

OBSIDIAN AND BLOOD

ALIETTE DE BODARD



SERVANT OF THE UNDERWORLD

*"An Aztec priest of the dead tries to solve a murder mystery,
and finds that politics may be even more powerful than magic...
a truly fresh fantasy novel."*

Kevin J. Anderson, *New York Times* bestselling
co-author of *THE WINDS OF DUNE*



**Haunted serial
killers.
Teenage riots.
Zombie detectives.
The evil dead.**

**The Robot Army
is on the rise.**

angryrobotbooks.com

SERVANT OF THE UNDERWORLD

“An Aztec priest of the dead tries to solve a murder mystery, and finds that politics may be even more powerful than magic. A vivid portrayal of an interesting culture in a truly fresh fantasy novel.”

– *Kevin J Anderson*

“Amid the mud and maize of the Mexica empire, Aliette de Bodard has composed a riveting story of murder, magic, and sibling rivalry.”

– *Elizabeth Bear*

“An amazingly fresh and engaging new voice in fantasy: the shadows of the Aztec underworld drip from these pages.”

– *Tobias Buckell*

“A gripping mystery steeped in blood and ancient Aztec magic. I was enthralled.”

– *Sean Williams*

an excerpt from
SERVANT OF THE UNDERWORLD
(Obsidian & Blood vol.I)
Alette de Bodard

To be published January 2010 (UK/Australia)
and September 2010 (North America) by
Angry Robot, in mass-market paperback,
eBook and downloadable
audio formats.

ISBN: 978 0 00 734654 7

Angry Robot is a division of
HarperCollins*Publishers*
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,
London W6 8JB UK
angryrobotbooks.com

Copyright © Alette de Bodard 2010

All rights reserved. However, feel free to
share this sample chapter with anyone
you wish. And if you like this, go and
buy Alette's book. And if you really like
that, tell your friends...

ONE
Odd Summonings

In the silence of the shrine, I bowed to the corpse on the altar: a minor member of the Imperial Family, who had died in a boating accident on Lake Texcoco. My priests had bandaged the gaping wound on his forehead and smoothed the wrinkled skin as best as they could; they had dressed him with scraps of many-coloured cotton and threaded a jade bead through his lips – preparing him for the long journey ahead. As High Priest for the Dead, it was now my responsibility to ease his passage into Mictlan, the underworld.

I slashed my earlobes and drew thorns through the wounds, collecting the dripping blood in a bowl, and started a litany for the Dead:

*“The river flows northward
The mountains crush, the mountains bind...”*

Grey light suffused the shrine, the pillars and the walls fading away to reveal a much larger place, a cavern where everything found its end. The adobe floor glimmered as if underwater. And shadows trailed, darkening the painted frescoes on the walls – singing

a wordless lament, a song that twisted in my guts like a knife-stab. The underworld.

“Obsidian shards are driven into your hands, into your feet,

Obsidian to tear, to rend

You must endure th—”

The copper bells sewn on the entrance-curtain tinkled as someone drew it aside, and hurried footsteps echoed under the roof of the shrine. “Acatl-tzin!” Ichtaca called.

Startled, I stopped chanting – and instinctively reached up, to quench the flow of blood from my earlobes before the atmosphere of Mictlan could overwhelm the shrine. With the disappearance of the living blood, the spell was broken, and the world sprang into sudden, painful focus.

I turned, then, not hiding my anger. A broken spell would have left a link to Mictlan – a miasma that would only grow thicker as time passed, darkening the shrine, the pyramid it sat upon, and the entire temple complex until the place became unusable. “I hope you have a good reason—”

Ichtaca, the Fire Priest of the temple and my second-in-command, stood on the threshold – his fingers clenched on the conch-shell around his neck. “I apologise for interrupting you, Acatl-tzin, but he was most insistent.”

“He?”

The curtain twisted aside, and someone walked into the shrine: Yaotl. My heart sank. Yaotl never came for good news.

"I apologise," Yaotl said, with a curt nod of his head towards the altar, though clearly he meant none of it. Yaotl answered only to his mistress, Ceyaxochitl; and she in turn, as Guardian of the Sacred Precinct and keeper of the invisible boundaries, answered only to Revered Speaker Ayaxacatl, the ruler of the Mexica Empire. "But we need you."

Again? Even though I was High Priest for the Dead, it seemed that Ceyaxochitl still considered me little better than a slave, to be summoned whenever she wanted. "What is it this time?"

Yaotl's scarred face twisted in what might have been a smile. "It's bad."

"Hmm," I said. I should have known better than to ask him about the nature of the emergency. Yaotl enjoyed keeping me in ignorance, probably as a way to compensate for his station as a slave. I snatched up my grey cotton cloak from the stone floor and wrapped it around my shoulders. "I'm coming. Ichtaca, can you take over for me?"

Yaotl waited for me outside the shrine, on the platform of the pyramid temple, his embroidered cloak fluttering in the breeze. We descended the stairs of the pyramid side by side, in silence. Beneath us, moonlight shone on the temple complex, a series of squat adobe buildings stretching around a courtyard. Even at this hour, priests for the Dead were awake, saying vigils, conducting examinations of the recently dead, and propitiating the rulers of the underworld: Mictlantecuhtli and his wife, Mictecacihuatl, Lord and Lady Death.

Further on was the vast expanse of the Sacred

Precinct: the mass of temples, shrines and penitential palaces that formed the religious heart of the Mexica Empire. And, still further, the houses and fields and canals of the island-city of Tenochtitlan, thousands of small lights burning away under the stars and moon.

We walked from the bottom of the steps to the gates of my temple, and then onto the plaza of the Sacred Precinct. At this hour of the night, it was blessedly free of the crowds that congregated in the day, of all the souls eager to earn the favours of the gods. Only a few offering priests were still abroad, singing hymns; and a few, younger novice priests, completing their nightly run around the Precinct's Serpent Wall. The air was warm and heavy, a presage of the rains and of the maize harvest to come.

To my surprise, Yaotl did not lead me to the Imperial Palace. I'd expected this mysterious summons to be about noblemen. The last time Ceyaxochitl had asked for me in the middle of the night, it had been for a party of drunk administrators who had managed to summon a beast of the shadows from Mictlan. We'd spent a night tracking down the monster before killing it with obsidian knives.

Yaotl walked purposefully on the empty plaza, past the main temple complexes and the houses of elite warriors. I had thought that we were going to the temple of Toci, Grandmother Earth, but Yaotl bypassed it completely, and led me to a building in its shadow: something neither as tall nor as grand as the pyramid shrines, a subdued, sprawling affair of rooms opening on linked courtyards, adorned with frescoes of gods and goddesses.

The girls' *calmecac*: the House of Tears, a school where the children of the wealthy, as well as those vowed to the priesthood, would receive their education. I had never been there; the clergy of Mictlantecuhtli was exclusively male, and I had trouble enough with our own students. I couldn't imagine, though, what kind of magical offences untrained girls would commit.

"Are you sure?" I asked Yaotl but, characteristically, he walked into the building without answering me.

I suppressed a sigh and followed him, bowing slightly to the priestess in feather regalia who kept vigil at the entrance.

Inside, all was quiet, but it was the heavy calm before the rains. As I crossed courtyard after courtyard, I met the disapproving glances of senior offering priestesses, and the curious gazes of young girls who stood on the threshold of their ground-floor dormitories.

Yaotl led me to a courtyard near the centre of the building. Two rooms with pillared entrances opened on this. He went towards the leftmost one and, pulling aside the curtain, motioned me into a wide room.

It seemed an ordinary place, a room like any other in the city: an entrance curtain set with bells, gently tinkling in the evening breeze, walls adorned with frescoes of gods – and, in the centre, a simple reed sleeping mat framed by two wooden chests. Copal incense burnt in a clay brazier, bathing the room in a soft, fragrant light that stung my eyes. And everything, from the chests to the mat, reeked of magic: a pungent, acrid smell that clung to the walls and to the beaten-earth floor like a miasma.

That wasn't natural. Even in the *calmecac*, there

were strictures on the use of the living blood, restrictions on the casting of spells. Furthermore this looked like the private room of a priestess, not a teaching room for adolescent girls.

“What happened—” I started, turning to Yaotl.

But he was already halfway through the door. “Stay here. I’ll tell Mistress Ceyaxochitl you’ve arrived, Acatl-tzin.” In his mouth, even the tzin honorific sounded doubtful.

“Wait!” I said, but all that answered me was the sound of bells from the open door. I stood alone in that room, with no idea of why I was there at all.

Tlaloc’s lightning strike Yaotl.

I looked again at the room, wondering what I could guess of the circumstances that had brought me here. It looked like a typical priestess’s room: few adornments, the same rough sleeping mat and crude wicker chests found in any peasant’s house. Only the frescoes bore witness to the wealth of the calmecac school, their colours vibrant in the soft light, every feature of the gods sharply delineated. The paintings represented Xochipilli, God of Youth and Games, and His Consort, Xochiquetzal, Goddess of Lust and Childbirth. They danced in a wide garden, in the midst of flowers. The Flower Prince held a rattle, His Consort a necklace of poinsettias as red as a sacrifice’s blood.

Dark stains marred the faces of both gods. No, not only the faces, every part of Their apparel from Their feathered headdresses to Their clawed hands. Carefully, I scraped off one of the stains and rubbed it between my fingers. Blood.

Dried blood. I stared at the floor again – at what I had taken for dark earth in the dim light of the brazier.

The stain was huge – spreading over the whole room, soaking the earth so thoroughly it had changed its colour. I'd attended enough sacrifices and examinations to know the amount of blood in the human body, and I suspected that the stain represented more than half of that. What in the Fifth World had happened here?

I stood in the centre of the room and closed my eyes. Carefully, I extended my priest-senses and probed at the magic, trying to see its nature. Underworld magic, yet... no, not quite. It was human, and it had been summoned in anger, in rage, an emotion that still hung in the room like a pall. But it didn't have the sickly, spread-out feeling of most underworld magic. Not a beast of shadows, then.

Nahual. It had to be nahual magic: a protective jaguar spirit summoned in the room. Judging by the amount of blood in the vicinity, it had done much damage. Who, or what, had been wounded here?

I had been remiss in not taking any supplies before leaving my temple – trusting Yaotl to provide what I needed, which was always a mistake with the wily slave. I had no animal sacrifices, nothing to practise the magic of living blood.

No, not quite. I did have one source of living blood: my own body. With only my blood, I might not be able to perform a powerful spell; but there *was* a way to know whether someone had died in this room. Death opened a gate into Mictlan, the underworld, and the memory of that gate would still be in the room. Accessing it wouldn't be a pleasant experience, but Huitzilpochtli, the Southern Hummingbird, blind me if I let Ceyaxochitl manipulate me once more.

I withdrew one of the obsidian blades that I always carried in my belt, and nicked my right earlobe with it. I'd done it so often that I barely flinched at the pain that spread upwards, through my ear. Blood dripped, slowly, steadily, onto the blade – each drop, pulsing on the rhythm of my heartbeat, sending a small shock through the hilt when it connected with the obsidian.

I brought the tip of the knife in contact with my own hand, and carefully drew the shape of a human skull. As I did so, I sang a litany to my patron Mictlantecuhtli, God of the Dead:

*“Like the feathers of a precious bird
That precious bird with the emerald tail
We all come to an end
Like a flower
We dry up, we wither...”*

A cold wind blew across the room, lifting the entrance-curtain – the tinkle of the bells was muffled, as if coming from far away, and the walls of the room slowly receded, revealing only darkness – but odd, misshapen shadows slid in and out of my field of vision, waiting for their chance to leap, to tear, to feast on my beating heart.

*“We reach the land of the fleshless
Where jade turns to dust
Where feathers crumble into ash
Where our flowers, our songs are forever extinguished
Where all the tears rain down...”*

A crack shimmered into existence, in the centre of

the chamber: the entrance to a deep cavern, a *cenote*, at the bottom of which dark, brackish water shimmered in cold moonlight. Dry, wizened silhouettes splashed through the lake – the souls of the Dead, growing smaller and smaller the farther they went, like children’s discarded toys. They sang as they walked: cold whispers, threads of sound which curled around me, clinging to my naked skin like snakes. I could barely make out the words, but surely, if I stayed longer...

If I bent over the cenote until I could see the bottom of the water...

If I...

No. I wasn’t that kind of fool.

With the ease of practise, I passed the flat of the knife across the palm of my other hand – focusing on nothing but the movement of the blade until the image of the skull was completely erased.

When I raised my eyes again, the crack had closed. The walls were back, with the vivid, reassuring colours of the frescoes; and the song of the Dead had faded into the whistle of the wind through the trees of the courtyard outside.

I stood, for a while, breathing hard – it never got any easier to deal with the underworld, no matter how used to it you became. Still...

I had seen the bottom of the cenote, and the Dead making their slow way to the throne of Lord Death. I had not, however, made out the words of their song. The gate to Mictlan had been widening, but not yet completely open. That meant someone in this room had been gravely wounded, but they were still alive.

No, that was too hasty. Whoever had been wounded

in this room hadn't died within – yet I didn't think they'd have survived for long, unless they'd found a healer.

“Ah, Acatl,” Ceyaxochitl said, behind me. “That was fast.”

I turned much faster than I'd have liked. With the memory of Mictlan's touch on my skin, any noise from the human world sounded jarringly out of place.

Ceyaxochitl stood limned in the entrance, leaning on her wooden cane. She was wearing a headdress of blue feathers that spread like a fan over her forehead, and a dress embroidered with the fused-lovers insignia of the Duality. Her face was smooth, expressionless, as it always was.

I'd tensed, even though she had barely spoken to me, preparing for another verbal sparring. Ceyaxochitl had a habit of moving people like pawns in a game of *patolli*, deciding what she thought was in their best interests without preoccupying herself much with their opinions, and I seldom enjoyed being the target of her attentions.

“I don't particularly appreciate being summoned like this,” I started to say, but she shook her head, obviously amused.

“You were awake, Acatl. I know you.”

Yes, she knew me, all too well. After all, we had worked together for roughly nine years, the greater part of my adult life. She had been the one to campaign at the Imperial Court for my nomination as High Priest for the Dead, a position I neither wanted nor felt comfortable with – another of her interferences in my life. We'd made a kind of uneasy peace over the matter in the last few months, but right now she was going too far.

“All right,” I said. I brushed off the dried blood on

my fingers, and watched her hobble into the room. "Now that I'm here, can we dispense with the formalities? Who was wounded here, Ceyaxochitl?"

She paused for a moment, though she barely showed any surprises. "Hard at work, I see."

"I do what I can."

"Yes." She watched the frescoes with a distracted gaze. "What do *you* think happened here?"

I ran my fingers over the traces of the skull I'd drawn on the back of my hand, feeling Mictlan's touch cling to me like damp cloth. "A nahual spirit. An angry one."

"And?" she asked.

It was late, and someone was in mortal danger, and I was tired, and no longer of an age to play her games of who was master over whom. "Someone was wounded – at Mictlan's gates, but has not yet gone through. What do you want to hear?"

"The nahual magic," Ceyaxochitl said quietly. "I mainly wanted your confirmation on that."

"You have it." I wasn't in the mood to quarrel with her. In any case, she was my superior, both in years and in magical mastery. "Do I get an explanation?"

She sighed; but she still didn't look at me. Something was wrong: this was not her usual, harmless games, but something deeper and darker. "Ceyaxochitl..." I said, slowly.

"This is the room of Eleuia, offering priestess of Xochiquetzal," Ceyaxochitl said. Her gaze was fixed, unwaveringly, on the hollow eyes of the goddess in the frescoes. "Most likely candidate to become Consort of Xochipilli."

The highest rank for a priestess of the Quetzal

Flower. "And she was attacked?" What was Ceyaxochitl not telling me?

"Yes."

I stared at the blood on the frescoes – felt the anger roiling in the room. A nahual spirit would have had claws sharp enough to cut bone, and even a trained warrior would have had trouble defending himself against it.

"Did you find her?" I asked. "She needs a healer, at the last – if not a priest of Patecatl." There were healing spells – meagre, expensive things that the priests of the God of Medicine jealously hoarded. But a priestess such as Eleuia would surely have a right to them.

"I've had my warriors search every dormitory. We don't know where Priestess Eleuia is. No one has been able to find her, or to find her trail. She is the only one missing in the whole calmecac, though."

My heart sank. If it had been a beast of shadows... there were ways, and means, to track creatures of the underworld. But a nahual... There were too many of them in Tenochtitlan at any given time: any person born on a Jaguar day could summon their own nahual, though it would take years of dedicated practise to call up something material enough to carry off a human, or even to wound.

"I can attempt to track it," I said, finally, even though I knew it was a futile exercise. Nahual magic was weak to start with, and the coming of sunlight would annihilate it. We had perhaps four hours before dawn, but I doubted that would be enough.

Ceyaxochitl appeared absorbed in contemplation of the brazier: a studied pose, it suddenly occurred to me.

"But I still don't see—" I started, with a growing hol-

low in my stomach.

She turned, so abruptly I took a step backward. "I arrested your brother tonight, Acatl."

Her words shattered my thoughts, yanking my mind from worries about Eleuia and the nahual to something much closer to me – and much more unpleasant. She had... arrested my brother?

"Which one?" I asked, but I knew the answer, just as I knew why she'd asked about the nahual magic, and why she'd waited for my confirmation before telling me anything. Only one of my brothers had been born on a Jaguar day.

"Neutemoc? You can't arrest him," I said slowly, but Ceyaxochitl shook her head.

"He was in this room, covered in blood. And there was magic all over him."

"You're wrong," I said, because those were the only words that got past my lips. "My brother isn't–"

"Acatl." Her voice was gentle but firm. "When the priestesses arrived, he was searching the room, overturning the wicker chests and even the brazier. And I've never seen so much blood on someone, except perhaps the Revered Speaker after the Great Sacrifices. Your brother's hands were slick with it."

I finally dragged my voice from wherever it had fled. "My brother isn't a killer."

That made no sense, I thought, trying to close the hollow deepening in my stomach. Neutemoc was a successful warrior: a member of the elite Jaguar Knights, a son of peasants elevated into the nobility after his feats in the Tepeaca war. My parents had all but worshipped him, back when they had both been alive. He could do no wrong. He had always been the

precious, beloved child – whereas I, of course, was less than nothing, a humble priest who had never had the courage to seek wealth and honour on the battlefield. Of course he was a warrior. Of course he'd know how to kill.

But surely... surely he wouldn't do such a thing?

"I'm sure your brother can explain what he thought he was doing in her room. So far, he hasn't been helpful." Ceyaxochitl's voice was ice again. She disapproved of Neutemoc's arrogance, but I wasn't sure why. Knowing my brother, he'd have said the wrong things to her. The Duality knew it didn't take much to anger her these days.

I tried to think of something to say, but couldn't form any meaningful words.

Ceyaxochitl tapped her cane against the clay of the brazier, with a hollow sound. "You're the High Priest for the Dead, in charge of the Sacred Precinct. A case like this is your province, and mine."

Guardian, and priest: a Guardian to wield the magic of the Duality, and a priest that of the underworld. We'd done it before; many, many times, both here and in the smaller town of Coyoacan. But this was different. I couldn't...

Not Neutemoc. Duality, no. We'd parted ways four years ago, and the last thing I wanted was to see him again. I had left him alone in his grand house with his success, freeing him of the burden of my presence. His acts, in any case, had made it painfully clear that he might not completely share my parents' disapproval of me; but that he would do nothing to change it, that he would not even speak up in my defence when Mother was screaming at me from her death-bed. The

hollow in my stomach wouldn't close.

I should walk away. That was the sensible option. Leave him to face the magistrates on his own, as he no doubt wished. But if I did this – if I ran away from him, at this moment – then I would be no better than him. I would prove, once and for all, that Father and Mother had been right: that I was a coward, unworthy of the battlefield.

The Storm Lord's lightning sear him! What had he been thinking of?

"You want us to take the investigation," I said to Ceyaxochitl.

She said nothing for a while. "No," she said. "Not quite. I didn't call you here at night for my own amusement, despite what you might think of me."

"You don't know what I think of you," I protested, which was not quite true. I was wary of whatever she offered, with good reason.

Ceyaxochitl turned, slightly. Her face in the brazier's wavering light was a statue's: majestic, expressionless. "I could have dealt with this on my own. After all, guilt has already been established—"

"It hasn't," I protested – a reflex that surprised me by its vehemence.

"It has," Ceyaxochitl said. She banged her cane on the floor; its deep sound punctuated each of her words. "Listen to the end, young man. As I said: I have no need for you. Strictly speaking, nahual magic isn't your province, and it dissipates in daylight anyway. There has been no encroaching of the boundaries."

"No," I finally admitted. Aside from saying the death-rites, I maintained the boundaries: the fragile balance between the underworld and the world of the

Fifth Sun. I dealt with the minor gods of Mictlan: the Wind of Knives, the Owl Archer, the Faded Warrior. "But—"

Ceyaxochitl banged her cane a scant hand-span from my exposed foot. I flinched. "Be silent. I summoned you to do you a favour."

As you did by pushing my name for promotion at the Imperial Court? I thought, but bit my lip before the words could escape me.

Ceyaxochitl saw me, all the same, and smiled grimly. "You might not think it's much of a favour. But the fact is, Acatl, I have no time to investigate this as it should be investigated. Either I end it swiftly by condemning your brother on scant evidence, or I leave it to you."

"No time?" No time for my own brother – after all I'd done for her? No time to find a priestess who might be, if not dead, in mortal danger? "What's so important?"

Ceyaxochitl grimaced. "Revered Speaker Axayacatl-tzin is ill. All the healers are by his bedside day and night. As Guardian, my place is with them."

That the Emperor was ill wasn't news. But, still, I had to ask. "Do you think it's—"

"Magical?" She shook her head. "No. But he's a man, Acatl. He may be Huitzilpochtli's agent on earth, but even a god's powers don't guard you against wounds, or fatigue."

"And so that takes precedence," I said. Again, not a surprise. The Imperial Family always took precedence over us: a bitter, but necessary thought.

"It has to," Ceyaxochitl said. "The fight for his succession has already started among the Council."

The Imperial succession wasn't my concern. Whoever was elected Revered Speaker would still want the dead to be honoured, and the balance to be maintained between the Fifth World, the underworld Mictlan, and the Heavens. Neutemoc was the one I needed to focus on. "So what you're telling me..."

"Is that you can investigate this matter, but, as I said, you'll be on your own. I'll offer resources, but I can't do more than that, or I risk my own position." She didn't sound thrilled by that consideration. But then she had always been independent, like me.

"You know I can't refuse," I said.

Her gaze was sceptical. She knew exactly the state of my relationship with my family, and the grievances between Neutemoc and me. I owed nothing to my brother – nothing at all. I could just walk away...

There was a tight knot in my belly; a constriction in my throat, as if I would vomit. I couldn't let Neutemoc be executed. I couldn't stand by and do nothing.

"Very well," I said. I crouched on my haunches in the middle of the room, trying to forget the nausea in my stomach. "I assume you've sent search parties out into the Sacred Precinct."

"Yes," Ceyaxochitl said. "With jade amulets."

I shook my head. "Jade won't be of use against a nahual." But it couldn't hurt, either. "What can you tell me about Priestess Eleuia?"

Ceyaxochitl's cane tapped against the frescoed walls. "An ambitious woman," she said. "Still beautiful, considering that she was five years older than you."

Thirty-five. For a woman, definitely past her prime. "And?"

"All this is hearsay, of course," Ceyaxochitl said.

“Gathered from those few students bold enough to talk to me. But the head of the calmecac, Priestess Zollin, wasn’t overjoyed about Eleuia being foretold as the next Consort of the Flower Prince, Xochipilli. Zollin had ambitions of her own.”

“Was she born on a Jaguar day?” I asked.

Ceyaxochitl shrugged. “That can be verified. She could have hired someone to do the summoning, though.”

I shook my head, still feeling the roiling anger in the room. “Too much rage in here. Whoever did this had personal stakes.”

Ceyaxochitl bent to lift the reed mat from the ground with her cane. “I’ll defer to your expertise in such matters. What else? You’ll want to know about the people present in this section of the calmecac. Surprisingly few, considering how spread-out the place is.”

“You can’t account for them all,” I said.

“You’d be surprised,” Ceyaxochitl said, “at how many priestesses are awake at night.”

Of course. They would be going through their devotions, just like the priests in the other temples: blowing their shell-conches at regular hours, burning copal to honour their goddesses, and kneeling on the cold stones to pray for the welfare of the Fifth World. “So who was here?”

“In the vicinity of this room,” Ceyaxochitl corrected. “A handful of students. Another Jaguar Knight, Mahuizoh. And, of course, Zollin, whose rooms are just next to Eleuia’s.”

“A Jaguar Knight?” Men in the girls’ calmecac weren’t rare or forbidden, but they usually left by sun-

set.

“Visiting his sister,” Ceyaxochitl said. “The girl says he didn’t leave her side.”

“She would.”

Ceyaxochitl nodded. “Of course. Blood stands by blood.” Probably another jab at me.

Or perhaps I was being too sensitive about the whole matter. The idea of Neutemoc arrested and tried had rubbed me raw, and I wasn’t really fit to judge Ceyaxochitl’s actions.

“What was Neutemoc’s reason for being here?” I asked.

Ceyaxochitl shrugged. “He won’t tell us.”

I turned, took a good look at the room. “I guess you’ve already searched it?”

Ceyaxochitl didn’t move. “Yaotl did. But if you want to see for yourself...”

I nodded. Yaotl had no magical sight. It was possible he might have missed something, though unlikely.

It was a brief search. Like all priestesses, Eleuia had been living in near-poverty. In the wicker chests I found a few personal belongings, and an unfolding codex on maguey paper, which opened with a rustling sound, to reveal the history of the Fifth World – from the primal fire from which Tonatiuh the Sun God had emerged, to the very end: the Celestial Women and monsters that would consume us before the earthquakes tore the land apart.

Aside from that... a few tokens, safely hidden under a pile of embroidered cotton skirts: an exquisite chalcedony pendant set in silver, in the shape of a dancer entwined with a warrior; and the same kind of pendant, this time in coral, with the dancer alone.

Presumably, a third pendant with another type of inset stone, depicting the warrior alone, would complete the set. It was a fairly safe guess, though, that Eleuia had it around her neck.

I walked out of the room with Ceyaxochitl in tow, wondering how to proceed.

Outside, the night was dark, with only a few stars winking in the sky. Like all the rooms in the calmecac, Eleuia's quarters opened onto a courtyard with a small garden – in this case, a pine-tree. There was faint magic in the courtyard: traces of a nahual, though without living blood I couldn't place it more precisely.

"Satisfied?" Ceyaxochitl asked.

I took a quick look at the layout of the place. Only two sets of rooms opened on this particular courtyard: two wide entrances flanked by painted pillars, their curtains painted with the same dayflower design. The first were Eleuia's, which I had just searched; I guessed that the others had to be those of her rival, Zollin.

I would have to talk with Zollin, to see what she'd really thought of Eleuia, and whether she'd summoned the nahual. I would also have to talk to Neutemoc – and the Southern Hummingbird knew I wasn't looking forward to that.

But the most urgent thing was tracking the nahual. Which meant I needed to cast a spell; and unlike Ceyaxochitl, who was the agent of the Duality and had been entrusted with some of Their powers, I could only rely on my personal magic. Other than magical obsidian, our patron Mictlantecuhtli, God of the Dead, did not give His powers into human hands. Without the gods' help, I could only work magic with living

blood.

For this, my own blood would not suffice: I needed much more than I could spare.

“Do the priestesses have supplies here?” I asked.

“For using the living blood?” Ceyaxochitl rose, as regally as an Imperial Consort. “That depends what you want. They’re mostly small animals: birds, rabbits...”

I shook my head. For what I had in mind, I needed an animal connected with Mixcoatl, the Cloud Serpent, God of the Hunt. “I’ll return to my temple.”

