DAVID AES \MANUSCRIPT NOTES

a friend of hers once pointed out that silence was the mother of all sound. no matter what one was hearing, no matter the pitch, or volume, silence always overwhelmed it. most people just ignored it, but none ever escaped it. she supposed she could say she heard her, but in her self interested little heart, she was more interested in airing her own notions of the profound. she tilted her head to the side, she paused just long enough to suggest that she had weighed her point carefully—and then she argued right past it. she could say now that she missed the point entirely on that day. the idea lodged itself in her mind however, and gave her a framework to recognize something she had intimately understood all her life but could never grasp.

in the intervening time she had refined a blunt version of the same idea. it might be easier to follow. for every thought that stood out clear, there was a blank page supporting and holding it together. as far as zen went, its a hammer, but it still was one of those indirect references that lead to an understanding which was seated in the abstract rather than to the comprehension of someone’s interpretation of it.

the blank page might as well have been anything, but the blank page she knew best was always the part of her mind that operated on the fringes of consciousness. everyone was intimately acquainted with this part of the mind because it was essentially the glue that held their reality together. the strange gap of oblivion that discriminated between waking and dreaming, and defined the eternal moment. the eternal moment. well she guessed that should be explained that since she had dropped it into the conversation.

“those of us that exist within our own minds—that should be most of us that move about volitionally—experience everything in our lives during a point in time we call ‘now’. however, each minute, detail occurs independantly and, hopefully logically, in its own time and place. there’s no reason to believe that time really exists in a rigid, linear expurgation, but it’s reasonable enough to admit that we get through it by following the thread that makes sense to us. we trace a line through events that allows us to deal with the prospect of living with a degree of sanity. by focusing on continuity, whether that’s a method we follow by design, or an objective quality of nature, everything we experience evaporates from existence in the same instant we touch it. it’s only that part of our mind which has no regard for time that allows us to make connections with what we experience now and what ever we have experienced whenever.”

she could not remember anything at first. memory did not exist. nothing seemed to exist. she had no points of reference. oblivion engulfed her, marred only by her own awareness of it. it was a familiar silence. she understood, for lack of a better word, though there was nothing to understand. she suppose that she just... understood herself. the idea of herself. it was enough to bring her back from the edge. in lieu of anything else, that glimmering awareness absorbed her. focused her. she was a single naked thought. alone.

you are not alone.

the enshrouding darkness reverberated to that intruding thought. she tried to look but she had not realized yet that there was nothing to look *at*. suddenly it was vitally important to regain the thread of her last rational thought. she flailed desperately for a measureless eternity but the only points of reference she cold find was the hard presence which had uttered its thought within her. she became aware then of the limit of her understanding and she was terrified.

i don’t understand! her entire being cried out. the explosion of emotion expended in that outburst drained her to the core. she could feel what little understanding she had turning to ash as the flare was absorbed by the unknown.

you are dying. the tendril of foreign thought breathed on the ember of her soul. she felt a quickening as the threat implications penetrated and became part of her dwindling consciousness. why? she demanded of the universe. what did i do wrong? why can’t i remember anything? a rush of passion filled her and extended her existence in anticipation of the answer.

does it matter why? the voice probed.

she responded to the touch like a caress. a velvet tongue savoring a fleeting echo of spice and sweetness. her being vibrated as the image unfolded and devoured her, extending her being into a vivid sensual reality. the resolution collapsed as she tried to gear her attention to capture the thread. she almost touched the forgotten life on the other side of oblivion. she fell away from it hungry. this impulse was far stronger. she could suddenly feel the aching of her insides. the pulling of a desire as ancient as the ocean. longing and pain.

a ghost shadow of flesh aching for the unimaginable. confusion. she could not remember the reality of hunger. she felt the starvation of the mind. she craved sensation. all that there was to feel however, was the strange presence that seemingly held her between its lips. please, she begged from some unknown depth. she projected all she was into the sweeping embrace of the other. what madness was this? the voice queried. even as it recoiled, its whispering filled the thread of her being with hints and echoes of contact. the interferrence strumming across the naked thread of her soul and awakening the fire within. she felt the stirring of her spirit. she felt the reunion of her shredded will with her ruined mind. one were dying! the other shouted through her. there is nothing to come back to but pain. not even a shell. you are carnage, it declared projecting rage, shock and sorrow mixed in with satisfaction.

parts of her absorbed this report and cringed. the horror, the mental agony she felt at the idea that whatever life was, she had gathered her self to confront only the worst possible aspect of it. and yet, she could not comprehend any other possability. her understanding, her being, was dedicated to living. to existing. she could not wrap her self around the concept “not to be”. i want to feel... whatever there was to feel. she cannot turn away. she cannot recall the magnitude of desparation and anguish that was in her mental voice, all she could feel was need.

[revision note : the intimate friendship of these three must be an issue from the start or it must wait for a later scene. intimations of psionic ability must also be developed from the beginning, which may be the only justification for a sexual thread in the opening chapter. consider the best emphasis on (av), a first person narrative.]

night. in myth and legends a time for unearthly visitations and dark omens. for aeve, night had always been a close friend and ally. sleep, however, had long been an unrelenting enemy. moonlight streamed down upon the colorado rockies. a cliff house, on a remote edge of the wildmuir estate, gleamed under the silken light. within that glass walled house, the estate’s sole heir slumbered fretfully.

caressed by the moon, her body writhed and arched; her arm rising as if to fend off attack. this night’s ghosts were different from her usual nightmares. her simple presence had aroused demons long buried and forgotten on this land.

like a drowning victim, her throat struggled to give voice to inarticulate pleas for help. in her dream she was a child again—her vocal chords frozen with terror and confusion. her mind—embracing the past—revisited an eternal moment, where memories tore at her heart and tried to rend her soul the way they could not have done in the instant they had first seared her. her mouth framed the strongest word of denial known to a child—over and over—as her spirit toured a hell within.

her body wrenched itself around the desperate need to scream and break the spell, but only a faint rasp in her throat escaped. a part of her danced under the surface of sleep’s paralysis, desperately aware of how near the haven of waking lay. her mind stabbed desperately at the barriers between consciousness and sleep. only a simple shift of mental state and her wounded soul would be rescued from memories painful enough to override a lifetime’s worth of self control and training; harsh enough to crack the discipline of a mind strong enough to pry between dimensions...

her eyes flew open.

pain. she resisted the urge to moan. the edge of danger remained in the air as she struggled vainly to assert *here* and *now* over the chaos in her mind. *so much pain,* she thought, *and i haven’t even come near the scene of...* the truth she had fled eleven years ago. even now, she could not make herself complete the thought. she sat up hesitantly in bed and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. what she saw was as natural to her as sweat tears and bleeding, but rationally, it had nothing to do with reality. she lifted her hands before her and appraised the state of her body. to herself she groaned, “this is a bad sign.”

she closed her eyes and focused on the wings of her mind. a simple way to explain it, would be to say that part of her had woken up in bed, and another had woken up somewhere in the remote wilderness of earth and sky. ever since her entire extended family—with only one exception—had been slaughtered, her reality had refused to obey the rules of everyone else’s. she did not know which version was closer to the truth, because it seemed that everyone’s reality had a few exceptions, all the worse for that they were ignored. pulling her attention back together she closed the most dangerous door her desperate mind had opened.

when she was satisfied that her reality was once again safely conforming, she opened her eyes and glanced over at the clock glowing on her dresser. “almost three. god,” she exhaled. she slid off of the bed, wrestling her night shirt back down for the sake of modesty. the sheets and comforter had all been thrown off the bed in her convulsions. she bent over to grab them but when she stood up, she simply tossed them down again, shaking her head.

*not worth it. i’ll never get back to sleep.* aeve ran her hands through her disheveled hair, sorting out her thoughts in a still awakening mind. *richmond—that parasite—won’t get up to aspen for another nine hours...* she realized. with a grimace, she dropped her hands to her hips. she looked upon the bed and its invitation to renewed dreaming. *i’d rather wait it out.* she toed the comforter, but she was hot enough from her fit to forgo the added insulation. approaching the door, she reflected, *i expected to find some painful memories waiting for me—coming home. i didn’t expect them to nail me at the cliff house though... or, for that matter, before i’d gone back ... home.* her throat clenched, because for all the evil that had happened to there in one night, it remained, in her heart, just that.

home.

in the hall, a back lit silhouette of herself, she turned and punched the wall. the shock passed through her, but the impulse to rage and destroy was harder to ground out. “damn!” feeling no pain, and not bothering to examine the result of her impact on the wall, she glared inwardly at herself. *i can’t believe i lost control like that,* she frowned. a flash of memory from her awakening followed. *or like that either.* she composed herself against further outbursts. they would only reverse and end up hurting her. like everything else it seemed, this property had been held in trust her entire life, only rarely to be visited by her. by her father’s express wishes, the buildings on this property had been meticulously maintained and provisioned, in spite of the fact that she and only she could permanently reside there, and *that* only when she inherited at twenty-one. it belonged to her, but that did not mean she could afford to knock holes in the walls.

she continued on through the connecting hallway and came out on the balcony overlooking the common room below and the majesty of the aspen slopes beyond the glass walls. she slunk through the dark, gliding down the stairs into room that was once the heart of a hunting and skiing lodge. *i wonder what other omens of ill fate are lurking in wait for me...*

*...here.* the thought twisted, and she glanced down reflexively. a thick leather bound book lay on the mahogany table before the couch. she could not just walk away from it, she found. dropping softly into the couch, she laid a hand lightly on the cover. *god...* she breathed projecting to the absent author, *you knew i would have to come—after seeing this.*

she picked it up warily, and as she flipped open the cover, her fears, her nightmares, her impatience were all blown away by the magnitude of what came into focus before her eyes. the words were written in her father’s elegant longhand, and they spoke with an immediacy that brought an ache to her heart. but what they said was like a blast of storm winds to her mind.

all that we can ever truly know we know only in the mind. the world we exist in is a field of raw information which our perceptions are somehow able to make sense of... but the world we are aware of is an image, created and interpreted by our minds from that information. what that information really is or what it represents we are unable to know, because it can only be observed indirectly and solely through interaction. psychology is not engineered to explore this prospect, which is more consonant with the study of physics. the study of the mind as a component of reality falls under the science of psionics.

despite efforts made—even by aeve eve wildmuir, your great-grandmother—to establish this field, it remains barely acceptable as merely a venue of fiction. admittedly, the topic of psionic ability is a murky one at best. there has really been no serious investigation into the very basis of mental ability, as there has never been a coherent recognition of the mind's role in the very expression of existence. for this reason, much of the work related to the field has been disorganized and incoherent. there are fundamental constants that unite the many profound phenomena found in fiction with the natural process of psychic existence in which we all are grounded. understanding the state dependent nature of psionics, and the effects of basic interpretation on freeing these abilities is a prerequisite to even beginning an inquiry into the subject.

i am sorry to say, my daughter, i never had the time to find all the answers you will need to deal with what you will experience. i have collected my insights here for you sort of as a framework within which you might find a way to search for the answers yourself. you might as well know that my own experience with the secrets of the mind have been provocative and while you may feel that you are reading predictions of your life, i can only tell you that the powers of perception are little understood and falsely limited. i am watching you and i am only sorry i can do no more to aid you with what is to come. perhaps someday, you will understand, and you will be able to look my way and realize that you were never alone.

*i feel like i’ve opened pandora’s box,* she realized to her own amazement. but this was her father’s last gift to her and it had waited until she had dared to probe the tragic legacy of her loss. *this is the most unnerving inheritance, dad. why did you do it? how did you ever know i would need this? it’s like confronting an abyss—and here i am poised on the edge.*

in the morning light, the rich dark wood of the coffee table gleamed identically with the lustrous radiance of her hair. aeve sat curled up on cushions with her feet tucked under her, the heavy book in her lap. she glanced up as she felt a cat’s weight land on the cushions beside her. “hey bozwell,” she greeted the black tom, smiling. “you hungry kitty?” she asked him. bozwell squinted his eyes and meowed assertively. she suddenly noticed the daylight streaming in the vast picture windows, realizing that she had not moved an inch since sitting down. the enchantment of reading broken, she arched—stretching languorously to relieve the cramping that had set into her muscles. “jeez, how long have i been reading?” she wondered aloud, absently setting the book aside.

bozwell slid into her lap just as she was about to move. curling an arm to support him, she stood up and started off for the kitchen. “well,” she said to her cat, “let’s see what they’ve got here for us to eat.” in its time, the cliff house had been an innovation, and it had been maintained and refitted over the years to compensate for the weaknesses an open and airy mountain house could suffer. the glass walls that overlooked the north, south and east were all double paned insulated glass. the floors were all fine wood parquet with plush islands of carpeting in most of the rooms. the interior was staggered in three levels, but was at most only two stories at any particular point.

it was once a guest house, and for an entire family it would be very cozy, but for her alone it was elegantly spacious. the upstairs was a loft, containing a master bedroom and two other rooms flanking, all of which shared the same view as the common room and the elaborate balcony and double staircase. the kitchen and a small dining room dominated the northern corner of the house, and the common room spread through out the rest. nestled under the loft, the westward corner of the house protected the entry, a small sitting room and a workroom off of the garage. aeve had toured every square inch upon her arrival the previous day.

crossing into the kitchen, she rubbed bozwell behind the ears, assuring him, “don’t worry boz, i brought some tuna and a carton of milk, just in case, but maybe there’s—ooouchh!!!” she exclaimed, dropping the poor cat in a sudden stab of pain. “what the...?” she glanced down, lifting up her foot reflexively. the kitchen floor was sprinkled with splintered shards of silvered glass. “glass... did you break something boz?” she asked turning a stern eye on her familiar.

as she reached out to snatch up the broom and dust pan from the nook by the refrigerator, she glanced at the clock on the stove. it read ‘11:11’. *when all is one,* her mind fished up the old saying. then she had to grab the cat. “no boz, let me sweep this up first.” the cat glared at her a moment, then hopped up to the counter to lick at his paws. aeve quickly attacked the mess, but she couldn’t help wondering *where* the glass had come from. upon closer inspection the silver fragments obviously came from a mirror. setting the full dust pan on the counter she frowned. *...but there aren’t any mirrors in here...* directly in front of her the clock changed to eleven twelve and it finally clicked. “oh shit!!! the time! i’m going to miss my appointment!” she exclaimed in sudden alarm. in a flash, she was bolting down the hallway. the cat stared after her emitting a plaintive, “mew???”

a door popped open under her hand and then slammed shut. aeve continued on past the linen closet with a towel in her hand.

entering the utility bathroom, across the hall from the work room, she stopped short to look at the mirror. at first, she was absorbed by her own reflection. green eyes shone under the dark arch of eyebrows in a dark frame of lashes, peering through long sheer bangs. her face, fair skinned and framed by a rich mahogany mane, had even, regular features. a little stronger than she liked, but androgyny was attractive now anyway. she cocked her head, and regarded herself for a moment.

her focus shifted to the surface of the glass and she bent closer to examine a faint crack in the mirror, catching the reflection of the shower behind her in the edges of her vision. for a moment her mind flashed back to the mystery of the mirror shards. not finding the answer here, she shrugged and turned to start the water. behind her, the cat appeared in the doorway. her towel remained on the counter where she set it down. she was still upset with herself for having lost track of the time so completely. *with my luck the shower will blow up on me next! how did i ever manage to read for so long, without realizing it!?* she fondled that thought for a moment.

the book, like the experience of the night before, had tipped her reality on edge. it had posed a possibility that was at once tempting and horrible. on one hand a vindication of her sanity, but on the other, a vexing quagmire of paradoxes. reading it had been like pawing through a catalogue of answers. unfortunately, even if she knew what the right questions to ask were, she had no idea how to justify them with what normally passed for reality. a line from the book flashed out of recent memory. *one has to draw the line between what is and what is not.* the words formed unbidden in her mind. it was less than the current of a thought, but as she undressed, a sense of it nagged at her. she slipped easily out of the night shirt as the impression evolved.

coming at her like that it was as if her father had spoken to her from beyond the grave. she couldn’t help directing an uncertain response to him as he was in her memory. *what is... what? and what is not... what did you mean by that?*

she did not know the answer, and the moment left her dwelling on the loss of her family—*when do you draw the line between ‘might have been’ and what is?* another line resolved itself. *were you trying to help me deal with your loss?* she asked her father’s memory. *did you know what was going to happen?* the way the whole book was written it was easy to believe it *had* been written for that purpose. another line manifested from the book, and she wasn’t sure who it made more sense coming from, herself or her father. *when do you draw the line between chance and intent?*

she could accept that possibility about as well as she could accept her own experiences, but that still did not tell her how to make either fit into reality. aeve shook her head, realizing that even though she had put it down it still consumed her attention, allowing time to run away from her. thinking about her fixation on the book, the truth of her distraction came clear. *i let myself lose track...* behind her, in the misting mirror, the reflection seemed to stir, clipping the edge of her awareness. she turned to gaze at it full on but whatever it was, it must have been her imagination. leaning back into the bath stall to test the temperature of the water,the voice intruded on her again, *when do you draw the line between here and there...?*

shaking her head, she stepped down into the sunken basin of the steaming shower. she tried to pin down the direction of her thoughts with an uneasy feeling. the water was raining down on her back, letting her get used to the heat. as she bent back to let the water run over her face and chest, she kept thinking about dreaming. about her nightmares. that made her pause. she flipped back in the stream of thought and picked up the thread. *drawing a line... is that it?* she slid her hands down her body to spread the water’s warmth over her. *trying to draw a line... between dreaming and reality... between here and there...* her skin tingled as the direction became clear, *and i don’t want to make it to the meeting, which means i don’t want to face the memories...* she opened her eyes and wiped the water off her face.

turning to face the shower head and grab the soap, it suddenly clicked together. the limits of her reality suddenly rose up. the opening passage from the book suddenly connected with her reality. her reality, her experience with the safety of the normal world, only existed in her mind. whatever was really out there, it had to get through her mind to reach her, and in that regard, reality was no different from dreaming. *but... what does that that have to do with the line..?* all of a sudden it was right before her.

at that instant, the power went out. in the work shop bathroom, everything was flooded in darkness. her concentration was snapped. “sonovabitch! i knew it! if it isn’t one thing...” hurrying, she quickly soaped her body and washed her hair. she rinsed herself down, trying to slough off the unease her thoughts had left her with. finally, she reached through the darkened mist and traced over the glass door, “where’s the bloody towel...?” sliding the shower door open, she glimpsed what appeared to be eyes looming deep within the mirror. she hesitated for a second, shaken by the image but when she cleared her eyes again, the misted mirror was only a darkened fog. the thread of her broken thoughts suddenly returned.

the line, she realized, was between sanity and something else. reality and something too big to face. something stirred in her. *what happens when you reach that line, and something pushes you over it?*—a strange dread darted into her head.

aeve stepped carefully out of the sunken tub and slinked over to the counter, dripping a sheen of steaming moisture. her hand reached out for her towel, but her eyes were drawn to the mirror. the misting made it impossible to make out a clear image, but darkening currents writhed in the distorted glass. suddenly, the cat hissed, drawing her attention away. “bozwell...?” she queried as the cat leapt past her through the shadows. her eye tried to follow the streak of midnight. the black tom arched in a bristle of charged fur. “damn, cat, you scared me!” she breathed in relief as her mind painted the feline into her overactive imagination.

grinning at herself, she turned back to the counter mocking her thoughts. *how strong is the boundary between here and nowhere...?* a remembered line challenged. casually she picked up the towel, and before wiping herself down, she gave in to the temptation. balling up the towel in her hand, she swabbed over the glass to clear the fog. behind the mist a dark form reared back. a shocked gasp escaped her throat. the demonic image, a horror from her chaotic memories, immediately burst forward. aeve reeled back as the figure hit the inside of the glass and the mirror exploded into fine fragments of slivered glass. she passed through the open door of the shower and wracked her head against the tiles. a sharp crack, and a blinding flash in her head proceeded her down into darkness. her inner voice murmured tonelessly, *strong enough,* as she landed in a warm, wet oblivion.

her numb body came to rest over the drain, blocking the water.

alex wildmuir let himself into the cliff house with his own key. he reached for the light switch inside the door, and frowned as the entry remained dim. then he heard the distinct sound of shattering glass. a solid thump vibrated through the walls immediately after. the former soldier froze into listening silence. because of the house’s acoustics, he could not pinpoint the origin of the sound. dropping his coat and his bag inside the door, he soft stepped toward the kitchen; into the small back hall between the front of the house and the dining room.

as he moved down the hall, he heard a shower running.

he realized that aeve must still be in the house. he had expected her to be gone for her meeting with the family lawyer, richmond bale. still careful, he did a quick circuit of the house before going to the utility bathroom door. finding nothing amiss, he knocked on the door to advise her that he had shown up early. he knocked harder when he didn’t get a response. he listened again for a pause. “mew? you taking a nap in there?” he asked loudly, using her childhood nickname. he began to get a little worried and the quality of the sound of flowing water penetrated just as the first of the flood leaked from under the door. without a second thought he slammed his shoulder to the door, easily splintering the oak framing. he burst into the bathroom, almost choking on the steam.

he whipped around and saw her laying submerged in the sunken tub. the cat was sitting grimly on top of the toilet, “mew?!?” bozwell cried. alex plunged into the tub and wrenched his niece out of the water. he doubled her over his shoulder to drain her lungs and when the flow stopped he dropped her to the streaming floor, too pressed for time to be gentle. cpr was a built in reflex and he didn’t even give himself time to reflect on the intimate contact the motions demanded.

for an uncle he was not that far from her in age, only ten years—and in the absence of her father, he had become the focus for about eight years worth of electra complex. this was the first time he had ever seen her naked. and if she wasn’t dying, he would be having a heart attack over it. constantly telling a pretty young girl no did not make a man serene, even with the specter of incest. as soon as she could manage a choking imitation of normal breathing, he grabbed for the sodden towel laying on the floor beside her and flung it over her nude form, his face glowing deep red.

aeve rolled over, moaning, and he quietly reassured her until she could limply respond to his questions. confident that she would survive, he went to the linen closet for a dry towel. when he came back in, he had his own distress under control. aeve was sitting there examining the floor of the bathroom with piercing scrutiny. when he asked what she was looking for she said, “there’s no glass... i guess i must have dreamed it all...” he didn’t follow the comment at all, and just as he was about to ask what she thought she had dreamed, she looked up and saw the broken mirror. he followed her gaze but he didn’t know what to make of it.

*\av, awakened by a terrifying nightmare—and the accompanying and unnoticed fit—slipped out into the night. prowling about, she happened to overhear a private interview between the ara’dai and a man named teyn. finding that they were discussing her mother, she could not pry herself away. what she heard disturbed her and cast a shadow on her coming mnao.*

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caressed by the moon, her body writhed and arched; her arm rising as if to fend off attack. this night’s ghosts were different from her usual nightmares. this was what she had expected. this was what she had feared. her presence in this place had aroused demons long buried and forgotten on this northwest coast.

*in her dream she was a child again—her vocal chords frozen with terror and confusion.*

*her throat struggled to give voice to inarticulate pleas for help. her body wrenched itself around the desperate need to scream and break the spell, but only a faint rasp in her throat escaped.*

*a part of her danced under the surface of sleep’s paralysis, desperately aware of how near the haven of waking lay.*

*her mind—in embracing sleep—revisited an eternal moment, where memories tore at her heart and tried to rend her soul as they had in the instant the experience first seared her.*

*her mouth framed the strongest word of denial known to a child—over and over—as her spirit toured a hell within.*

*her mind stabbed desperately at the barriers between consciousness and sleep.*

*only a simple shift of mental state and her wounded soul would be safe.*

*rescued, from memories painful enough to override a lifetime’s worth of self control and training.*

*salvation, from horrors harsh enough to crack the discipline of a mind strong enough to pry between dimensions, articulate enough to embody a thought—and damaged enough to attempt to do both.*

her eyes flew open.

she regretted it instantly. her sight was assailed by an impossible vision of two heres, two nows and her brain struggled to superimpose them on each other. with a tearing mental effort, she focused on the image she had reason to expect. the image of the room etched in moonlight slowly resolved before her eyes in response to the shift in her attention. she sat up hesitantly in bed and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. her sanity wanted to abdicate. it was all that was holding her nightmares at bay. somehow, she retained consciousness. taking a deep breath, she tried to understand what she was seeing. an image in the mirror, human in outline, but an open window to somewhere—or maybe somewhen?—else in substance. though *she* had not seen it, she suddenly remembered that it had *happened* once before.

it was fantastic. she lifted her hands before her and appraised the state of her body. to herself she groaned, “this is a bad sign.” her hands felt like they ought to, and yet if she let her concentration slip, she could feel, as well as see, that her body touched the world twice at once. it was as if her... no. not as if. her body *had* become a gate. as with any other gate, light primed the passage, that was why she could see—through her own hand!—a distant curve of shore, with rocky headlands, and night lit rain forest.

risking the fragile calm that wonder had brought her, she allowed her attention to shift to the opposite end of the link.

it was as if her mind plummeted through an abyss. a violent, eternal instant with her very flesh twisting through her thoughts. her wits returned—badly frayed—what she hoped was only an instant later. and then the panic hit. after the spasm of animal terror passed, she realized that she sat, as surely as if she were still in bed, suspended high over the northwest coast.

looking around her, she unconsciously got to her feet and pivoted around for a better view. noticing, she took a couple experimental steps. *i’m walking on air!* she thought with delight. she whirled about in a mad dance and suddenly swallowed her heart as she fell!

precisely one meter, she found, as she painfully crashed in a heap on the floor. she could see it through her hands. as quick as that she realized how little she understood of her present state of being. only an instinct saved her from making an even worse mistake. her thought had been to undo this strange miracle, and close the gate before she did something irrevocably stupid. she grabbed the notion and smothered it at once. there was no reason to believe it, but she knew, by whatever that excruciating sensation had been, she had shifted herself, not just her attention, here. if she closed the gate, she would end up on the unsupported side and plummet to her death.

she closed her eyes and focused on the wings of her mind. step by step. turning her focus back to the haven of her room, she embraced the dismembering sensation of thought that had marked her previous transition. it struck her that she could see, and understand what was happening as though every intricacy, every mechanism, made its function obvious, but the only words she could think of to harness this passing revelation were pathetic and solipsistic. it reminded her of the dangerous times during her recovery. from the moment she had seen...

*pain.*

*a child—a friend—hacked to pieces by some invisible storm of blades.*

*an aunt, peeled apart as she tried to flee, every part of her delicately and yet swiftly dismembered. a split second anatomy lesson.*

*somehow more frightening, a dark gaze piercing her soul. and blood. everywhere the gore.*

her body, still twisting in her thoughts, spasmed. brief and brutal, the vision might have been the closest her mind could come to finding a word to express...

again, the dream opened its mouth to swallow her, and she had to cut the thought short. she resisted the urge to moan. the edge of danger remained in the air as she struggled vainly to assert *here* and *now* over the chaos in her mind. *so much pain,* she thought, *and i haven’t even come near the scene of...*

she flinched yet again. there seemed no way around it. like fingers, fearfully probing the extent of a terrible wound, she opened her mind to the facts. just the naked truth behind what she had avoided contemplating for eleven years. she struggled to complete the thought. strained to remember how she had become damaged. sweated to accept that from the moment she had seen the better part of her mother’s extended family slaughtered, parts of her reality had refused to obey the same rules as everyone else’s. mad times when she did not know that the carnage had ended. terrifying times when she struggled to wake up from the nightmare only to discover that she was already awake. lucid times, when her mind stepped beyond the boundaries, as it was doing now. learning how to function in other people’s reality had been frightening and frustrating. they had explained that her mind had been damaged, but it had taken her a long time to understand how that fact had impaired her grasp of reality. the reality she had lived in seemed whole and sound, but it did not mesh perfectly with the common dynamic. she did not know which parts of her reality were closer to the truth. then again, if she really thought about it, it seemed that most individuals’ realities had a few exceptions. deviations. she had paid attention to it, suffering from an odd tilt herself, she had noticed the eccentricities in other people’s orbits. for all those differences, though, they were the same as she, fiercely ignoring the exceptions to the pattern they strove to imitate.

what was the question? she wondered, as the answer continued to unravel in profound complexity. what was reality, anyway? she mused. how did one honestly know that what they experienced was real? from where she was, it all just looked like patterns. she could not se any reason why she simply could not *choose* the one she wanted.

something pulled at her scattered wits, forcing her to collect her thoughts and remember herself. she had not even noticed going over the edge. with all the energy she could summon she focused on where she was supposed to be, and even more fiercely, *who* she was supposed to be.

av.

the endless moment ended with a violent clarity. “...goddess!!!” she gasped, her body trembling with fear. after one quick check, a vision of land and sea far below, through her hands, and the floor properly under her body, av closed her eyes and began pulling her attention back together. not bothering to think about the fact that she had not a clue how, she closed the door her desperate mind had opened.

when she was satisfied that her reality once again safely conformed to the proper guidelines, she collapsed in a heap and panted from an exertion she did not even know how to define. when her heart stopped crashing around within her chest, av opened her eyes and glanced around for the clock. tracking up the wall, she focused on the inset display glowing through the darkness. “almost third of one. goddess,” she exhaled.

she pushed herself up from the floor, where she had ended up after sliding off of the bed. wrestling her night shirt back down, for the sake of modesty, she stood up and took stock. the sheets and comforter had all been thrown off the bed in her convulsions. she bent over to grab them but when she returned upright, she simply tossed them down again, shaking her head.

*not worth it. i’ll never get back to sleep.* she ran her hands through her disheveled hair, sorting out her thoughts in a still awakening mind. *kev and the others won’t arrive until fifth of four...* she realized. with a grimace, she dropped her hands to her hips. she looked upon the bed and its invitation to renewed dreaming. *i’d rather wait it out.* she toed the comforter, but she was hot enough from her fit to forgo the added insulation. approaching the door, she reflected, *i expected to find some painful memories waiting for me. i didn’t expect them to nail me at teal ni hayr though... or, for that matter, before i’d gone back...* her throat clenched, because for all the evil that had happened there in one night, it remained, in her heart, just that.

home.

in the hall, a back lit silhouette of herself, av turned and punched the wall. the shock passed through her, but the impulse to rage and destroy was harder to ground out. “damn!” feeling no pain, and not bothering to examine the result of her impact on the wall, she glared inwardly at herself. with an effort, she forced herself to take account of herself and reimpose discipline. *i can’t believe i lost control like that,* she frowned. *or like that either,* she added as the ramifications of waking episode started to come clear. she composed herself against further outbursts and smoothed her hair back. it did not serve to loose her temper, it would only reverse and end up hurting her. like everything else it seemed,

she continued on through the connecting hallway and came out on the balcony overlooking the common room below, and the majesty of the coastal highlands beyond the glass walls. she slunk through the dark, gliding down the stairs into room that was once the heart of a home.

it seemed strange to be here alone. an apartment like this should belong to a family, but there was not enough of the house of ara left to occupy the many accommodations reserved for the extended kin of the dai. it was not like her father’s house where the families of his brothers and sisters, his aunts and uncles, and even his cousins all lived together like a town community. she would be more comfortable with this space once her own siblings joined her here. but for now, it was too much. turning from the room, she went to the washroom adjoining the workshop and dressed to go walking.

slithering out of her nightshirt, she squirmed into a body sleeve, tunic and leggings. she found her tall boots and overcoat in the entry and with economic haste soon found herself sealing the door behind her, safely out in the night. she was mildly surprised to note that the evening storm had made its advance during her brief distraction, and the moonlight had become diffuse and weak. she toyed with the notion going back in for her travel cloak, but resigned herself to the whim of the weather.

av was mildly afraid that she would retreat back to the lonely comfort of her apartment if she opened the door. she was afraid that if she gave it a chance, sleep would trap her again. so, setting her teeth, she stalked out into the darkened estate.

she did not have anywhere to go really. her only thought was the need for action. she did not want to dwell on the nightmares—both sleeping and waking—that she had struggled with. she wanted to feed her ever hungry senses. she needed to fix on the moment.

there was a music in the motion. the fast beat of her heart and the slower rhythm of her echoing footsteps set a complex tempo. the wind whistled and moaned along the broad arcades, underscored by the rattling hiss of the rain. the crack and grumble of thunder dominated, reaching inside her chest and abdomen to caress her vulnerable parts. in the silences between, she heard even the endless passion of the sea, stroking the beaches, and thrusting among crevices and fissures of the rocks.

the sharp bite of ozone, and the spice of new rain, laced by the primal life-scent of the ocean, were taunting and arousing. her nostrils flared as she drank in the heady mix. it sharpened her perceptions, opening her mind to her body, transforming flesh into some sensual flame. her muscles moved beneath her skin like tongues of heat and light. every motion created friction, her own clothes gripping and sliding around her in a binding caress. it was maddening. it was wonderful. it was unbearable. her senses were overloaded and her whole being craved for release.

she wondered if making love would be as wonderful as opening herself to the sensuousness of the world as she moved through it. in spite of herself, she also wondered if that was just part of her madness. maybe she had experienced so much pain in her short life, that any moment without pain was pure pleasure.

if that was true, she smiled to herself, than true pleasure would probably be overwhelming!

moving as she did, with her senses expanded to their utmost, she was able to check herself—when she noticed the voices—before she herself was noticed by the ones who spoke. midnight wandering was natural enough to her, but she was aware that it was odd behavior in others. with care, she investigated, careful to remain unnoticed. trusting to a child’s memories of exploration, she was able to stalk them down. they were in an abandoned part of the palatial estate, in an upper room. she wriggled up an air shaft and found a perch where she could hear their voices clear and undistorted. she recognized one of their voices at once and was resolved to leave them their privacy. but before she moved, the unfamiliar voice—the man—spoke and caught her attention.

“ane’yn is dying.” she stopped and caught her breath. ane’yn was her uncle. her mother’s older brother. he was also her grandmother’s heir. carefully, she levered herself a little closer, straining to peer through a crack in the shutter. the light fell on her face like a lash. janathnae, the ara’dai, stood in the middle of the room, her back mostly to av. av could not even see the other. ja’nae looked like the polished version of av and her mother. tall, proud. her hair, though red, was more full of gold than her daughter’s. like fire, whereas av’s own locks spilled from her scalp like blood. av flinched when ja’nae turned toward her and finally spoke.

“i know,” she said tightly. everything about her was tight, her lips, her stance, even the glare in her eyes hinted that fury, and not grief wanted to respond to the man. av held her breath, watching her grandmother’s eyes, realizing that he, whoever he was, stood right there by the window.

“you have to get her back here, ja’nae.” he moved suddenly, from the left of her vision, eclipsing the light that was thrown out by the lamp on the desk. he moved toward the ara’dai, to rest one haunch on the edge before her. ja’nae’s eyes shifted with him.

“i haven't seen or heard from her in eleven years,” she said crisply. eleven years. the significance of that number pricked up av’s ears. were they talking about her? ja’nae shifted her weight and crossed her arms. “do you really think that if i call, she'll come running home? don't be a fool, teyn.” she turned her back again and slowly paced away from them. av’s brows creased, they were talking about someone else then, there was no need for her to be summoned. av struggled to recall ever having heard mention of a man called teyn, but she came up dry. when ja’nae reached the far wall, she turned back and continued speaking. “do you think if i tell her her brother is dying—that she has to take his place—she’ll simply forget?” she raised a hand inquisitively. av raised her eyebrows. they were talking about her mother. av returned her eye to the shutter and saw her grandmother cocking her head to the left. av wished she could see teyn’s face. ja’nae smiled sarcastically and took a few steps back into the center of the room. “there is nothing between us but pain. she won't come back. she couldn't forgive me as a child, i doubt it is in her heart to forgive me now.”

“that's not the point.”

“maybe not, but it is not up to me, now is it?” she countered.

“no, it is not. but not the way you think,” he said with an added edge to his voice. av glared in the darkness, who did this man think he was to speak that way to the ara’dai? but he was not done. “how old are you, ja’nae? how much longer do you think you have before people start wondering? it's time for you to join you ancestors, ja’nae.”

av raised an eyebrow almost in synch with her grandmother. “oh, yes. this again. we can't afford to *compromise* our secrets. damn this, teyn, the purge ended a long time ago.”

“it never ended,” he retorted, getting up and stepping into the center of the room. “it just became too hard to find targets. they already suspect us of more than we let on. what do you think will happen when your peers bend to their age and see you, as young and healthy as a bride?”

“i don't believe you, teyn!” she cried, brushing away his hands as they tried to caress her face. av’s eyes were peeled wide. she had heard of the purge. naturally, everyone did while they were growing up. what she had never known, precisely, was what was being purged. perhaps a few hundred generations ago, a child would have been told that, but since humans had come secrets had not been trusted to innocent minds. her thoughts were so distracting, she almost missed ja’nae’s soft amendment. “were you ever my friend, or is riding herd on those of us still on the inside the only thing you have room for in your soul?”

“don't change the subject.”

the softness vanished from her voice and look. the ara’dai turned her shoulder to him, “get to the point, teyn or get out of my house. i haven't the patience for your paranoia today.”

he turned his golden maned head slightly, giving av a faint glimpse of his profile. “i am not being paranoid, ara’dai. i have put this off for too long as it is. do i have to remind you?” he asked plaintively, “they grow old, ja’nae. we do not. they will hate us for that alone far more than the fact that we exist.”

“but we do exist. why deny that?”

he sighed. “people have died, since creation, for the simple crime of being different. do you have any idea what the cost in blood is for being *better?”* he challenged. “look at your own house. this was once the greatest house of the exiled worlds. look how far they have brought you down. the pride of ara’dsai is its curse, ja’nae. you simply cannot rub anything more into their eyes or they will take you down and the entire (phoenix) court with you. all they need is an excuse.”

“we can’t hide forever, teyn.”

“we don’t have to. only until the rift is healed. only until the end of exile.” av’s mind churned rapidly during the next pause. what were they talking about? worlds in exile? what exile? did that mean that what avonai had told humans had been a lie? were there other civilizations in the universe? she couldn’t pursue the thought, because he was speaking again. “all of us leave when our peers become grey. you will too. even if your daughter will not come and take your place.”

her grandmother’s voice was ice, “this house has been in my family since the purge, teyn. i won't let it fall into ateph's lap. not while the bloodline is still alive.”

“ateph is failing almost faster than ane’yn,” he said with venom. “if you had such fear of having your house fall to the avon’dai, perhaps you should have thought of that before you drove anathnae into the embrace of the avon’dai’s heirs, neh?” av’s brow furrowed in concentration. she could tell that the pieces were important, but she could not figure out what the binding thread of this conversation was.

“damn you, teyn,” ja’nae accused, “that was more your fault than mine. she was mnao, by the gods, but you demanded the abortion.” av shook her head. whatever this was about, she had no chance of figuring it out right now. she could only listen and think on it later.

“ja’nae, she was mnao to a (dragon),” he protested.

“he was as half-blooded as she.” she retorted unsympathetically. “anathnae knew the risks. it was likely enough to happen.”

“you shouldn't have let it happen.”

“i wasn't in a position to do anything about it, if you recall.”

“as i recall i told you, strictly, to forbid her that choice.” av almost spoke out at that. her own mnao was coming soon, and she knew keenly that no outside voice could dictate the course of the mnao. that was in the code of obligation. but his own rebuttal cut her short and saved her from the consequences of her eavesdropping. “i know the code, but there are ways you could have kept them apart.”

“they were in love,” ja’nae countered incredulously.

“they were in heat!” he accused mercilessly.

“you have an unromantic soul, teyn. and a murderous heart.”

“girls miscarry all the time. i should have taken care of it myself.” he sounded so matter of fact that it forced av to realize that this man had more power than her grandmother. this man was xai.

ja’nae’s response, however, held very little awe for the deadly artist. “if you had touched her, teyn, do you think you would be here now? i was tempted...” av found she was holding her breath again. who was her grandmother that she could speak this way to a xai? “i could have killed you for what you demanded. how could you even suggest a course of action that would leave the daughter of daughters neutered? and you knew it too—you kept invoking the immunity of the court while out of the other side of your mouth you ordered me to have my daughter kill her babies. knowing full well the price she paid for her first abortion. is it any wonder i lost my daughter?”

“i only did what i had to do.”

“you disgust me. it was an excuse to tear at my house, nothing more. why did you force me to dismiss her from my house? why did you forbid me even shelter her when she came with her daughter? for that matter, what do you know about what happened at the aes’dsai at tegal ni’hayr?” av almost lost her perch. *goddess, they’re not going to talk about that!*

“are you accusing me of conspiracy to that massacre?” his voice dripped with acid.

“one wonders, neh?” the ara’dai responded. she turned away from the xai, and shrugged. “there were whole families present. mothers, fathers, children. some of us survived. i survived, and i still don’t know what attacked us. you are the shadow dancer, you explain it to me. or don’t. if you have an answer, i am not sure i want to know it,” she shuddered and then looked at him, with pain in her eyes. “only one child survived that night, and you dared deny my claim to name her my own child and raise her in anathnae’s stead. no excuses, i was within my rights. but, you could not permit it, could you?”

“there were other reasons...” he began, but she cut him off.

“have you always thought i was so stupid? you weren't trying to protect us all from discovery, you were trying to destroy a possible alliance between my heir and the avon’dsai heir. you wanted this. you deliberately drove her away from the court, away from her house, and most especially away from aeph. you want this house to fall as much as that bastard, ateph, does.” av cringed. it hurt to hear the ara’dai attack the avon’dai, to know that her grandmother had such hatred for her grandfather.

“i don't have to listen to this nonsense,” the xai snarled. “this house is nowhere near as important as you think it is. thanks to your mother this house is nothing more than a title and a useless legend. the only possible interest anyone could have in it is getting rid of a family of troublemakers. so, if you intend to go on making trouble, i will put you down, as i am supposed to. if your house goes down with you, its your own fault.”

“be careful, teyn. both of us will go down before this house does, i can promise you that,” ja’nae pronounced severely. there was nothing threatening in her voice as she said it, but av could hear the truth in it. it had been said with such resignation. her expression had such complexity to it, she could almost feel that once there had been very strong emotions between the two of them. an almost tragic love. av had heard more than she could bear and was already slithering away, down the air shaft, when ja’nae broke the silence that had fallen between them. “we may not be friends anymore, but we're still kindred. i'll try find her. i'll try to bring her back. that wasn't the question anyway. we'll see if she will listen to either of us. just remember, i will not walk away from this house without a legitimate heir in place.”

the last thing av heard as she silently fled from them was the xai, speaking with equal resignation, “we'll see.

\clipboard mdi

\clipboard mdc

av stood at the edge of the cliff and stared out over the land slashed ocean. the emerald coast stretched its wing from far beyond the north-west horizon out into the warm equatorial waters before her. the majestic coastal mountains carried on in chains of archipelagoes where the land sank sedately into the water's embrace. cold arctic air, flowing along the feathered highlands, endlessly combed the tropical winds, bathing the rain forests from which the coast got its name. the forests had adapted an age ago, blending away climate borders. dangerous, because it gave one no way to distinguish where one was along most of the coast and deep into the interior. only far to the east did the tropics become a dominating blanket over ancient slopes. neither people, nor beasts were ever entirely sure of the perimeter of their habitats.

this property had been held in trust her entire life, only rarely to be visited by her. by her father’s express wishes, the buildings on this property had been meticulously maintained and provisioned, in spite of the fact that she and only she could permanently reside there, and *that* only when she inherited at twenty-one. it belonged to her, but that did not mean she could afford to knock holes in the walls.

as natural to her as sweat tears and bleeding. but rationally, it had nothing to do with reality.

*i wonder what other omens of ill fate are lurking in wait for me... ...here.* the thought twisted, and she glanced down reflexively. a thick leather bound book lay on the mahogany table before the couch. she could not just walk away from it, she found. dropping softly into the couch, she laid a hand lightly on the cover. *goddess...* she breathed projecting to the absent author, *you knew i would have to have this. you knew i wouldn’t be able to face this alone.*

she picked it up warily, and as she flipped open the cover, her fears, her nightmares, her impatience were all blown away by the magnitude of what came into focus before her eyes. the words were written in her father’s elegant longhand, and they spoke with an immediacy that brought an ache to her heart. but what they said was like a blast of storm winds to her mind.

“it is the nightmares that makes us afraid to test the boundaries of our minds. still, when nightmare becomes reality, the way our minds can redefine reality show us that the boundaries are more flexible than would normally find comfortable to contemplate. your scars have forced you into a position which most humans endure. you have the instinctive knowledge that there is more to reality than meets the eye, but you have never been able to grasp it and realize it....

\a lock, written aonatneh, the mind of the reader is the key

“all that we can ever truly know we know only in the mind. the world we exist in is a field of raw information which our perceptions are somehow able to make sense of... but the world we are aware of is an image, created and interpreted by our minds from that information. what that information really is or what it represents we are unable to know, because it can only be observed indirectly and solely through interaction. psychology is not engineered to explore this prospect, which is more consonant with the study of physics. the study of the mind as a component of reality falls under the science of psionics.

“despite efforts made—even by arden eve sinclair, your great-to-the-whatever-grandmother—to establish this field, it remains barely acceptable as merely a venue of fiction. admittedly, the topic of psionic ability is a murky one at best. there has really been no serious investigation into the very basis of mental ability, as there has never been a coherent recognition of the mind's role in the very expression of existence. for this reason, much of the work related to the field has been disorganized and incoherent. there are fundamental constants that unite the many profound phenomena found in fiction with the natural process of psychic existence in which we all are grounded. understanding the state dependent nature of psionics, and the effects of basic interpretation on freeing these abilities is a prerequisite to even beginning an inquiry into the subject.

“i am sorry to say, my daughter, i never had the time to find all the answers you will need to deal with what you will experience. i have collected my insights here for you sort of as a framework within which you might find a way to search for the answers yourself. you might as well know that my own experience with the secrets of the mind have been provocative and while you may feel that you are reading predictions of your life, i can only tell you that the powers of perception are little understood and falsely limited. if it brings you comfort to think i am watching you, then please, indulge yourself. i am only sorry i can do no more to aid you with what is to come. perhaps someday, you will understand, and you will be able to look my way and realize that you were never alone.

*i feel like i’ve opened pandora’s box,* she realized to her own amazement. but this was her father’s gift to her and it had waited until she had dared to probe the tragic legacy of her loss. *this is the most unnerving thing, dad. when did you do it? why did you do it? how did you ever know i would need this? it’s like confronting an abyss—and here i am poised on the edge.*

\clipboard ddi

“dai, there is a messenger.”

“well, let him in, nume.”

“what a strange boy.”

“don't just stand in the doorway, boy, come in. what is the matter with you? you act like you've never seen the inside of a house before.”

“oh, i have. a couple of times now. i'm sorry. oh, yeah. here, i think this is for you.”

“you think? don't you imagine that someone in your position ought to know if he is delivering his message to the right person or not? ... whatever then. give it over. well, you're in luck. it has my name on it. that's a good start. my thanks boy, nume will pay you at the door.”

“that's it then?”

“what, did you expect more? well, from the look of you, i imagine you were hoping for a bite to eat or some such.”

“not really. still...”

“well?”

“a’nae nu didn't really tell me what to do if you sent me away.”

“a’nae nu? my gods, it *is* her handwriting! i really didn't think she would answer... but then, that makes you inuna, my grandson.”

“uhn. not really.”

“well, you called my daughter 'mother', no?”

“and my mother calls me her daughter.”

“i see. i thought you looked a bit frail. my apologies, but you do wear those clothes very well. ... never mind. nume! go with nume, inuna, and get cleaned up. i'm sure you've been on the road for a while.”

“thank you. a bath sounds very nice. ninu.”

“good. when you're done come back here and we'll talk about what to do with you.”

“as you wish.

“

“boy. te! i don't believe it. ... does this look like a boy to you?”

“uhn... no. not really. ao, you *are* a girl.”

“see? te! it's not like i was even trying or anything.”

“you wear *these* and you say you weren't trying? ... why do you wear them?”

“why not? they're more comfortable, they're easier to move in; i think they are better suited to life on the road.”

“uhn. what about the, uh...?”

“hmn? i'm too old to study na anim in the nude. there's nothing wrong with a girl wearing body sheathes.”

“oh. well, sure; you can wear them by themselves *if* you're a boy, or under your skirts if your a girl. but under *pants?*”

“what's so strange about that? if i have to, i can change pants on the road, or something, without totally exposing myself.”

“what do you do when you have to go? ... sorry, bad question. here, i'll do your back for you. hm. how long have you been studying the anim?”

“all my life. i was born in the jentempas.”

“ne. you're body is hard as a boy's. i guess you're not a toy, neh?”

“mna? me?”

“ne, relax. nobody is going to take advantage of you here. *especially if you keep them guessing.* there, that's good enough. the water should be hot enough now.”

“oh, that's so nice. mmm. thank you, nume.”

“you're welcome, unae. ... grew up in the junim, eh? that's a hard life, especially in a jenju. all that wandering around. ... i heard you call ara’dai *ninu.* this must be the first time you've ever been home.”

“literally.”

“so. is your training over?”

“no. i'm still just nao. naoma, actually.”

“oh. you do gymnastics then. i guess that explains the tights...”

“i do dueling.”

“i thought that was naio?”

“i would have been. i was studying naio. i was out of my path, but i had the aptitude to challenge. a qunaio told me i'm probably the best the school has ever seen. aet’idiamas refused me the examination and instead advanced me to naomna! please, please don’t tell any one that though!”

“isn't that part of the requirement to complete nao?”

“yes. ...”

“ ‘the devotion of body touches every action, and every reaction.”

“ ‘it deals with interaction and intercourse.”

“ ‘it trains the senses and the attention.”

“ ‘it opens us to truths of our sensuality.”

“ ‘it openly confronts our sexuality.”

“ ‘sex is as much a part of my devotion as it is a part of my body.’”

“ ... but it is not the purpose of my devotion. i never cared for that presumption.”

“it's not all presumption. imagine if boys weren't taken in hand by mnai and trained? we'd be stuck having to please ourselves to get any joy out of it.”

“yeah? do you know that less than one in a score of female mnai ever progress to nai? the responsabilities of mnai being what they are, just guess how they end their study of nao? pregnant. so what does the mnai get for her efforts then?”

“if she's smart, she gets the pick of the lot, neh?”

“no good, he's off limits. the only chance a woman has of legal equality with a man is to complete nai. by making mnai a prerequisite of nai, they are keeping us barred from autonomy and authority. ...”

“well, you know, it has to do with what you want. mnai has the best chance of getting and keeping a man, as long as she is first. if you hadn’t missed your chance i think you would be less bitter about this part of your path. you can keep from getting pregnant if you are careful. even i know that much. ... so. you already know the finest man born?”

“top of the running so far. ...”

“you plan to miss the next one? neh?”

“i guess i could stand it if i thought i might meet his equal. someone closer to my age, perhaps.”

“well, you may be able to pass yourself off as a boy, but at least you think like a healthy girl.”

“thanks, i think.

“what’s wrong with her?”

“she’s in heat.”