the tlat’acon. “So, tlat’acon, I have an offer for you. Prove to him what it is to fight wholeheartedly for a goal.” I pointed to the diminutive Rhani, who hunched closest to the rows of practice weapons on the edge of the pil’thir. “Rhani, give him a practice blade. You too, Shulich.” I waited until the wooden hafts were in each pair of front fore claws, appraising how the tlat’acon held his. There appeared to be little tension in the muscles of his forelimbs; he held it well. “If you can defeat Shulich now, you shall take his place as we attack the lesh’pah to the south.” I heard several hisses of outrage from the others at my dangling of the banana; I hoped I wasn’t making too dangerous of a decision with the choice. “When we return with our trophies, if you live, you shall no longer be a tlat’acon—you will be a tlai’min of House Kaf’shou.”

Even Moctemi’s lids flickered at that. It was odd, her body language spoke of interest, while her smell had no palpable change. The others looked stupefied, their jaws hanging wide; they must have thought I’d lost my mind. The offer of freedom, let alone being joined to a house as a tlai’min, was one that took a lifetime of service, or an extraordinary act. But I was backed to the swaying tip of the branch, and the wind was
strong. I needed individuals on the foray I could trust, and Shulich wasn’t showing the dedication we’d need to stay alive. If this tlat’acon had the skills, I was willing to grant him entry to the house for his service.

“Move aside,” I commanded, preparing to kick Moctemi from her place of rest, but in one lithe movement she rolled to all fours and slunk away without complaint. She cast a long look back at the towering tlat’acon, but her scent still didn’t change. “Both of you, focus. Much depends on the outcome of this battle.” Oh, I could smell the rotten wood stench of Shulich’s hate, but I cared little: If he won, I’d probably have to defend my rank immediately, but that would also solve the problem of his discontent. Killing him during the challenge would remove the difficulty, after all.

I moved back to give the pair space for their combat. Rather, I took two steps back—and felt a rush of air from the tlat’acon’s practice blade slicing past my face. He’d lunged forward so quickly I’d barely reacted in time to get out of the way, and I wasn’t even his target.

Shulich reversed the blade to catch the blow on the wooden haft as I’d taught him, but the power of the tlat’acon’s swipe still sent him staggering. He retreated for space, but his opponent’s steps were longer. Shulich parried the next swing with the flat of the blade, guiding the other’s blade to the wooden slats beneath them. He stepped sideways and lunged, point leading, towards the tlat’acon’s stomach. The tlat’acon spun around the thrust, bringing his blade up high before bringing it down against Shulich’s right front leg. The whistling snap, so like that of an overwrought branch breaking, spoke of Shulich’s broken bones.
He didn’t back down, though—I had to accept, even if he was inept, he did understand the language of pain, of napaluqui. Shulich tried to hold the weapon with only his left foreleg, but one limb was not enough to counter the power of the tlat’acon’s strikes; he could only deflect partially the fury of the blows. In moments the other’s battering swipes had knocked the blade up and away, and the next smashed into Shulich’s ribs, the sweet sound of breaking bones ripping the moist jungle air again. Shulich tumbled to all fours, releasing a rank mix of pheromones heavy with the stench of burning sap and citrus. The tlat’acon stepped forward, the blade aimed at Shulich’s skull.

“Foolish tlat’acon!” I hissed, stepping in his path before he could strike again. “You fight like a beast, or worse, like a lesh’pah. The shochimoatl would have shattered with your first blow upon his blade, especially when facing a human’s weapons.” I locked eyes with the victor; if there were a hint of insolence in his gaze, I wouldn’t be able to use him. I wasn’t being entirely truthful about the use of the shochimoatl—even the best blade master was forced to use power in their strikes sometimes, but I needed to be sure this ‘pani’s former crime wouldn’t be replicated.

His eyes dropped, and his scent deepened with the unmistakably sweet odor of lioth blossoms. A rare odor from a ‘pani, normally only released when performing a dishlo in a bridal spiral.

I was taken aback, but his next words spoiled the effect. “What does it matter? He lies broken.” I’d not noticed how deep the tlat’acon’s voice was for one of our kind; idly I wondered if it had anything to do with his massive stature.

“And so would your shochimoatl. Your next opponent would have an easy time gutting you.” I hissed again in his earth-turned face. “You’ve proven that in sheer
brutality, you were stronger than Shulich—you will go with us to slaughter the lesh’pah. But first, you need to learn the artistry of the weapon, instead of swinging it as if you chop a tree.” While power helped with the weapon, its true beauty lay in the careful use of its razor sharp obsidian points. A true shochikuo could find the weak points in an opponent’s dance, and open an artery with the barest touch of an edge. It remained to be seen if this one would learn the skill. Either way, I hoped I’d removed one knife poised above my back by eliminating Shulich from the foray.

The Planetfall Journals

*We believed the few surviving followers of Davide would burn themselves out.*

*Alas, it was another mistake, but we refused to consider the alternative; they had once been our kin, after all. The small cannibalistic bands found alternate means of survival, endemic plants that could grow in the rocky soil and what passed for sea life from the ocean. These bands eventually showed remarkable growth and development. Perhaps the few electronic devices we’d allowed them to take helped in this process, as many of them were memory devices of Earth history. Some of our pilgrims argued, as the years passed, that we must reintroduce ourselves to their populace, but their comments were drowned out by the majority. Most of us ignored the problem, believing the fickle seas, in thrall to Keltorr’s double moons, would prevent their spread to the super continent. It was our worst failure.*

Chapter 9. From the Leaves to the Roots.

The following night, when the foray members assembled again upon the wooden slats of the pil’thir, I placed a true shochimoatl in the tlatacon’s front paws. The perfectly cut obsidian teeth were wound tightly into place by throttle vine fibers, and the
haft was crafted of the flexible wood of falamei ground runners, the vines that attached themselves to the soil or other falamei before hardening as supports for the mighty trees. This wood was light enough that it was nearly impossible to hold it beneath the surface of water, making it perfect for a true shochikuo to wield. He accepted it without comment, but I could smell the scent of his excitement. “This is one of the finest shochimoatls I have ever held,” I began. “It was crafted and used by a member of House Kaf’shou two generations past, when the owner of this blade led the house to victory in a yaoyotl against House Richalo. It tasted much blood in that conflict, and I am confident it yearns for more.”

“You are to practice with this,” I continued. “At the end of each night, for every tooth that must be replaced, Shulich will strike your back with vines. As of now, he can barely move from his bower, so his blows will be weak upon your flesh. However, continue to mistreat the weapon and he will have you twisting in pain upon the lattice. It shall be a proper lesson in napaluqui if you continue to treat it disrespectfully.” I noticed he made sure to support the flat edge of the blade with one of his front legs. “If you crack the wood, I will finish breaking it upon you. Gain the grace of a shochikuo, become one with the weapon, and none of this need occur.”

“Your new name is Aoshatlan. Learn the weapon, use the practice blades if you must at first, since your body is used to the life of a tlat’acon and its lack of violence.” I glanced at the others, who stank of rebellion over the glory I gave the tlat’acon. “You are still a tlat’acon until we leave for the flatlands. Remain here and learn the blade.” I hissed at the others. “You all, follow.”
From the middle canopy where most Riapannai settlements huddle thick on the
labyrinthine falamei limbs, I led them to the heights, as if we meant to spear the moons
on our claws. The thick branches thinned to fresh shoots, bending under our weight. We
climbed ever higher; until we clung to branches several hundred body lengths above
Kaf'shou's settlement zone. Up here, each hand and foothold was precarious, and the
sounds of the constant insects and amphibians of the lower realms diminished in volume.
Once we could see the unbroken bowl of the sky above us, and the lights of the cooking
fires from our settlement were dimmer than the glorious lights of the stars above, I halted.
Kala was the only one not to smell of unease. Even I felt restive at the vast abyss above
us.

"Do you feel the breeze, my brethren? That is a pure wind, and it caresses the
tops of falamei trees throughout our lands. It is ours; it belongs to no other, except the
birds themselves. It flows from the triad of mountains far to the north, at the center of
existence. If you watch for them on a cloudless night, you can see their pure tips
thrusting to the sky." I paused, breathing deep of the ether, filling my lungs with its
soothing embrace. It cooled my skin after the exertion of the climb. "No lesh'pah has
ever tasted the fliahata, the breath of the mountain, and none shall as long as the
Riapannai draw breath and thrive in the falamei limbs. It is but one of the things we
protect from the destructive grasp of the earth crawlers."

I appraised each in tum with my eyes, holding their gazes before moving
on to the next. "Remember the zephyr's love for you, as its protector. When we march
to war, we shall not feel its touch for many nights, and our claws shall be forced to walk
the fetid earth. We must become like our enemy, able to fight upright on the ground."
“Could we not just strike them from afar, tuac’a’pili? Use the atlatl and spear from the protective limbs of the forest itself?” Houlit interrupted.

I looked to Kala’zh o for guidance, who caught my tacit question. “Humans are cunning, and bend the land around them. They destroy all trees near their squatter huts, where they sleep upon the soil. Sometimes they surround their homes with upright pil’thir boards for protection. They use fire to see at night, which can blind you if you look upon it full on.”

I performed a quick dishlo in thanks for his words, noticing his vinegar scent decrease in response. Kala seemed to accept me more with each passing night, although I wasn’t so foolish as to trust him behind me on a branch. The previous night I’d been expecting him to tear me apart after I’d offered rank to the tlat’acon, but something had held him back.

I rose to two legs, balancing precariously upon the branch. “Follow, to the soil.” I launched myself off the limb, digging deep with my claws when I landed on a thicker branch. I hung off the underside of the limb and crawled to the thicker trunk of the falamei, following it down through the upper canopy. I moved as quickly as possible during the descent, taking risks and jumping between the limbs of the trees. The sensation of weightlessness during each leap filled me with pleasure, similar to the intensity of crushing an opponent in the chaol.

I lost myself in the careless, hurtling descent. I barely noticed the passing of the middle canopy zone, recognizing it more by smell before I moved deeper into the complex of close-growing trunks closer to the fecund, devouring earth. As far above the
settlement as we’d climbed, I now found myself as deep beneath, nearly to the rotting lowest level of the falamei canopy.

I stopped to wait for the others, and to allow my eyes a chance to adjust to the murky conditions. The only motes of light were the intermittent flickering of insects hunting for mates, fireflies and such. I’d spent many nights as a huaculi with only them for company, and in my boredom watched their activity as they flitted through the moist, rank air for companionship. I’d always felt an ache of loneliness at those moments, far from the familiar scents of others of my kind, wondering if a proper mate would ever sleep in my bower. Most wouldn’t be willing to accept the ugly, scarred lines covering my chest and face; I could simply pick a weak male from a crippled house and force him to my bower, but the idea revolted me after what had happened in my battle against Tuathi. I wanted an equal, something I doubted I would discover.

I heard the sound of claws digging into bark above me and tossed aside my idle thoughts. I needed to take back House Kahn before thinking about a mate, and that goal was barely distinct, more a mirage spotted in the distance. I barely had the trust of my new house, after all, yet I was pushing them fast towards a reckoning against the weakest of Ceel’ishi’s allies. As water flows, it was a weakened limb I trod upon; one misstep and I’d feed the worms.

A whiff of Tilipa’s scent alerted me to the identity of my nearest housemate. Her scent was laced with the soothing odor of freshly slashed leaves, a mellifluous distraction from the rank, fetid odor of rot that permeated the world so close to the earth. Sunlight was greedily swallowed by plants long before it could penetrate to this level of perpetual darkness. Large mushrooms the size of a grown adult festooned the trunks of the trees,
and clumps of moss and lichen crept over every surface. Without the security of stable bark beneath one’s paws, false steps were common.

I followed her scent through the latticework of branches until I was in sight. Tilipa was beside one of the large mushrooms, sniffing it. “Don’t eat them,” I warned her. “Some are edible, but I wouldn’t risk it. Let the tlat’acons worry about picking the right ones.”

“I think I’ve eaten this before.”

“Even if you’re sure, don’t try it. There are insects, they live in the feathery under bottoms and biting one accidentally can knock you out. Easy prey for their fellows, or any other scavengers that find you, after that.”

“This is only the third time I’ve been this close to the earth,” she admitted. “Such a different world it is this deep.”

“How far behind you were the others?” I asked, speaking softly for no reason in particular. It felt natural to whisper in this place of primal decay and fecundity, and not disturb it with a voice of liveliness. Besides, the less attention we drew the better. None of us were carrying weapons.

“They moved sluggishly, tuac’a’pili,” she whispered back. “I could no longer hear their movements when I was in the middle canopy and could smell the cooking fires.”

We quieted. After a long wait of watching the hovering insects circle, I heard the movements of others making their way towards our level. Drifts of their scent twirled my nostrils, but I still couldn’t scent Houlit. “Why did you not wait for your mate,” I
asked. I could think of few better opportunities to learn what the problem between them was, and it could affect the success of our foray.

She hissed, her scent changing immediately to bitter gall. “He should learn to care for himself. He has grown lazy since I brought him into the house. He only chose to kill the lesh’pah after I did, you saw? He fears being alone, and cannot care for himself without my beatings. His house knew nothing of the ways of napaluqui.”

I trilled as softly as possible. “Impressive you have such control over your mate. Did he fight well against you in the chaol?”

“He knelt when I asked. It was a bad choice...his beauty made me believe him to be a fair warrior, not a cowardly one. He’s no better than the alakihi surrounding us.” She gestured with one forepaw for emphasis. “He’ll feel right at home down here in the filth, plenty of plant scum for him to eat. Maybe he won’t come back.” She trilled back, although the strong odor of vinegar belied the sound.

Alakihi were unthinking scavengers, spiky balls of flesh with a toothed mouth on their undersides. Several oozed their way about on nearby limbs, leaving oozing trails of chewed vegetation behind them. “Perhaps it would be better if one of you remained in the bower. You have a youngling, as water flows? It would be better if he had one adult survive, if the attack goes badly.” I thought of my own youth; at least I’d had my grandfather and brother to watch out for me, or I might have been bound to some inept warrior.

She eyed me again, a measuring look I’d long become accustomed to from rivals. “Let him stay, then. I won’t let some earth crawler serve me up as food to its brood, and House Rok’h has none I fear. Except Tuathi, perhaps, but his remaining eye glares
intently at you. But Houlit would teach bad lessons to my son, if left alone to teach him.

I’ve already made arrangement with my blood kin.”

I hissed my acknowledgement. I could smell Kala’s scent strengthening, and Moctemi’s faint, emotionless odor. “Tilipa, why does Moctemi desire to join the foray? Her odor is peculiar, and she shows carelessness in all things until a spear is in her hands. I am bewildered at her actions.”

Tilipa’s scent changed immediately to the dangerous scent of rotten wood. I almost retched, it was so heavy. “Nothing from that one can be trusted,” Tilipa hissed. “She has mastered wremaishi.”

“The path without odor? I don’t understand,” I replied.

“She hides her desires and emotions. Never trust her—even when she shows emotions, it is false! Never.” She finished her words as Kala’zho emerged on a nearby limb above us. He leapt down to the wide branch we hunkered upon, which stretched as wide as two ‘pani laid head to back claws. A moment later Moctemi dropped down as well, although I hadn’t seen from where—I couldn’t be sure if she’d heard our words. Kala’s scent acquired a tinge of chewed wood at smelling Tilipa’s outright hate, but as her scent faded back to normal his did as well. Both Kala and Moctemi were panting, but their breath calmed before Houlit’s scent forecast his arrival.

Tilipa’s mate dropped onto the branch, smelling of unease. “What took so long, versi,” she hissed in his face, her words dripping of sarcasm. “Did you mistakenly think you saw a cousin feeding on a branch?” I had to restrain myself from trilling at the insult, but I was still navigating the pathways between the foray members, and didn’t want to seem like I had picked sides.
"I was waiting for Rhani," he said. "I waited for some time, but I heard nothing
of his movements, nor could I detect his scent."

I turned to Kala. "Is he one to give in, to leave things unfinished?" I asked.

"No," he responded. "Weak with the spear, perhaps, but not with the heart. He
would not abandon us unless prevented, and he does wish to kill lesh’pah for abna’hei in
the house. There is no doubt that he thirsts for vengeance against them."

"He’ll catch up if it matters to him."

When we were only a few body lengths away from the forest’s litter I halted
again. For a time I watched, wanting to make sure none of the forest floor’s scavengers
were in the mash of leaves, branches and muck, and also to give some more time for
Rhani to arrive. The leeches we’d have to put up with, but some of the others had deadly
fangs or spines, and I’d be blamed if anyone died from such a stupid cause.

I leapt first. The sensation of my claws touching earth instead of stable wood sent
a shudder through me. "Everyone, down. Without a tlat’acon with us, we must clear the
way." They dropped to the soil with hisses of displeasure while I busied myself clearing
away the litter. It was moist and stank of rot, but moved easily enough once you pushed;
the worst part was the hungry bloodsuckers I had to peel off my skin after. Before long
we’d cleared away enough of the mulch to form a wide oval. Several carrion eaters
scuttled to the edges and burrowed their way back to safety in the compost. From the
pheromones of my housemates I could tell I wasn’t the only one disgusted by the work,
but I refused to bring any tlat’acons down with us; their wagging tongues would no doubt
inform Tuathi of our preparations.
“Have you heard why Riapannai, when it comes time for them to find a mate, compete on the floor of the forest in the chaol?” I asked. I heard the sound of feet padding upon soaked bark; Rhani had arrived.

“Easier to leave the dead where they fall, to be reclaimed by the forest,” Kala’zho mocked. “No need to drag them to the edge of the pil’thir, and chance their bodies getting tangled in a limb to stink up the settlement.” I trilled at the humor of his answer, as I wanted our time down here to be informal, away from the formality of house gatherings. Besides, I was certain Kala knew the real reason.

“Practical concern, but not the truth, as water flows. What other reasons have the elders given?”

“To grant knowledge of our end? Show the importance of breeding, before we return to the soil?” Rhani asked. I was pleased he’d stopped spurtting fear scent into the air, as it had been raising my hackles.

“That would be a good lesson to learn from these depths, but it isn’t the throbbing heart. At least, my second teacher, my grandfather Kualitl, told me a different truth. He explained to me, endless generations past, the first combats between males and females developed after exterminating the lesh’pah in their swarms. The betrayal was fresh in their minds—when the elders tricked and assassinated our progenitor Ak’tantoth.” I stalked the edge of the oval, trying to remember the way my grandfather spun the spiral of the history out for me.

“At that time, those few that survived the purge became the first tlat’acon.” They nodded impatiently; all Riapannai, even tlat’acon, knew the history of that era. “To prevent the next generation from suffering the fate of their ancestors, those who
were slaughtered and feasted upon by the human swarm, every Riapannai child was taught the ways of combat."

"But it was not enough to learn how to fight in the limbs of the falamei. To fight the humans, they had to learn how to fight them upon human territory, the flatlands. For floods upon flood, each was forced to fight upon the soil of the jungle floor, to familiarize themselves with the lack of freedom and tactics of the flat. During those long, strenuous periods, it was inevitable as water’s downward momentum that the tight confines produced some heated passions."

"Our people fought against one another as much, or more so then they fought the humans, weakening themselves. While conflict and competition are good for our people, it is destructive when not tempered by tradition and judgment over the proper time for bloodshed. So, to offer an alternative to the widespread bloodletting and to honor the best warriors, the chaol developed."

Tilipa and Rhani nodded at the logic, while the others just blinked. Still, the scent of freshly cut leaves coated their scents, except Moctemi, so I knew they were fascinated. "Those best able to fight on terms totally at odds with our nature—two-legged, and upon the filth of the soil itself—would be those granted the abna’hei of choosing which mate their desired.” Apparently they’d not heard the origin of the tradition, even though each had participated in the ritual. "When the swarm of lesh’pah was turned aside, and most of our people were able to return to the trees, the chaol continued to always take place upon the soil of the forest floor."

"Many houses no longer have challenges for house or rank here in the depths, but all challenges for a mate happen here. This way, of any legitimate younglings born, at
least one of their ancestors learned the means of killing humans on their favored ground. The lesson is thus passed down through the lineage, just as skin color or facial features reappear in each generation.

Tilipa puffed out her chest and glared across at Houlit openly. He looked away. I ignored her baiting, continuing. “So, although many of us have never seen a living lesh’pah, the wisdom of our ancestors guides us with their forethought. This is why I believe the truth my grandfather told.” They exposed their necks at the wisdom of the story, even Kala.

“Before we leave to fight the lesh’pah, we must learn the lessons for ourselves, fighting on the ground as our ancestors did. Only in this way can we learn the problems of moving silently through the forest’s mulch, and not shudder in revulsion at the sickly touch of rotting vegetation beneath our feet. To defeat our enemy we must learn more of them. By doing this, we shall also have the advantage over House Rok’h in taking the heads of our enemies, for I doubt they will prepare themselves in this manner for our foray.”

“I give you one last moment—if you wish to withdraw now from our foray, I shall not punish you.” I waited, a heartbeat, two. None signaled, despite the sickening surroundings I’d forced them to wade into. They were mine. “Houlit, with a child under your care, would it not be better for you to remain behind, if our attack turns bitter?”

He performed a wide dishlo. “Tuac’a’pili, that is true. But from your words, would it not be better if my mate Tilipa remained behind? She was, after all the one to show dominance in the dishlo at mimicking human combat. More prudent for her to remain, and pass on the lore while I attempt to learn the ways of killing firsthand?”
“Ah. Your words flow like water.” I had to admit, he’d been quick to find the hole in the web I’d laid for him. “Do you agree, Tilipa?”

“Only when water burns and the sun drips blood,” she swore. “My son shall be fine. If he weakens in my absence I shall discipline him after I return from exterminating the lesh’pah.” She looked to her mate, her jaw thrust forward aggressively. “We both go.”

Unbeknownst to our astronomers and geologists, the destructive wrath of the oceans calms for several weeks every few thousand years, when the two moons are furthest from the planet due to the tug of other celestial bodies. We paid little attention to the ramifications, merely seeing the event as a curiosity. Meanwhile, on the islands of the outcasts, one leader had wrested control of most of the islands, slaughtering any that stood in his way; as the seas calmed, he prepared to invade the final island. In their desperation, the inhabitants performed a fantastic achievement in a matter of weeks; we still do not know if the memory devices we gifted upon them allowed the building of the ships, but whatever the source, half of their population fled in the mass exodus. While we debated and argued whether we had the right to halt the migration, the ragtag ships reached the coast of Keltorr’s super continent. The oceans turned to froth again, preventing the warlord from following, but our worst fears were realized. Unless we intervened directly, humans would encounter the Riañannai. We continued to discuss possible means of stoppage, but our words and committees did little to prevent the inevitable.

Chapter 10. Waiting for the Flood.

2

The Planetfall Journals

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The nights flowed. From the next night onward, Aoshatlan joined us, although I kept him practicing alone rather than with the rest of us. I didn’t want to alienate my other housemates through integrating him too quickly, and the shochimoatl is best in the hands of a solitary fighter. I saw improvements in each of the housemates, even Kala, as the nights passed, and my harsh training regimen seemed to garner respect for my leadership. I hoped their respect would diffuse through the rest of the house as their words no doubt did.

I didn’t take it easy on them. Each night I forced them to fight, joining them in the makeshift choal to keep myself taut, and show them why challenging my authority would be a foolish decision. I taught them the techniques of the anupi, the edged mace best when caught belly to belly with an enemy. I showed them means of grappling, how to use the earth for leverage. Rhani showed particular aptitude at unarmed combat, something to do with his smaller frame and agility. When one of the housemates showed competence in most of the spear forms, I surrounded us with gummed torches, which burned our eyes with acrid smoke and pained our sensitive eyes. After they became used to that, I changed the time of our combats to the full daylight hours, while the rest of the house slept. I worked them through mealtimes, until they collapsed from exhaustion. The very color of their skin changed from the welts, bruises and slashes that marked their bodies.

And always, I watched my real enemy. While I trained my housemates for killing humans, I readied myself for an attempt on my life by Tuathi. I questioned the tlat’acons of our house that moved near House Rok’h, trying to discover any weaknesses present. From their fluid words it appeared the stratagems of Tuathi were laughable. I heard often
of the personal fitness and strength of Tuathi; the tlat'acons appeared to delight in telling me of his ability. He spent long hours of each night perfecting the use of his spear and anupi, and hauled himself on the underside of branches by his front claws alone.

But I didn’t hear of readiness from others in his house. Many of them languished in their bowers throughout the nights, instead of preparing for the rigors of combat against lesh'pah. More importantly, I heard rumors Tuathi was out of favor with his father, the shuacuitl of the house, after approaching neutral houses for favors. That could be turned to advantage, although it would be dangerous to act before I knew for sure of a breach within his house. It could all be part of a manipulation designed to lull me into a sense of ease.

Soon the ribbons of falling rain increased in tempo and consistency, and the rivers swelled. The tinder of the forest floor became increasingly moist and difficult to clear for our nightly duels, and pools formed in the depressions and hollows. Furled leaves filled with water, each one the birthplace of new forms of life fighting for its place in the verdant heart. It was time for us to assemble for the foray.

Although this section of the jungle is not inundated by the annual flood like the forests to the north, it remains the best time of year for war. Crops require less tending by the tlat'acons, as the gentle and consistent showers do much of the work of raising the plants themselves. Not that I’ve ever dirtied my hands with the growth of crops—I merely have heard this from other ‘pani, and seen it borne out in the timing of forays and yaoyóts. Crops which rot if left in standing water are picked or uprooted before the periods of heaviest rainfall, so the rain season is mostly a time of idleness. Rather, it is idleness for those unconcerned with shedding blood.
I sent emissaries to our civilization's center, Shen'thocaopani, to House Rok'h and to the tuec'qual leader of Li'qui'pal alerting them to our coming foray against the human lands. I watched them leave with an eased heart, satisfied that the time for action was at last upon us. As they left, I found myself wondering what our people had done before encountering humans. The spoken legends said our people had lived as lowly tlat'acons, every last one. They hadn't even fought one another.

With nothing else to focus on, as the spears were oiled and hafted, ready for war, I asked Kala'zho while we waited for the formal meeting between Kaf'shou and Rok'h to occur. We'd been alerted it would be this night by an earlier tlat'acon, so everyone was wearing their best finery, feathered capes and clean woven clothes embroidered with the written legends of Kaf'shou. Weapons were near at hand, but these were formal blades, not designed for war.

"Like the tlat'acons do now, they grew crops. I'm sure they spent a lot of time breeding, since they couldn't really defend themselves against the sarcophiles of the jungle. Easy prey," he said, after musing for a while on my question. I noticed his skin had lightened further from the stress of the regimen I'd been putting him, and the rest of the foray members, through. Whether or not he survived the foray, it would be his last. A place of peace by the fire would be his soon.

"Where was the abna'hei in such a life? How could they be satisfied without balance—if all you do is create instead of destroying, your existence is at odds with all that lives or dies," I said.

"Yes, the balance," he hissed back. "I've never wondered how they passed their time, since they did not war against one another or the humans. Nor did they have
knowledge of the self-hardening ways of napaluqui. Then again, the jungle is a harsh mistress; they must have had some strength."

"Perhaps a dried mud puddle of strength, compared to the river that flows in each "now," I countered. "In some ways, you could almost say the lesh’pah did us a favor. We’d still be weak and defenseless without their influence. And if we’d not have been here to stop them, they would have swarmed the land and eaten it down to the roots."

"Beyond, even. They would have dug up and cooked what remained. It is good we go to thin their numbers." He paused, and dropped his eyes. I noticed his scent changed to the desiccated, dry scent of worry. "What is the true reason we wait for House Rok’h?" He said it quietly, so Moctemi and Tilipa, further off on the pil’thir, would not hear our conversation.

"You should know more than I. We need another house to witness our slaughter." I hissed my irritation. I knew the channel his words carved, and I didn’t want to fall in. Rather than wait for them to flow, I cut him off. "Don’t make the mistake this foray is some means for me to revenge myself upon Tuathi. Do you really think me so foolish? You meddle as much as Flihoct." I realized that I had instinctively turned in the direction of my former house, which was in direct line beyond Rok’h.

"Don’t believe your actions are unnoticed, tuac’a’pili. We’ve all seen you glaring off towards Tuathi’s house, and heard whispers of what you ask of the tlat’acons. Is this some manipulative game you play at, to gain him as a mate again since he spurned you in the chaol?"

I lunged. The slap struck him hard across the face, knocking Kala hard to the side. The sensation of blood on my fingers satisfied my craving for violence, but I
wanted things to be clear. "He fled the spiral through his own fear, not to spurn me. You have no knowledge what you speak of."

He looked me straight on, not even bothering to wipe the smears of blood from his face. Off to the side, Moctemi and Tilipa looked over—Moctemi’s scent remained the same like always, while Tilipa’s had spiked with worry—but upon meeting my eyes looked away in a hurry. “Don’t destroy the house in your search for a mate, or revenge if that’s your task. Your dedication to the house is noticed, and there will be many trophies taken on this foray if you lead well. But if a time comes that you lead us astray, and choose revenge over the safety of House Kaf’shou, my claws won’t be the only ones at your throat.”

“Risks need be taken for rewards, Kala. You should be thinking of the opportunities to come, not just the dangers.”

“Don’t forget, the shochimoatl has two sides.”

“Yes, it cuts both ways. I have long understood. And a true shochikuo can press it against their skin and never be cut. And fear not, the goals of the house are the same as my own, you can be sure of that.”

He thrummed his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “You are no shochikuo, Lier’kar.”

“I will be. Many floods remain in my life, before I end up feeding the alakihi and flesh worms. And there should be no moments during the foray when you bring this up again—have you seen me do anything that will harm the house, since I’ve joined it?”
“No,” he admitted. “All the same, I’ve been within it for all my life, and change can bring risks. I don’t want my last years spent watching the house disintegrate.” He performed a deep dishlo.

I turned aside, not wanting to accept his apology. My blood was burning still, so I moved off to the edge of the pil’thir and tore at the wood with my front claws. It had taken me time to accept the hideous scarring I’d received from Tuathi, and I did want revenge upon him, it was true. But my plans for House Kaf’shou were to raise it up, to challenge and overtake my old house, not destroy it from within. Tuathi was a mere knothole in the trunk for me to grasp on the way. And I certainly had no desire to make him my mate; we’d end up killing each other. The infighting between Houlit and Tilipa would be a youngling’s squabbles compared to the hate a mating between Tuathi and I would conceive.

“Tuac’a’pili?” It was Rhani. He squatted upon the pil’thir several steps behind me I noticed Kala had left, probably back to his bower.

“What?” I snapped. I regretted the outburst immediately—he was not at fault.

“My error, Rhani. I am letting my emotions control me.”

“It is more a drop of rain, not an edged blade upon my skin. A simple shrug tosses it away.” He moved up closer, although his scent still alerted me to his caution. I had to be smelling strongly of salt, the way he edged about. “I wanted to say, Kala’zho is merely thinking for the house.”

“As do I.” This again. “He is an elder, and too cautious. It bothers me that he misunderstands my reasons.”
“Do you know much of the House’s history, Lier’kar?” He stretched out on all fours upon the flat planks, a movement of subservience. “Kala’zho is the only reason we still exist as a house, if you didn’t know. He’s very protective of us.”

“Explain. I’ve not heard of any yaoyotls between Kaf’shou and others during my lifetime, or in generations previous. What threatened you, then?”

“The very prey we go to hunt, tuac’a’pili. He sees little threat from Rok’h, and fears you bring us to fight lesh’pah with enemies on all sides.”

“Humans almost killed the house? How?” I rose from my crouch and began to pace. He’d sparked my curiosity.

“My father once led the House. We were bound tightly to Ishcualec then through my mother.”


“Yes, we were bound tightly, having the abna’hei that is now granted to House Lesath. Those feathers upon Kala’s chest, for killing lesh’pah, are from those nights of success. But as Kala has told me, my father gripped too loosely upon his spear once—the humans were prepared, and cut down many in the House before they could escape. Kala and several others from another house were the only survivors.”

Fascinating. “Were the other survivors from Blad’shoth?”

“As water flows, I believe so.”

I nodded my understanding. “My grandfather may have been upon that foray, as an observer for House Blad’shoth. I suppose it matters not, but now you have opened my eyes to understanding Kala’s unease. I shall think upon it further, housemate.”
I pondered the knowledge while Rhani moved off. Kala’s actions certainly made more sense, now; for as long as I’d known them, the members of Blad’shoth and been particularly hateful towards lesh’pah, and almost unknowing of the importance of being wary of our own kind. I was sure that was part of the reason my grandfather had liked them, and been willing to risk death to save them on that foray. I’d have to ask Kala further, to see if he remembered my grandfather from that time.

It had started to rain. It always took some time for the drops to drizzle down to this level of the canopy, and the moisture in the air was turning the vegetation around us a distinct, vibrant emerald, similar to Houlit’s skin color. Through the haze in the air, I saw a bright flicker of yellow far off, distinct against the leaves and trunks of the falamei. A moment later I spotted another flicker; it was too large to be a bird.

“They are coming,” I hissed loudly enough for everyone to hear. “Send a tlat’acon to summon Kala’zho, he must be here.”

“My pads already touch the pil’thir,” I heard him hiss, spotting him squatted upon the far side of the meeting place. The rain was dampening my abilities to scent him, it seemed.

“Good,” I said. I looked down at the woven clothing I wore, still self-conscious over the brown, red and green colors of Kaf’shou compared to the ones I’d yearned for most of my youth. At least it wasn’t the yellow and black of Rok’h I wore. And now, Tuathi was about to step foot upon my house grounds, and I’d have a chance to force him to show the proper respect to me. I shuddered in anticipation.

“Wait here,” I ordered to the rest of my foray, gesturing to Kala with a nod of my head. Wordlessly the tlat’acons followed to the edge of our territory, careful on the limbs
made slightly slippery by the rain. Although an accident was unlikely, having to scramble around on all fours for support would be humiliating, and ruin the fine cloth we all wore for the formal greeting. House Rok’h could point to it as an insult to their abna’hei, and would be able to wriggle out of joining the foray.

We met at the edge of Kaf’shou territory, as I had waited at the edge of theirs when I first extended the invitation. Tuathi led them. I exposed my neck in the dishlo, slightly less than was proper when greeting guests. I did want him dead, after all; no need to hide my dislike. His grey skin lightened slightly—yes, he’d noticed. I found it hard not to trill my pleasure, but kept it wrapped up.

“Tuac’a’pili of House Kaf’shou, our blood responds to your entreaty. Our blades are poised, our muscles taut. We crave the blood of the invader to feed the earth and stain our weapons,” he intoned. The four behind him echoed the lines, less than I’d expected. One of them was the guardian I’d encountered when I presented myself at Rok’h territory—that one still smelled of rotting wood, and his eyes did not shift from my face. The other three were unfamiliar. Their voomlish revealed two were still tlai’min, untested by the chaol; it wasn’t forbidden, but was bizarre such untested youths would be his choice for the foray. Perhaps there was truth in the rumor Tuathi struggled against his father, and reaped a meager harvest for his trouble.

All of them, Tuathi included, carried ornate spears etched with symbols and dark with resin and age. They were fine weapons, but like ours would not be carried into combat; reserved for these moments, the blades denoted what weapons each planned to use during the foray. The two tlai’min had anupi tied to their chest straps along with the spears they carried.
“We desire the same, House Rok’h. As we have called, so you have answered. We gift you these bananas, yams and cloth for your aid in our desire.” The tlat’acons moved forward from both sides to pass the gifts, making sure to stay far enough away that none risked brushing the gifts up against any of the cual’pir. It was an ill omen for such to happen, as warriors were not supposed to be concerned with anything beyond the abna’hei of the foray. “Here also, is one of our favored tlat’acons, ready and willing to work for the betterment of your house.” As water flows, that was an outright lie, but no longer our concern. That tlat’acon had been indolent and overly given to breeding, making it an easy decision to shuffle him off to a doomed house.

“We thank you for the gifts, and come garbed for war. Let not our weapons rattle against your bucklers, and instead bathe in the heart blood of our mutual enemies.” He performed a dishlo, the final part of the formalities finished. I moved aside to let them move into our territory and together we moved in one worming mass up the trunk towards the wooden slats of the pil’thir. A large feast awaited us. It would be the last time we’d have the opportunity for such a large meal. According to what my elders in House Kahn and Kala’zho had told me, finding food in the flatlands and savannah to the south, savaged by human tools, would be hard upon our stomachs, and we’d have to scavenge upon the leaves of trees and bushes we’d scorn normally.

It wasn’t long before the civility and formality of the occasion drained away. “I see you have one of your warriors wielding a shochimoatl,” Tuathi said between mouthfuls of cooked yam and banana. “I’d be impressed, except I heard rumors the only one wielding a shochimoatl in House Kaf’shou is a tlat’acon.” Damn the wriggling tongues of our tlat’acons—didn’t they have anything better to do except ruin my
scheming? I made a mental note to whip some later and find out who’d been lax with their mouth.

“Now that I see him, I still find myself amazed. Is he able to understand the concepts of war? Or are you forced to use basic language, as you might with a clinging youngling?” Tuathi smelled of amusement, and the odor strengthened from the two tla’im. I hissed. Upon its territory, to insult one of my house—the night he choked on his own blood couldn’t come quick enough. “Watch your tongue, or he’ll have it flopping at your feet before you finish your insults. He wields it with the precision of a hummingbird suckling flowers.” I smelled pleasure emanating from Aoshatlan’s direction, but paid it no heed. He wasn’t that good, but I wasn’t going to stand for insults, not here. Tuathi was testing the limits of my control in the house.

“Is that what you must do to retain control of your tlat’acons, Lier’kar? Dangle him as a possibility of what might happen if they wash the claws of the new tuac’a’pili?” He did wish war. Yaoyotls were started on lesser insults. I’d not be goaded into it especially after my earlier conversation with Kala, but it was a struggle not to violate the neutrality of a joined foray.

“He was not always a tlat’acon, Tuathi. Have you forgotten of Quihil, two generations past the Shual’atlatl? Have your teachers neglected your learning, or perhaps an injury is the cause, hmm? A blow to the skull, perhaps.” That would shut him up.

“I’ve not forgotten Quihil’s abna’hei, and his leadership of our people. It’s strange, to compare your housemate to a Shual’atlatl, you boast too much. I merely was questioning the methods you use to control your tlat’acons.” He performed a slight
dishlo, but I knew it was a temporary reprieve. I'd have to be ready for the verbal assaults to come as we moved south. If he was willing to do it on Kaf'shou limbs, he most certainly would have no qualms beyond the borders of our settlement.

"Who are your warriors? I wish to know their names." I dodged to another subject, since the two tlai'min were a 'curiosity I wanted satisfied." "That one, there. When I ventured to the border of your house I met him. He seemed fair with the spear."
The one I pointed at still glowered back, stinking up the gathering with his hate. He was going to be dangerous.

"Chana," Tuathi replied. He'd accepted my deflection from Aoshatlan's presence at least. "He is my cousin on my father's side." That explained the resemblance I'd noticed before. "If I am absent, or returned to the soil, he will take up my speal moved to stand beside Kala. "This is Kala'zho. He shall take my place if I am absent, or returned to the soil." His smell changed, to the sweetness of banana;
apparently I'd surprised him. I'd considered each of the foray members as my second, but had to acknowledge Kala as the obvious one. Our earlier altercation only demonstrated his respect for the house. The others would respect his decisions, and since he had great experience in human territory, he'd be able to return the survivors to the safety of falamei branches if things went bitter. I'd not warned the others who I'd choose for the position of second since I'd wanted them to keep competing against each other, but they'd probably known I'd pick Kala.

He pointed to the other cual'pir. "That stumpy one is Hai'tal, mated to the house." That one was short as Rhani, but much more muscular, although just as young as the two unidentified tlai'min. His eyes were widely spaced for a Riapannai, and his
skin a light powdered blue. A rare coloring. I wondered which house he'd come from before he was chosen by a female from Rok'h, and whether or not he fought her.

"The other two are brothers, not yet mated," Tuathi added. There was practically no resemblance between the two, so one of the parents had been different in the two matings. In fact, there appeared little physical connection besides a similar sepia cast to their skin, and they stood relatively close in height. "The taller is Clanch, the shorter known as Lip'chau."

Now it was my turn to take the offensive. "Why the unscarred younglings, Tuathi? No veterans willing to risk a challenge?"

His scent became tinged with the scent of citrus, exposing his embarrassment. "They are more potent than they appear. Our other warriors don't need the experience, so we are allowing these to go. Besides, the experience of killing lesh'pah will help Clanch and Lip'chau prepare themselves for taking suitable mates in the chaol." Was the perceived weakness another trap? Or was this seriously the extent of the warriors Tuathi was bringing in the foray? I wished I'd had foreknowledge of the members he'd be choosing, but of course the loose tongues of the tlat'acons hadn't offered up that juicy detail. Indeed, I'd punish them later for their trickery against me.

There was always the possibility House Rok'h's best warriors were waiting south for us in ambush, but I doubted even Tuathi would be willing to take that risk. If any of my warriors survived, he and his house would be destroyed for breaking the neutrality of a foray. No yaoyotl, that; it would be the best warriors of the Shual'atlatl sent from Shen'thocaopani to exterminate any housemate of twenty floods in age or higher. Only the younglings and tlat'acons would survive the slaughter. No, only one touched with
madness would jump such a length; there had to be another reason none of their best
warriors were being sent south with us. In most cases they’d be desirous of the chance to
decorate their chest sashes with fresh feathers.

Little else occurred during the rest of the feast. After, Tuathi’s housemates left to
gather what they’d need. I nibbled on some of the leftover foods before they were taken
away by the tlat’acons, and scented Rhani’s unease. “What bothers you? Second
thoughts?”

“No, tuec’a’pili... I am merely disturbed at the insult from House Rok’h. Why
send tla’im in on such a venture? Such a lack of respect, and he had the gall to attack
Aoshatlan for weakness?”

“Could be Tuathi’s way of showing his personal hatred of me. It would fit, with
everything I remember. Or, perhaps House Rok’h sends untested tla’im in with us while
their better warriors prepare to hunt the marauding rirwol that’s been stalking the
limbs?”

“Your spear may have pierced the heart,” he replied. I exposed my neck in a
slight dishlo, pleased at his understanding. “But I think they would boast of their task if
that were the reason for sending such younglings with us. At least, their tuac’a’pili has
the demeanor of a bluffing grouse.” He was perceptive; I’d not even thought of that, as I
was used to Tuathi’s ridiculous arrogance by this point. “Tuathi’s frustration showed in
his callous and blunt comment towards Aoshatlan.”

He’d surprised me. “That’s twice you’ve called him by the name I’ve given. Do
you accept his new name?”
Rhani performed a wide dishlo before responding. "He is better than Shulich. That's the only reason Moctemi hasn't attempted outright rebellion against you."

"What? She's more interested in getting enough sleep, not standing against me in the spiral. I would crush her if she tried, easily. And why would my decision to take Aoshatlan matter to her?"

He trilled loudly. "She hates Shulich. It is a long stream you have discovered, but he thinks them equals. Moctemi has let him believe that, so she could crush him before the house when she was to challenge Kala for the rank of tuac'a'pili."

"Before I joined the house, you mean."

He stretched out on the wooden boards before replying. "Yes, before you entered. That confused her plans. Shulich had mated to one of the few 'pëni Moctemi cared for—that is how he entered the house. She hates him for that, and for his attitude that he would be the next tuac'a'pili."

He continued. "That's why he was so insolent against you. He believed he should lead the house under Flihoctl. You crushed him, humiliated him. Moctemi respects you for that."

"It seems Moctemi has many enemies within the house. Tilipa warned me against her."

He hesitated before speaking again, his eyes darting about. "You haven't been in the House long enough to see Mociëmi's true face. If she has one at all."

"She strikes me as uncaring. She has no scent, no anger, happiness, nothing. Emotionless, accepts whatever I ask of her."

"Does a spider impress you the same? You've danced on her webs and don't
even notice the tangling of your paws in her desires. It is pure luck you took on Shulich, and Moctemi has also told us all that Aoshatlan is given a chance to join the house. That’s why I use his new name, Lier’kar. Be wary of her.”

I blinked in irritation at his use of my name, but let it pass. He’d passed on knowledge I needed without cost. “Your words sound of water, Rhani. Thank you for the gift.”

As a culture dependent upon the ocean for food, most of this exodus clung to the water, moving south along the coastline. This wasn’t a problem, as the Riapannai are unable to stand cold weather, with temperatures 40 degrees Fahrenheit or colder unlivable for the species, so the exiles would not encounter them there. However, 24 Keltorr years after the first landing, hunting parties moving into the tropical interior of the continent encountered Riapannai. We are unsure how the first meeting occurred, but considering the natural curiosity of the endemic species, it is probable they initiated contact. To their eternal woe. Far from the plenty of the oceans, the Outcast hunters must have been looking for another source of food. When several scientists ventured to the edges of the Riapannai communities, they found only ash and bone. They followed the trail a fourth of the way across the continent northward, where the trail of death had turned upon our former kin; their slaughter had brought them against an enemy they couldn’t fight. Disease.

The Planetfall Journals

Chapter 11. Where the Feather Drifts.
Tuathi would be the shuacuitl of the foray for two reasons. As the asking house, we were indebted to Rok’h for accepting our invitation. As equal houses in the greater scheme of the settlement of Li’qui’pal, their acceptance came at the price of granting them leadership, at least in name. Tuathi had also been a tuac’a’pili for two floods before I shed the trappings of a huaculi, which sealed his official title during the foray. That didn’t mean I had to accept it.

A power struggle is inevitable upon the collision of two tuac’a’pili. Even if we’d been complete strangers brought together for killing lesh’pah, the conflict would have flared, as fated and violent as monsoon rain hurled against earth unprotected by leaf or grass. It has always been this way; even though the shedding of the other’s blood unexpectedly is forbidden at pain of death, there is a dance between the houses on all levels of the tree. From the lowest cual’pir (or tlai’min, on this foray) to the leaders themselves, each seeks advantage over the other houses. Sometimes the pressure is too great, and may only be resolved through the spilling of blood; in these cases a chaol is drawn upon the ground, and I was expectant of this opportunity to weaken my enemy house. I knew Tuathi looked forward to the same. But such a moment would happen at the zenith of tension, if at all.

The quarrels exploded on the first night, as we traversed the falamei trails to the south. I’d assigned Aoshatlan to the position of last scout, watching to make sure we weren’t followed. I never said I was worried of treachery from House Rok’h, citing the danger of a following rirworl instead, but the taller of the brothers from Rok’h refused to share the position with the former tlai’acon. He nearly spat in the massive ‘pani’s face. Rather than push it so quickly I let Kala’zho handle it by taking the position for his own.
I wanted no Rok’h member alone to welcome assassinating members from behind, and I needed to trust Kala now. For a while, the quarrels ceased, but the scents coming from our opposing houses revealed where the points of our spears pointed.

As we moved south over the first few nights I let Kala handle each in turn while I walked a tense point with Tuathi. Neither of us could intervene so early on in the venture, or at least shouldn’t; direct action would mean we considered the issue enough of a threat to handle it ourselves rather than vying for direct control against the other. It would be a sign, marking our lack of faith in those of our house. Considering what I’d learned about Moctemi from Rhani before leaving, perhaps I had bitten off a larger wad than I could handle, but it was too late to look behind me; I’d already leapt.

The fourth night I found Kala constructing his bower at the intersection of two smaller falamei branches. He was placing several large leaves over the supple, stripped twigs of the tree he’d cut and cleaned with his anupi. I waited for him to finish before speaking.

He curled up in the bower, shifting about to make sure it was secure. “The sun appears less confident than the first time we met,” I began. “His reflections on the wafer, which I had expected to sparkle, instead are dull and unfinished, like a badly lacquered spear.”

“Perhaps the sun bides his time behind a cloud, hiding his power until he may roast young seedlings. Or, he is troubled by the moon, and once it rests, he shall glare forth his full fury. Stay alert.”

Before I could step away, he spoke again. “Bringing Aoshatlan was a good choice, Lier’kar,” he added. I paled, as I didn’t like him speaking so openly. “I
wouldn’t have noticed or thought of him as a wielder of the shochimoatl, and Tuathi
obviously doesn’t either. The house gains for that action, and the other housemates will
accept it.”

“You listen to Moctemi as well, then,” I said.

His scent changed, wry and amused. “She’s more a rival to you than Tuathi
could be. But my thoughts are my own, not hers in my mouth. If I bowed to her, then I
wouldn’t have been the one you faced in the chaol when you entered the house.” I left
him to his bower and went to build my own, musing on how I might deal with Tilipa’s
weakness.

* * * * *

Two nights later, we approached the edge of the falamei stand. Large patches of
sky were visible from the middle canopy through this section of the forest, as the trees
were becoming more widely spaced, and several times we were forced to backtrack to
find the right way to navigate through the trees. Long before we’d reached the thinning
trees however, we’d noticed the scent had changed. Our homeland was permeated with
the smell of water; each breath sucked in moisture from the air, mixed with the
perceptible scent of decay winding its way up from the lower canopy. Multitudes of
flowers bloomed through each season but especially during and after the season of the
flood, mixing their heady aromas with the pheromones every ‘pani would release
throughout their lives. The new odor—I wouldn’t give it the abna’hei of calling it fresh—
was dry and acrid, like dried banana leaves smoldering on a fire. It was unpleasant, and I
did not look forward to smelling that biting odor for days on end.
"The dryness burns my nostrils, Kala," I said, after I realized the scent wasn't a fluke breeze. "Is that the scent of the flatlands?"

"The savannah, as water flows. It would be best to wait for next day fall before we enter it. Sometimes the brush land, the sight of land without the soothing cover of trees or water to break its monotony, can have an ill effect upon our people. A heavier dose than usual of sil’anth will calm it, but that can have other problems. And being caught in the direct sun can be deadly to our skin." I exposed my neck, grateful for his wisdom, but I smelled Tuathi’s anger long before he spoke.

"Your words are twisted and poisonous, cual’pir." Just like that, the war was on. He’d directly addressed one of my house other than myself, and attacked his knowledge and wisdom. He’d taken the first step of the dance, and I suddenly didn’t mind that dry scent nearly as much.

"Your words fly heavy and unbalanced in the air, Tuathi. Kala is the only among us that has journeyed past the flatlands into the territory of the humans. Blocking his words will only put us in the path of dangers we could easily avoid." Tuathi’s skin lightened; perhaps he’d acted rashly without thought, another sign that something was deeply troubling him.

"Why should we pretend weakness by stalling here, instead of pressing on to kill the lesh’pah? I fear not the dry heat of the plains, or the feeble blows of the earth crawlers." He was trying to defend his position—while there was nothing wrong with a little recklessness every now and then, hoisting yourself upon a stationary blade you could avoid with some planning made little sense. It was time I learn the dart wriggling its way into his flesh.
"You push for haste, Tuathi. What bothers you, why the desire to return so quickly to the house, when we have barely left? Is there something...that you fear?"

The grey skin of his upper chest lightened, and his frustrated smell deepened intensely. I'd struck bone with that comment. "I fear nothing, Lier'kar. I push for haste in my desire to spill the blood of lesh'pah, nothing more. Perhaps the brain of your second has grown addled through lack of combat, and long years of complacency. How long ago was the last time you ventured away from the world’s heart?" Tuathi kept his eyes focused upon Kala as if my second were the leader of Kal’shou’s foray, not I. His target was easy to spot.

"If you have thoughts of wisdom, speak them—but your eyes and heart target me, not my second," I hissed, finding it hard not to cough at the arid air. "I would threaten to do the same to your cousin, but I hear devotion in his actions instead of wisdom. You could ask him to fling himself from a precipice and he wouldn’t act surprised at the fall."

"Better to have a devoted second rather than a fearful old creature, stabbing at his own shadow. There are reasons elders huddle about the fire for warmth—come, Kala, let us hear them." Tuathi trilled at his own humor. "Perhaps, long years from now after I have heaped many trophies upon my chest, your wisdom will hold some weight. But for now, it is less than worthless, and my house does not wish to wait."

He paced back and forth, bristling with the scent of his impatience. "Who here fears the realm of land crawlers? Do you fear the alakihi as it scrabbles for dead scraps through the decaying syrup of the jungle?" His lone eye roved across my housemates as well as his own, obviously attempting to sway their support to himself. "We enter the
savannah now, and find shelter along the way. There is always food and shelter for our people, as long as there are forests to cover us."

"Your lone eye can only see one angle, Tuathi. Humans strip the land about them to see threats coming. If we are spotted by one of their swarms during daylight, while we are blinded, thirsty and far from the protection of trees, our best warriors and tactics would not halt the returning of our bodies to the soil. Kala has convinced me of this, and his words are my judgment."

"Again you invoke Kala. Perhaps he is the true tuac’a’pili, and you shared his bower for the name?” He spat. “His prospects must be low indeed for him to take such advantage, and from one so repulsive. When I left your bridal spiral, Lier’kar, it was from disgust at the condition of your flesh. You must be pleased, having a feeble replacement that could not master you the way I did."

His diatribe continued, but the words faded as sunlight does the deeper it reaches in the jungle. Even with the tiny amount of sil’anth I’d eaten today, as I had to every day, it urged me on to bloodshed, to care not for the consequences. We could slaughter these four easily, and say the humans were responsible; we outnumbered them, and I knew Tuathi would be easily crushed. It would be ever so satisfying to toss his crumpled body from the tree, and hear it hit the limbs on its fall to the earth.

No—I had to master my emotions. I ignored the scratching rush of the sil’anth itching along my spine, and waited until I had calmed enough to speak without shrieking my wordless rage at Tuathi. I breathed, in, out, until I was no longer mastered by anger.

“If you wish to kill your younglings before they see the folly of your choice that is your will. I will confer with my housemates to decide if we walk beside you, or let you charge
upon the spears of our enemies alone.” The words tasted of bile, having to be subservient to his choices, but I’d placed myself in the situation. I couldn’t make rash decisions now. I had to remember, if things went badly after this, he would be found to blame.

He showed his teeth. “If you must ask suggestions from a lesser, perhaps they would prefer to follow one who knows their path, instead of jumping from tree to tree without guidance. Or, perhaps the tlat’acon could teach you how to carry buckets, that might suit you better!”

This had spun out of control; he’d mastered me with words, and I had to save what face remained. “Do with yours as you wish, Tuathi. I will not gamble mine until the rewards are palpable and within reach of my spear.”

I stalked off further down the branch we were strung out upon, breathing rage. Both times now when I’d become entangled in the vines of Tuathi’s language, I’d been unable to cut myself free. Although I couldn’t remember him at all, I suddenly felt a deep connection with my father; I wondered if this was the lesson my brother had learned from seeing our father die after a lifetime of disappointment. Trying endlessly to replicate that one moment of victory, to heal a wound that only worsened as he aged until it finally killed him. Yes, I could understand that.

I heard the scrape of claws behind me. I pivoted, still so enraged and frustrated at losing the word parry I moved expecting an attack. It was Kala, followed two lengths behind by the other members of House Kaf’shou. He held up his forelegs to show the lack of weapons, inclining his neck deeply to the side to show respect. “We must take counsel.”
I hissed, but my anger wasn’t directed at them. “Your words taste of water, my second,” I breathed out. “That louća would send us all to the feast of worms in his haste.” I squatted to sharpen my fore claws upon the falamei trunk, in an attempt to relax. It soothed me some, more so when I imagined I was tearing through Tuathi’s remaining eye.

“Have you heard of Lethanshaolopl, tuac’a’pili?” Kala said.

I hissed my acknowledgement. “Of course. The chopping of the worms, when the invading humans did their worst to cut out the verdant heart. All our people not returned to the soil defended the trees.” I continued tearing at the limb. “My mother recited the story before I entered my second doec of floods, and tasted sil’anth. What makes you ask?”

“Accept my weakness for not knowing the ways of your former house, the path is the same in House Kaf’shou,” he said. “We should eat here while we talk.” He slung off his shoulder straps and stepped out of the lower two, then opened up the cover and pulled out some lipil. They were a mash of banana and other sweet fruits wrapped in grape leaves. He handed them out to everyone else before me. I noticed—it was an unspoken sign that I was still the leader, despite my inability to argue successfully with Tuathi why we should not hasten our journey south. It was an odd thing that he brought the food with him from the feast, as normally the lipil is reserved for dessert, or celebrating important rituals. My defeat to Tuathi’s tongue didn’t seem like the proper motivation took several bites and took a lengthy look about the jungle, first the higher canopies, then below us. “Although you cannot see it, for the falamei have healed the damage to their own and other plants have retaken what they can, this is where the worms
were chopped. All around us, our ancestors fought with claw, spear, atlatl and shochimoatl, against the numbers and water stone weapons of the earth crawlers.” I paused long enough to look around, but it was as he said; I saw no markings of the battle save the reduced thickness of the jungle, and that pervasive dry smell made my nostrils itch. “Eat, and remember their strength as we go to pay homage to them, and gain abna’hei for ourselves and our house.”

We ate. I found my eyes drawn again, unconsciously, to Tuathi and his housemates further down the branch—they had slung their packs upon their backs again, proving they would leave soon. All of their eyes were focused upon the south. They, at least, did not question their tuac’a’pili. I envied him their dedication and acceptance of their place. Even the sweetness of the lipil wasn’t enough to salve the bitterness coating the innards of my stomachs. Although they’d said nothing, after my verbal thrashing by my rival, half of them must have believed him a more capable leader than myself, with the way I’d reacted.

“Before the battle plan was chosen, each of the Shal’teluc fought with their tongues, advocating a number of strategies. Eventually it came down to a choice between a pair. The first, presented by Huitzal, called for a night assault upon the vast human encampment in the hope of causing enough panic to force a retreat. This way, no human would touch the sacred trees, or bring their water stone weapons to bear upon the wood. Many favored this suggestion, for the idea of standing by and letting the earth crawlers cut their way into our home was madness, like jumping from a limb to catch a moon.

“Liarthop preached a different strategy. He wanted to wait for the swarm to enter the forest, and once it spread out in the confusing trails of the falamei, to attack from all
sides, leaving none to survive. At first, he was derided for his plan of trickery and acceptance of the loss of some falamei to the humans.”

“In the final choice reached, Liarthop’s plan claimed victory. Some say it was merely that the two moons would be full the night the earth crawlers made camp outside the limbs, so an attack during the night would have been spotted; other houses cling to the lack of training given to many of the people to fight upon flat terrain. It matters not, really.”

“What does matter is the trees have returned. None of you can see the signs of fresher grown here, compared to where many of the settlements exist.” He paused, looked about, breathed in the air. “Tuathi’s plan of boldness is similar to Huitzal’s choice. He is blinded by his rage at our tuac’a’pili, and there is something else chafing beneath his armor, goading him to haste.”

“If I did not know him through his earlier comments at our feast, on the property of our own house, I could understand how some might be swayed by his strategy. But the bowers of House Kaf’shou are not his, and he insulted us all by bringing along such untried whelps. Our tuac’a’pili, on the other limb, took no mercy in preparing us for this hunt. Even her sparing of my life had purpose to it, so I could offer my knowledge of lesh’pah. We each have new scars granted by her, lessons carved on our skin to enforce their dictates and keep our memory fresh. ‘Do you think Tuathi trained his younglings to fight in sight of fire, so their eyes became accustomed to its harshness?’”

My anger drained away as each of them exposed their necks to Kala’zho, in appreciation of his words. Although it was to my second that they made the motion, it was indirectly pointed at me, for it was in defense of my choices that Kala spoke. Were
my housemates more discerning than I gave them credit for? It certainly appeared so—
Tuathi’s insults within the bounds of our territory must have rankled deeply. Interesting.
The situation wasn’t as dire as expected.

“So, while Tuathi’s plans of haste may be seductive, there are many more
challenges ahead, battles which require planning rather than boldness. Lier’kar has
already shown herself to be more of a manipulator, a planner to harden us before we
encounter those challenges, similar to Liarhop’s successful defense of the falamei. We
must not forget that reaching the humans will be as difficult as killing them.”

In the silence that followed, I mulled over each of the others until my thoughts
settled on Moctemi’s unscarred, youthful face like a layer of pollen. She remained a fern
knot, and I was curious what motivated her. Why did she care about accepting
Aoshatlan? And was she truly as vindictive and dangerous as the other housemates had
been warning me? In all the battles we’d fought upon the earth over the many nights
before our foray, she’d appeared unmotivated, except when a weapon came hurtling
towards her face.

“Moctemi,” I said.

“Yes, tuac’a’pili?”

“Your words do not flow to our ears, sister. What stops your conversation? You
are with us but not in spirit. I must know where your knife lies.”

She smelled of nothing, like always. “I have nothing important to say yet.” She
finished eating her lipil, dainty to the last. “I don’t know why you let him bother you,
tuac’a’pili. The cracks in his bark are showing the diseased wood underneath, yet you
ignore it and batter yourself needlessly against him. Give him time and the disease shall
do its work, and the force of his pride will topple him. Then, the saplings will struggle to take his place."

I hissed in appreciation of her perception. Perfectly explained, as well. "You think it a disease he suffers from, some madness?"

"Obviously. The hate you two share. I’ve never seen anything like it between two houses. Heard stories, but not seen it first hand. It’s actually slightly entertaining, although I’d like it better if it didn’t involve my house directly." She rose on her back legs, stretching. "However, you are affected differently by your hate. Your hate strengthens you, pushing you on, searching for the opening in your opponent while preparing yourself and allies for the coming war. He, on the other limb, allows it to possess him, ignoring other more important problems to focus on his conflict with you.

"If the concerns of his house were his first priority, he would have bowed out of the foray, despite the loss of abna’hei. There are major shudders in the limbs of his house. Whatever it is, the best warriors, with the exception of Tuathi and his second, are at home defending against it. If it was a ruse, his bearing would be much more confident, but his unease is as visible as a mudfish abandoned in a falamei furrow after a flood. He has little skill in concealing his emotions, much like you, tuac’a’pili. Perhaps that is why you charge so mindlessly at each other like two male abnach during the mating season."

I paled, shamed at Moctemi’s perceptiveness. She was as good at reading people as Rhani; truly the house was improved from their presence. "What do you think is the storm shaking their house?"
“Doesn’t matter. Show patience and he, or one of the younglings will blurt it out. Perhaps Tilipa could invite Clanch to her bower, the one she’s been showing her neck to.”

“Mate of a lesh’pah!” Tilipa jumped in. “Keep your tongue furled, before I spit it on the end of my spear!”

“Such emotion,” Moctemi drawled, before yawning directly in Tilipa’s face. “So predictable, Tilipa. You aren’t even worth the time it would take to toss you from the tree—besides, the times I sent your face into the earth in the spiral were numberless. You wouldn’t have an arrow’s chance of striking the sun, so keep your strength for the humans, as you’ll find them easier opponents.”

I debated whether I should step in to prevent an outright fight, but Tilipa should know she didn’t have the ability to take down Moctemi. I watched Tilipa’s feet in case she lost control, but the muscles in her legs never tightened to show her intention, despite the rank odor of her anger filling the air. A moment passed before she relaxed and turned away, acknowledging Moctemi’s superiority over her.

“Enough, then. It pleases me to know we all agree our best action is to wait for Tuathi to cut himself with his own weapons, as Moctemi suggests. This is wisdom, and I thank her for passing it to me. If you can gain favor with his followers, do it if it grants no disadvantage. Kala, explain to us the horrors of the flatlands before we face them, so our greater knowledge makes Tuathi look the fool.”

*These illnesses were particularly virulent. Their rate of mutation was almost double, or sometimes triple the rate encountered in Terran influenza strains. They also had a propensity towards lethality in the mutations, and the Outcasts, as we were calling*
the humans beyond our borders, were unprepared to deal with the sicknesses they encountered. The long generations free of disease, a gift from genetic engineering, had removed from the Outcasts any sort of strategy for dealing with even minor illness. It also resulted in a chance for the Riapannai to react and prepare for the next wave of Outcast settlement towards the interior.

For ourselves, immunization was an easy task with our technology; some feel this should be granted to the Outcasts as well, but revealing ourselves would be disastrous. Instead, small groups of Outcasts are brought back to Ashram, indoctrinated, sterilized and allowed to perform required tasks in return for safety and a life without violence or death. Not all of our goals in coming to ‘Keltorr have been destroyed.

The Planetfall Journals

Chapter 11-The Trees Have Eyes.

Twenty one nights away from the edge of the falamei, and we’d discovered our prey. We’d sheltered ourselves inside some trees which were pitiful simulacra of the mighty kind we were used to, but at least they were tall enough to keep us away from predators and out of sight of any humans wandering near their village. The crowded conditions on the limbs, and bizarre nature of the world beyond the falamei had us all exhausted and irritable, and we all found it difficult to breathe in the desiccated environment.

High sun of the first day had been the worst. Going along with Tuathi’s initiative, we did not look for a place to shelter before sun birth. The light of its relentless, molten eye, uncut by protective leaves, had stupefied us with the power of its sight. By the middle of the day our skin blistered and peeled, but there was no shelter to protect
ourselves except under feeble thorn bushes the size of sil’anth plants. However, the leaves of the thorns were tiny, and could do little to stop the throbbing agony poured down upon us. Not even the hissed curses thronged upon Tuathi by his own house assuaged the fiery agony. In the end, the only thing that preserved us was a passing rainstorm, as the clouds gave us the chance to find some sheltering rocks to rest away the hours of daylight. After that, Tuathi’s raucous cries of aggression without thought weren’t tolerated, and mine were listened to even by his second, Chana. Of course I was just lifting the knowledge from Kala’zho and passing it on, but that mattered little; I’d been the one intelligent enough to bring him along, so the credit was mine.

As such, the position of Tuathi was a precarious one as we planned our attack, which meant I needed to be wary of my backside. A Riapannai spear kills the same as a lesh’pah one, and as long as it isn’t left in the wound, there’s no way of telling which did the killing stroke.

“Aoshatlan,” I said, “You are to stay with me in the attack. That is where the most blood will flow.” He nodded, quiet as always and watching the humans in their village intently. He’d accepted being a step apart from the rest of the house on the movement south, but now that we were here it was his time to show his skill. I couldn’t even smell the odor of freshly cut leaves coming from him, anticipation, which was strange for one of our people about to massacre our racial enemy. Almost as if he approached every task with the same sense of fatalism, no matter what it entailed; I wondered if it had anything to do with his time as a tlat’acon.
“Tuathi, where will you place your house?” I wanted to keep them far away from myself in the thick of battle. I really was worried of growing a deadly limb from my backside. It would be childish to expect otherwise.

“We shall move through from the east,” he hissed. “The largest dwellings are there. They shall take the longest to burn.”

“As water flows,” I said. “Aoshatlan and I will make torches to the west. Tilipa, Houlit and Rhani, light the houses on fire from the north. They shall flee to the south and east. Kala, Moctemi, kill what you can to the south. Channel them to the east through their fear, or make them run back into the fires to die in the flames. After the dwellings are lit, make your way east to support Tuathi and his house. Aoshatlan and I will do the same to the south as they flee the flames.”

“We can’t fight in fire,” Tuathi hissed. “We should pick them off, kill with fear before surrounding them.”

“A foolish thought,” I spat back. “Then they’ll have weapons and be ready when our attack comes. A cornered animal fights better—what makes you think the lesh’pah will act different? This way they’ll seek water, not weapons. We’re the eagle plummeting upon the gibbon, and they haven’t seen our shadow.”

“Fire is dangerous—we could light the entire forest up if the breeze shifts,” he grumbled. I was pleasantly surprised at his acceptance of his own weakness. Perhaps he’d had some sort of realization that day he’d nearly killed us all in the desert, or the constant words of his housemates had beaten down his self-confidence.

“My housemates won’t panic if the fire shifts.” Of course, despite his change, I didn’t forgive him and wouldn’t let his confidence regrow like the stubborn weed it was.
"You should have put more forethought into how you would kill your prey, as I did with my housemates."

Almost imperceptibly, he inclined his head to expose his neck. I felt a shudder of pleasure at his acceptance, that I'd outmaneuvered him. Next thing, he'd be asking me for advice.

It was nearly night birth. The bleached, heated scent we'd become slightly accustomed to over the past twenty one days dissipated, replaced by the cool, soothing odor of twilight. At least during the nights, the smell was much more natural even here this far south. We'd come to notice, in the two full days and nights we'd watched them, that the humans didn't stay up long beyond nightfall, choosing instead to expose themselves to the merciless sun. After a full day's work, which consisted of menial labor more suitable only for tlatacons, the filth and stink of their sarcophile odors would assault our nostrils far beyond the edge of their buildings. It was disgusting; I couldn't understand why they didn't bathe themselves immediately. Up close with one another, how did they stand it? Rarely did the smells alert one to the emotional mindset of the source, either. They smelled of carrion, or bottom feeders, eating whatever meat or plant came their way. Disgusting.

Yet these were the creatures which had changed our very essence, turning us from a weak-willed people more at ease beneath a leaf's furled edge into one hardened and coarse, brutal to our enemies. We did owe the humans that much, giving us our first taste of pain, enough so our ancestors grasped the concept enough to utilize it for their own ends and reverse the edge upon their necks. And here we were, the next leaf unfolding,
to balance and stop the rapine nature of the lesh'pah. I was proud to have the abna'hei of exterminating this clot of the disease, before they could spread closer to the falamei.

We waited, impatient, for the humans to rest. We sharpened our weapons one final time, stropped our claws on the thin bark of the trees we clung to, or ate a light meal while we watched the behavior of the ground walkers. I'd already done all these things, so I made my way to Kala'zho.

"Kala, they don't appear too combative," I hissed. "I've heard legends of their ferocity, of hordes sweeping north like a plague of locusts to devour all in their path. Where is that power?"

"Locusts are a good comparison, tuac'a'pili," he admitted. "A single one is easily squashed between two claws, but a swarm? They would leave only your bones. Culling is the only way to stifle the species. Otherwise, they'd overwhelm our borders, as happened long ago."

"They remind me of tlat'acons," I mused. "Except for the hunters that bring back flesh—" I had to control my stomachs, thinking of the sickening odor that had leaked out of the camp the previous day as they'd cooked it—"the rest of them move awkwardly, flatfooted on their two legs. All they do is labor, and even the children take part rather than learning the beauty of combat."

"Many of the other humans we encountered were like these, Lier'kar. Do not underestimate their abilities. We did so, and that's when housemates died. They show remarkable strength when defending their homes, and their weapons are unbreakable.

"We've seen none of those, however. With the fire foremost in their mind, we shall take away their greatest advantage," I added.
“Indeed, tuac’a’pili. The strategy tastes of water fresh from the sky, untainted. We may be able to send to earth the entire group, almost two hundred. Much abna’hei to the house, and others”—he glanced over at Tuathi and his housemates, waiting in a nearby tree—“will be forced to scream of your success to all of Li’qui’pal.”

“Aoshatlan will keep watch,” I muttered, knowing his thoughts.

“As will I, when you join us to the south. Moctemi will most likely let you fend for yourself, as it’s obvious she believes herself...superior. I no longer agree.” I was pleased to hear him speak the words, as they were not mere illusion; somewhere along our journey he’d come to accept me as a good leader for the house and he’d backed it up with his actions. I was pleased I’d not killed him in my bid for tuac’a’pili.

“I don’t think my rank would be sufficient for her. She’s an ambitious one, even if she covers it up with that aura of laziness.”

“She would have been the next tuac’a’pili in the house, no doubt, if you didn’t join us. I think it bothers her still,” he added.

“I’ll keep one eye upon her as well then, and the other on Tuathi,” I said. “But she seems the type to wish for another to block spear thrusts for her, and she has the tongue to convince others to do it. Water itself could flow from her tongue, given time.”

He trilled. “Perhaps it shall. Remember, though, an honest enemy is appreciated more than an unreliable ally.” It was now long past night birth. We could see in the distance that the human dwellings had gone quiet, the only movement the faint swirls of smoke rising from the holes in their thatch covers.
“Our prey sleeps,” I said loudly, so Tuathi’s group on a nearby tree could hear me as well. “Time to hunt.” My eyes turned to Tuathi, who caught either my words or the meaning in my eyes.

He and his warriors rose from their crouches and leapt over to our tree, while I gestured to my own house to gather. While the came in close, I removed a large chunk of dried sil’anth from my pack, distributing it as each housemate came near. I took my own portion last, as always; I still found myself requiring large amounts of the plant on a daily basis, but I’d made sure to bring sufficient with me for this moment. We’d need it to face death with abna’heii after all, and I hoped it would alleviate the stench of the ground walkers.

Tuathi passed out his own supply to his housemates. As the tuac’a’pili of each house, it was our responsibility to make sure we had enough for everyone. Running out would have been unacceptable, and dangerous; a Riappanai without sufficient sil’anth would blindly attack anyone in their way to more of the plant, and have to be killed before they devoured what remained.

The familiar tingle rippled its way up my spine, as it did every day when I ingested it. I noticed everyone was becoming affected; their irises, already large to adapt to the night conditions, were looming large and black, as if it would swallow up even the whites of their eyes. We were ready.

“Remember the lay of the spears,” I cautioned. “Draw them to the fires, and we meet in the east where the stronger buildings lie. Sow confusion and target the larger first, as those are the ones more likely to attempt defense. Slaughter the rest when you can. Stay cloaked in the fire and smoke. Let your spears and the shochimoatl sing death
for these lesh'pah, so others know and fear the night!” Rather than shriek our defiance of the enemy, we kept it to a low hiss. There would be time enough later for the prey to learn fear of our voices.

We dropped to the ground, fanning around the settlement. We’d left our satchels in the tree, burdened only by our weapons and lashinaq—the thick cotton armor that covered the chest and back. Tuathi was the only one wearing a laohlin, the layered, treated wooden armor embedded with river shells which could sometimes stop even the powerful blows of human water stone weapons. They might be ungainly, but from what Kala had related, the lesh’pah were powerful if they hit you.

Aoshatlan and I hesitated while the others hastened to the north, east and south of the village. “I am unable to say what we will find in their hovels, housemate,” I hissed. “I have also never seen a human up close.”

“Nor I.” He hefted his shochimoatl, examining the binds keeping the obsidian tied to the haft. “I thought nothing could smell worse than the forest’s waste we slogged in each night, but I was mistaken.”

I trilled, keeping a critical eye on the movements of the other members of the foray. Charsh and Lip’chau, the two half-brothers, were still running on all fours with their spears tied to the backside of their voomlish. If they encountered the enemy like that, they’d have problems loosening their weapons in time. We’d learn if my lessons of fighting on the ground, and in sight of fire, to the house were beneficial, or just a distraction. I had faith in my ancestors; the chaol wouldn’t exist otherwise. Learning to fight in sight of fire was my own addition, but I couldn’t see the harm. For all I knew, though, the humans could be ready for just such an event, and gather their weapons ready
to fight us instead of the fires we'd light. If one of the foray were spotted before we could torch their homes, my plan would unwind, and I would face the blame.

“What was it that made you tlatacon, Aoshatlan?” I asked suddenly. The urge to speak it was unexpected, even if I had to admit I'd been mulling the similarities between tlatacons and these lesh'pah ever since we'd discovered the settlement. Would he suddenly be overcome by sympathy for them, in their shared world of toil and lack of weapons?

“I killed my tuac'a'pili,” he said immediately. I hissed involuntarily, turning to face him as he continued to speak. “Boldly, before the assembled house, without challenge. I tore his throat out while his eyes shifted.”

Well. His scent hadn't changed, except to tighten with the pleasantness of wintergreen from eating the sil'anth, but as I'd learned from Moctemi, some 'pani could apparently change their scent by choice, rather than revealing their emotions. Now that I'd asked, I couldn't ignore it. “What madness possessed you to do such a thing?”

“My house sent me to Shen'thocaopani on the business of my house, to settle a dispute, before yaoyotl flared.” His paws glided up and down the flat of his weapon, before he tested several of the obsidian shards against the edge of a claw. “It was a ruse, no house would dare threaten Linuiipi in direct war. My tuac'a'pili knew the female I wished to take as a mate would step into the chaol soon. He delayed my return until after it happened, since he knew he could not defeat me in challenge. By the time I returned, having heard nothing of the mating, she was already pregnant.”

“He conspired to keep me away—that is not true, my parents did so, as they were the only ones I'd spoken my desire to. They had other plans for me, to keep Linuiipi
first among the houses through my mating. It was the way of the house, but I thought I was exempt." He hissed. "I was foolish."

"I could not issue a formal challenge for the position of tuac’a’pili for half a cycle, due to the laws of the house and my absence from it. Even then, I knew he would have bowed out of the challenge. He was weak. So, in retaliation for what was to come, he took my mate, at the urging of my parents. I had no other means to interfere."

I released the tense state of my muscles. These were not the actions of true madness, or of a weak-willed tlat’acon. His actions made sense; he’d been outmaneuvered, and he’d let rage take possession of him rather than accept the chance to take a higher position of power in the house. Even in killing his tuac’a’pili, he’d lost again to the machinations of his housemate and parents. "I wonder how long it shall be before your ambition brings your shochimoatl against me."

He ignored the goad. "After I tore out his throat, while his lifeblood splashed upon the pil’thir’s slats, he looked up and showed his teeth. Even in death, he’d defeated me, and he knew I’d never have the chance to kill his youngling."

"When we return, and the full stigma of a tlat’acon is rubbed from your back, will you look for her?"

He hissed, and this time his odor changed to the sickening, rank odor of rotting wood, enhanced by the effects of the sil’anth fury building within us both. "You may have cleansed me of the stigma within Kaf’shou, but in the eyes of my house the crime cannot be redeemed. She has mated another. The shochimoatl is my mistress now."

Below us in the valley containing the village, I heard the mournful call of a twikili bird. A heartbeat later another trilled from the south, and a third responded. "They’re
positioned.” He performed a quick dishlo and dropped to the earth. I followed, and
together we moved down towards our sleeping prey. A light rain had fallen just after
sundown, and the silver wetness of the grass was sweet upon my soles.

The human stench intensified, along with the reek of other unclean animals kept
in one place for too long. Their dung and unwashed bodies together formed a gamy
foulness that stung my nostrils. It was hard to avoid gagging. At least the scent of
burning wood from their homes, and the heavy odor of wet thatch lessened it slightly, as
did the presence of moisture in the air.

We neared the edge of the settlement. Their houses were laid in an unnatural,
structured way to those nearby, so I could see all the way to the other end without
anything blocking sight. We would always know the way out, but we’d have to be very
cautious. One mistake and surprise would dissipate.

I kept this in mind as I laid each paw carefully upon the well-tamped soil. We
reached the open hole at the backside of one of the outermost hovels. The humans didn’t
appear to use these airways as an entrance or exit, but they were more than sufficient for
us both to crawl in. I pulled myself in quietly, not letting my claws settle upon the frame
as I entered, and crouched low on the earthen floor. Aoshatlan handed me my spear and
his shochoimotl, but I could already see their lengths would present a problem in the tight
confines of the building. I communicated the problem through tacit gestures with my
front claws. He nodded back.

I moved aside to let him in before turning my vision upon the prey. There were
two. They were swathed in cloth and the hides of several animals. If I’d thought the
outside air was fetid and miasmal, it couldn’t compare with the putrid stench filling their

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home. I was breathing through my mouth to try and reduce the effect, but even that merely doused my tongue with the smell. It was so overpowering, I couldn't trust my nose to lead me true in these hovels—the smell of other nearby humans was affecting my delicate ability to scent enemies. I motioned to Aoshatlan towards our prey, and together on all fours we carefully moved over to our prey. The male was making a strange droning, but his eyes were closed. I signaled to my companion to take it.

As one, we reached for the mouths of the humans. With one foreleg I clamped down over the mouth and nostrils of the female, tearing across the exposed throat with my other. It was an easy stroke. The windpipe was torn asunder, along with the side artery. Heartblood spurted across the side of the home away from me, only coating my claw tips as I tore through. The creature's tongue pressed against the sole of my front leg a moment before it relaxed, a motion imitated by its eyes, which bulged before settling on me. Human eyes were so much smaller than our own, it was a wonder they could see anything at all, but perhaps it was able to make out my shadow in the glow from the nearby embers.

I could almost taste the creature's terror, looking into those eyes; the sil'anth thrilled its way through my blood in response, stealing up my back as easily as we'd crawled into the human's den. The sil'anth's second heartbeat was pounding now through my body, sending its power through me with each spiking beat.

I leaned in close to watch the small, deep-set eyes turn glassy. If it couldn't see me before, it certainly could now. "Die, locust," I hissed. "Die for the sins of your ancestors, and may your blood nourish the earth." The creature's legs churned in the cloths and hides of the bed for a moment more, then ceased. Aoshatlan had also subdued
his locust without difficulty. Their blood soaked the sheets together and dripped upon the wooden walls of their abode. Although I normally didn’t enjoy the smell of blood, it helped cover up their animal stink, so I could almost enjoy it in these circumstances.

I spent a moment looking at the face and skull of the creature I’d snuffed out. Like the male, it had a wild growth of fur protruding from the top of its skull, which was a bright yellow. It was similar to the feathers of birds, and must have helped protect the creature from the sun since they walk upright all the time. The fur was leaping with vermin, which were jumping all about now that their host was dead. Even though they presented no danger to us as we had no fur upon our bodies, it was still disturbing to have the little bugs leaping upon my skin. I shuddered at the sensation before moving away to examine the creature from a distance. The cheekbones weren’t nearly as ridged looking as upon the face of a Riapannai, and the jaws looked barely strong enough to grind apart vegetation, let alone tear the flesh of meat from bone. I could understand why our ancestors had been confused by humans, for they seemed to bear none of the hallmarks of normal meat-eaters.

I inserted one of my front toes into the creature’s mouth so I could see the teeth. “Look, housemate,” I whispered. “With teeth like these, how could they chew through meat? That must be why they have to burn it in the fire.”

“They cook everything. I’ve smelled it over the past couple nights,” he replied.

“We all have.” I moved to the fire pit. After finding some sticks of wood I wound them in some of the cleaner cloth rags and stuffed them deep in the coals. While the burned I lighted the bower and Aoshatlan crawled outside. He kept watch while I moved outside with the torches. He took one from me, and moved to another of the
homes while I stalked my way to a third. Even the slight rain from earlier wasn’t enough to stop the underpinnings of the thatch from igniting.

Our eyes burned from the work, but through the glare and greasy black smoke I noticed the huts to the north were also alight. We had to hurry. We moved to two more houses and put them to the torch before the first human shrieks cut the night in pleasing discord. It was time to leave. After flinging my torch upon another roof we fled into the enticing, soothing night, away from the stench of the human hovels and the fearful smell of burning thatch. I saw several silhouettes stumbling through the roiling smoke and flame, but none of them pursued.

When we were far enough away to avoid being noticed, I grabbed one of Aoshatlan’s front legs to pull him to a stop. “I’m curious, I want to see what they do. We have time, any knowledge will aid us in the next step.”

He hissed agreement. We flattened ourselves upon the ground, as the flames were reaching quite high from the burning buildings and I didn’t want to undo all our care. I could see the lesh’pah running towards the fire from all over the settlement, although many seemed confused whether to run to the north or the west. I saw no flashes from their hands, so it looked doubtful any had picked up weapons—most carried wooden buckets they were filling with earth, while others ran to the southeast in the direction of the river. “Kala and Moctemi will have some sport with those,” I whispered. “Come, let’s join them so we can thin their numbers further.”

We circled far enough from the settlement to keep out of the revealing sight of the flames, discovering Kala and Moctemi by their scent behind a hillock. Their eyes were bright in the glare of the moon and from the effect of sil’anth, and even before we
reached them I could smell Kala’s exultation and the scent of fresh blood. Even Moctemi appeared alert for once, rather than in her characteristic state of languor.

“Some of the adults were heading to the river for water,” Kala explained. “They had no weapons and died easily.” I could spot dark stains of blood splattered upon his lashinaq and drizzling from the edges of his spear.

“Did any escape?”

“None. Moctemi is skilled at taking down a fleeing lesh’pah,” he trilled. “Were either of you seen? Many houses burn.”

“No. They fight the fire now,” I replied. “No weapons. I saw the dwellings to the north alight, but don’t know if we’ve been revealed. We should move, to learn how the others have fared.” I led them through the diminishing shadows east.

The flames frolicked on the other sides of the village, growing fat with so much to feast upon, but in the east all was still. Against the frenzied maw of the flame sheets, the humans were easily discernable as shadows limned by the orange glare. The fires were growing in intensity. Even here, we could feel a touch of the heat radiating out from the conflagration. The stench of burning thatch, human flesh and wood spoilt the pleasing odor of the night, but I didn’t mind. I could stomach the smell for a while longer, and the pleasing throb of sil’anth was taking the edge off.

It wasn’t long before we came across the members of Rok’h. I smelled the fresh blood of a human, and the tang of cinnamon. Charsh, the older brother, smelled of pepper and blood; the others were envious of his kill. They hunkered on all fours behind a low hillock of earth watching us, and the burning village. No one spoke. There was no
need to, the lack of frustration or worry in their scents told me they'd not been spotted. We waited.

The wind carried the scent of danger to me long before Tilipa, Houlit and Rhani came in sight. Their trio of shadows moved fast towards us without trying to cover their run; something was wrong, but they all moved without injury. Rhani spoke first. "The bowers burn, tuac’a’pili, but Tilipa fears she was spotted by a youngling.” I nodded acknowledgement. I'd wanted more time. The scents of the three calmed as they saw my lack of anger. We may have lost the element of surprise, but as of yet I still didn’t have to carry any bloodstained voomlish back to the house, and that was more important.

"Enter the eastern homes, and burn them from within," I ordered. "Quickly. Look in the largest dwellings for weapons, stockpiles of their water stone weapons. If we keep them from the weapons, they’ll be grass before a harvesting tlat’acon.” Again, I led the way towards the untouched wooden structures.

The fire had yet to touch this section of the village, but didn’t see any lingering humans. We might still have the advantage. I found another of the openings in the back of one of the larger dwellings and pulled myself in, no longer taking care to do so quietly. Speed was more essential now.

I took two paces on my back legs inside the house and came face to face with a human youngling. I was startled—the profusion of scents intermingling in the air was wreaking havoc on my ability to distinguish the freshness of scents. It blinked at me, took two of its weird, faltering steps backward and fell. I moved closer. It watched me, unmoving, as I knelt and lay my spear’s obsidian edge against its unnaturally pink throat. One quick wrench sideways tore away its life.
"Feed the soil your blood, youngling," I spat, disgusted by the scent of its fresh dung and sweat spoiling the air. Moctemi and Kala had climbed in behind me. We all flinched when another youngling in the corner started wailing. I'd not spotted it while dealing with the other.

“Looking at the creature, which had curled up into a defensive ball, I noticed it wasted water from its eyes as it wailed. “Why does it do that, Kala?” I asked. “Strange, to release water that way. Is it urinating?”

Don’t think so,” he hissed. “They urinate from their sexual organs, like us. See, it’s releasing water there too.” A growing stain spread across the brown cloth it wore, darkening the material further between its thighs.

“No matter,” I muttered. “Kill it, before it summons others to its defense with that irritating shriek.”

The cries cut off abruptly while I made torches from the coals of the fireplace. I handed them out of the air hole we’d entered from, the smoke curling in black eddies and heating the flesh of my front legs. We left the hovel the same way we’d entered, leaving one crackling torch against the wall. After leaving the stink of the interior, I glanced about for the largest of the structures, since the one we’d entered had been bereft of weapons.

“That place, there,” I gestured towards it, a larger building with a sloping roof higher than any other in the village. “It has no apertures to enter, it must be what passes for a defensive structure. Even the rain cover is made of wood. Burn it now.” They hastened to my command. Torches were thrown upon the sides so the flames licked and
spread up the sides. Hungry flame, ready to eat all in its grasp, so similar to humans; it was fitting we finished them with something so close to their own spirit.

My musing was interrupted by guttural human speech. The echoes drifted closer, coming from the west. “To the shadows,” I hissed, and I was satisfied when all obeyed, even Tuathi’s housemates. They scattered to the north. I led my housemates around the east side of the massive structure we’d set alight. It burned, but hadn’t caught fully, and I didn’t want to give the lesh’pah a chance at recovering their weapons and becoming a threat. Events could still turn from favoring my turn of the spiral to the human spin if we were foolish. They still had numbers on their side.

We huddled together on the far side. I could hear the voices rise in pitch—they must have noticed the torches we’d left leaning against the other side. “Climb,” I hissed to Moctemi, as she was the closest, and gestured to the others to follow my example, or sweep around the sides of the building.

I hooked my claws into the wood and pulled myself up and over the top of the structure, enjoying the sensation of upward movement. Moctemi moved beside me, and together we edged to the peak of the human construct and looked over. There were five males, but none were looking up at us; whatever they feared, they certainly didn’t expect it to come from above. None held weapons, so they’d be easy prey despite their alarm. Instead of busying themselves looking for threats, they were trying to beat down the flames upon the building by scooping up dirt with their front paws, or from the wooden buckets they carried. I almost pitied them, trying to protect their homes to the last. I gestured to Moctemi to show my target before I tensed and sprang.
I plunged down, rage boiling in me from the heartbeat of sil’anth. My spear led the way, giving it greater force from the double impetus of my fall and the spin of the blade cutting down through the air. Its edge sliced easily through the midsection of my target, the force of the blow roiling through the innards of the lesh’pah before my back legs touched unclean earth. The force of the blow pinned him to the earth.

The spear tip lodged in the human’s pelvis or the earth beneath, so I abandoned it rather than pull it free. My claws were more than adequate for slaughter. I saw Moctem’s spear slash eviscerate another one of the humans as the survivors watched us in shock. One that had pulled away a torch from the house didn’t notice the flames of the torch, and ignited his own clothing, and the scent of his burning flesh and fur as he screamed was hideous. I busied myself with one of the two remaining, tearing its throat out before it could react. The sil’anth helped me focus, enough that I could see the droplets of blood litter the air from my victim’s pumping arteries; as it fell backwards I followed, drawing my claws across its face and throat several times, until it was a bleeding, gasping ruin. It was nothing more than a slashed slab of meat when I stood from my work.

The human we’d not killed, and the burning one, were dead when I looked up, although I wasn’t sure who’d been responsible for the killing blows. It mattered not, but all my housemates were uninjured and around us again. The only human still clinging to life was the one I’d pinned to the earth with my spear’s point. I watched him feebly clutch at the haft of my spear before I stalked up and freed it. “Be honored to touch my spear, before you die,” I said, but knew he wouldn’t understand. I left him to suffer.
“Where are Tuathi and the other members of House Rok’h?” I asked, feeling the seething rage of sil’anth settle again.

“They disappeared when we ran behind the structure, tuac’a’pili,” Tilipa replied. She still refused to match eyes with me, no doubt shamed by her failure to stay out of sight. “They can’t have gone far.”

“Houlit, Rhani, search. Don’t let them the lesh’pah see you, but kill any that do. If the group is too large, flee into the dark and make your way back here to us.” They performed dishlo and trotted off.

The others are ripe for slaughter, now that we have burned those structures where they probably keep their weapons,” I said. “They’ll be exhausted from fighting the fires to the west—“

A nearby human wail interrupted. An adult male stumbled towards us. In its forelimbs was the corpse of one of the younglings Kala and I had finished in the dwelling a short time before; apparently he’d risked the fire to try and save his young. It fell to its knees before us, making that bothersome wail.

“Strange,” I mused, sure it presented no threat. “Its eyes are leaking water as well.” No one moved as it continued to wail unceasingly. “Why didn’t it run to alert the others, instead of wasting time on the dead youngling?”

“Before I was reborn to the House, I raised birds for their feathers,” Aoshatlan said. “When a baby dies, sometimes the mother keeps it in the nest for a time. Perhaps the creature hopes it is mistaken in the death of the youngling?” He stepped forward, raising his shochimoatl into the forward striking position.
The creature didn’t appear to notice its impending death, keeping up that infernal shrieking. “Hold, Aoshatlan,” I interceded. “Let it wail for a while. Perhaps other humans will respond to the sounds of distress, and we can whittle down their numbers further since the bravest will respond.”

The others exposed their necks at my words. I directed them to the tunnels between some of the unburnt hovels, where we could wait in shadow while the other structures burned. It was becoming harder to breathe with the fire and smoke devouring all the nearby hovels, but we could still see well enough to keep watch upon our bait. It wasn’t long before I heard the heavy tread of more humans approaching, their rolling stone voices a mélange of alarm. The babble ceased suddenly, before picking up again in pitch and fervor. They’d discovered the dead, but were still not in sight of our bait. I held the others back until I saw one move beside the kneeling human.

We fell upon them. They died as quickly as the previous group, although some of them had the chance to scream. Throughout the bloodshed, the kneeling human continued to make its hideous wailing and held close the corpse of its youngling.

“Enough of this irritation,” I hissed, angry at its refusal to defend itself. I kicked it in the right temple to knock the beast to the ground. Even then it didn’t release the corpse, although at least it stopped screaming. Instead it began gasping the same thing over and over again, as if it were some focusing chant. I stepped on its neck with one of my back legs to quiet it, satisfied when I heard the bone buckle and snap from the pressure.
“These humans are such easy prey, Kala’zho. Are these really the same beasts responsible for nearly exterminating our kind? I thought the description of them as worms was derogation, not a description of the ease of killing them.”

“As I said before, tuac’a’pili, although some of the humans I faced were this easy to return to the soil, others were much more difficult. Like us, they have many that work the role of the tlat’acon, and others in the position of warriors. Apparently there are none in this settlement that hold the abna’hei of knowing the dance of combat. And if they do, you have outmatched them with your tactics of flame and subterfuge.”

“How pitiful,” I spat. “They would not survive a night in the harsh layers of the falamei groves. Little wonder Liarthop created his plan to allow them into the jungle. Let us finish this, as the butchery bores me with its ease. I had hoped for tougher prey.”

I led them west. The pulsing effects of the sil’anth effects diminished in my blood, much as the flood season was weakening deep in the falamei groves to the north. My eyes burned from the heat and smoke, but I could still easily make out the pink flesh of the humans ahead of us, even though they were covered in grime from their exertions to save their homes. They spotted us coming as we walked up towards them, and several of the larger males moved to meet us before we could reach their females and younglings. Courageous, but I knew they weren’t a threat; I saw no weapons clutched in their forelimbs. Even the males were bunching together in a mass, as if numbers might save them from slaughter like a school of fish fleeing a predator.

“Surround them. Make sure none of them are behind you. Don’t kill any yet, or they might all flee.” The humans continued to clump in a ball, many of them making
that wailing sound of distress. Some tried to communicate with us in that bubbling pebble speech, anger or query heavy in the tone.

"These beasts must be foolish indeed," I heard Tuathi speak behind me, raising the hackles on my back. "We're covered in the blood of their people and they don't even fight. I had no idea they were so cowardly—we should have walked in upon our arrival and slaughtered them, rather than wasting all that time on planning our attack."

I hissed, turning to face him but keeping one eye behind me. Kala's words were still rumbling in my head, and I was in no mood for Tuathi's attempt to wrest control of the foray away from me at such a time. I'd been cautious, true, and these humans were like ta'tacons, but still, the warnings of our ancestors spoke of their former power. Cornered prey can become vicious at any moment, and I didn't want to deal with their rage while in another power struggle against my rival.

"Join the spiral, Tuathi. We can use your numbers to make sure none escape."

"There is no need," he huffed, walking past me with his spear up. He slashed the chest of one of the larger males open easily, his prey falling backwards into the group. Tuathi's next slice cut off the upraised arm of a female, who'd stepped forward after the male was cut down. "Finish them. My house needs its warriors returned from this easy slaughter."

"The sight of fresh blood excited the prey, and some of them tried to flee, sometimes alone, but often in small family groups. We struck crippling blows, cutting tendons and stomachs, knowing we could finish them off later—the point was to stop healthy ones from escaping."
"You've riled them, Tuathi," I pointed out, breathing heavily from the exertion of the blows I lay upon the lesh'pah. I was tired from the events of the night, and could feel the sil'anth impetus leaving me. "If you'd only waited a bit longer, they would have been too tangled to move."

We were streaked with gore now, just as the grass itself was becoming slick with blood and the organs and limbs of our prey. The knot shrank while their screaming deepened; there were only perhaps three doecs remaining, many of them younglings. I turned aside as I heard Rhani call my name; he and Houlit were emerging from the darkness of the north, moving easily. "Come join the slaughter, as our forelimbs grow tired from the exertion," I called back to them, turning my eyes away from the remaining humans.

I heard a shrieked alarm from Chana. I turned back in time to see one of the younglings step forward from between the protective legs of the few adults that remained, something clutched in his hand. Too late, I heard his defiance of his death; too late, I saw his small arm raised to throw. My senses were dulled from the killing and the loss of sil'anth's vital edge, and I saw my death as his eyes met mine.

Those small carnivore eyes swiveled away, turning to another target. His clutched object hurtled through the air, an oblong dark shadow against the glare of fire. I know I wasn't the only one hypnotized at the unexpected, watching to see whither it spun. If directed at me, I couldn't have turned.

But it wasn't. It struck Tuathi in the side of his head, direct in the temple. He'd been cutting through another human female and not seen the threat, or ignored the cry of warning as more irrational fear. It dropped him to the blood-slicked grass immediately.
His body twitched in spasms and jerks that twisted him about among the blood and bodies of our enemies; we all watched his erratic, horizontal dance, shocked to see him downed so easily, by a human youngling of all things.

After a time, he stopped his thrashing. A small trickle of blood leaked from where the stone had struck, and even from several steps away, I could see a clear fluid leaking from his ear. He still breathed, but it came in quick gasps that alternated with the crackling of the nearby fires consuming the human dwellings.

Chana was the first to move. He plunged towards the male youngling, spear raised high. Without thought I moved to intercept, knocking out his knees with the butt of my spear. He hissed up at me hatefully, smelling of rage. "Are you mad, Lier'kar? What possesses you?"

I couldn't explain it. Not yet. I spoke anyway. "Bring the youngling to me. I wish to inspect it." He pulled himself upright, his eyes burning upon me as hatefully as the nearby fires did upon my skin.

"I claim the abna'hei of killing that one," he spat. "I want his blood on my spear, to carry it back to House Rok'h."

"Do not touch him," I hissed back. "The youngling is mine to do with as I please, my choice as shuacuitl of the foray. Do you dare challenge me in this? See to your housemate."

"Kill it!" he demanded. He was shuddering from the sense of his anger at the youngling; I was taking a great risk in my actions, but I didn't care.

"There is a lesson here, tuac'a'pili," I cautioned, being sure to tempt him with the chance to take Tuathi’s place. "Let us discover what makes this one so strong, possessed
by a power none of the adults dared to exhibit. Look, it does not leak water from its eyes like the others."

It was true. The little beast’s front paws were curled into knots, and it looked without fear upon me and my blood spattered kin. “It is angry.”

“Kill it, then,” he urged again, “before it can become an adult.”

“No,” I said. “I have other plans for it. Check on Tuathi. Does he still live?”

The other humans hadn’t moved; they appeared just as shocked at the actions as we all were.

Hai’tal, the cual’pir, knelt to check. He would be second to Chana now, with the sudden shift in power. “His breath is rapid, but the injury is severe. The bone is splintered, and underneath I can see his brain.”

“Drag him away from the fire, and see if he recovers. Sate your bloodlust upon the others.” I paused, entranced with my find, and the extraordinary luck he’d brought me. No, I wouldn’t let any of the others touch this one—he was different. “Leave another of the younglings alive, so we may send it as a warning to others of its kind. A living testament to our power, and the strength of House Kaf’shou. And Rok’h, of course.”

I walked up to the male youngling, looking it directly in the eyes before kneeling to pick it up. It deserved that respect, for its deed. It was heavier than a Riapannai child, and stank of odious human, but I wasn’t about to let that stop me from preserving it; I could always throw it in the river later. It leaned against my shoulder, not fighting against me as I’d worried it might; yes, that look we’d shared had been correct. We could help each other, this beast and I.
As I carried it from the screams, the blood, and the killing of the diminishing circle behind us, I whispered in its ear. “Do you know what you have done for me, youngling? You have freed me from one of my enemies, saved me from the path of my father. As he should have let that human live to kill his enemy, so I shall keep you alive for killing mine.” I trilled, giddy at the turnabout. Here I’d been thinking all humans were powerless, and this one had shown my mistake. Yes, I would care for this one, and bring him up as my own.

“None of my people were able to free me of my rival, the one that cursed me with these scars,” I continued to whisper, rocking him back to trace with a claw the white lines that covered my face and chest. “Not my grandfather, my brother, or even myself—none of us could kill him with such ease. I thought he would plague me until I returned to the soil, an enemy for life, and you have snapped the vine between us.” I noticed his eyes were a startling azure, the color of the sky, or of pure water. “Your eyes are the color of sacredness, youngling. I name you Nemida.” He did not turn away from my sight. Yes, I would raise this one as my blood.