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Koa stepped closer and stopped short. Even as a veteran of the Special Forces in Somalia and a witness to more than a few murder scenes, he struggled to suppress his nausea. *Control. Stay in control. Block emotion. Concentrate.* He clenched his teeth until they hurt. His nausea receded.

In the dozen years since 2003, when he'd left the army

to join the police, Koa had heard about ritual killings, but had never actually seen one. Until now. The naked body lay with its legs toward him, feet slightly separated. The trunk was bloated from putrefaction. The skin had blackened. The genitals had shrunk into the body, but the deceased was unmistakably male. The sight, the smell, and the walls squeezed in upon Koa.

The victim's arms had been drawn out to the sides. The upper arms were swollen, but below the elbows the flesh had shriveled. Bones protruded from shredded hands and smashed fingers. Slash marks cut wide ribbons across the distended chest. The incisions must have been deep, he judged, for the swelling to open up the flesh in those straight, wide tracks. A sharp knife or, perhaps, a straight razor. Something with a real edge. It wasn't easy to slice human flesh. The killer had been strong. Koa looked around for a knife, but saw none.

The face had blackened to pulp, much of it bludgeoned beyond recognition. The lower facial bones had been shattered. Nose broken. Jaw smashed. Most of the teeth knocked out. The killer must have directed numerous blows at the victim's mouth. Dental identification would be difficult, maybe impossible.

An empty socket leered at Koa from the left side of the dead man's face. A gaping blackened hole surrounded by withered flesh. The hole on the left side of the skull seemed to fix upon him. Koa's own eye, his left eye, began to hurt. He shook his head to dislodge the false pain. Mutilated hands, battered faces—he'd seen those before, but desecration of an eye was something new. The killer must have gouged out the eyeball.

But why? Why pluck out the left eye? Some savage had derived great pleasure from acting out this rite. That was Koa's job, to stop people from acting like ancient savages.

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