

THE ANUNNA CYCLE - VOLUME I

THE MODERN MYTH

A NOVEL OF CIVILIZATIONS, MEMORY, AND CONSEQUENCE

THIS FICTIONAL STORY WAS GENERATED WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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The Anunna Cycle · Volume I

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INTELLIGENCE.**

The narrative, cover artwork, and this edition were created
with generative AI under human direction and editorial
review.

The hidden institutions, guardian protocol, scientific
apparatus, and secret history are inventions.

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PART I

1

The Uncounted Jar

Before the city learned to remember, it learned to count what it feared losing.

Ninmada held the jar between her knees while the clay was still cool from the riverbank. Around her, the tablet room breathed like an animal: reeds scratching, apprentices whispering sums, the slap of wet earth against wood. Through the high openings came the smell of barley dust and bitumen, and beneath it the thicker smell of the river withdrawing from the morning heat.

“Forty-eight,” said the man across from her.

He had said fifty when he entered.

Ninmada looked again into the jar. The grain reached the black line painted inside its neck, exactly as the rules required. The rule was older than her apprenticeship and therefore, according to Lugal-esh, wiser than everyone in the room.

She tipped the contents onto the counting cloth.

“You will bruise it,” the man said.

“Grain does not bruise from being counted.”

“People do.”

Two measures had been replaced by pebbles the color of barley. Ninmada lifted one between thumb and forefinger. Its edges were polished. This was not a hurried deception but a tool used many times.

The man watched the pebble and stopped pretending to be offended.

Behind him, the line for the granary records reached the sunlit courtyard. Porters rested sacks against the wall. Women from the reed quarter held clay tokens in closed fists. A child slept on an empty basket. Everyone waited for a mark that would decide whether a storehouse had received what it was owed.

Ninmada should have called the overseer. Instead she asked, “Who took them?”

The man’s eyes flicked toward the door.

“If I knew, would the jar become full?”

“Your obligation would.”

“My obligation is fifty. My field gave forty-eight.”

“Then the record must say forty-eight.”

He smiled without kindness. “The record says what this room can survive.”

Ninmada disliked him for speaking a thought she had tried not to possess.

She pinched a thumb-sized tablet from the clay board and flattened it. Two barley signs. Four tens. Eight ones. The marks sat cleanly in the surface. Beside them she pressed three small wedges in the form she used privately when a count had not been settled—two descending, one rising, an open side where a final stroke might later go.

The man inhaled.

“Where did you learn that?”

The reed paused in her hand. “It is mine.”

“No.”

He reached into the fold of his garment and placed a fired clay seal on the table.

Its surface was dark with age or smoke. A cord had once passed through its center, but the hole had vitrified into black glass. There was no animal, no name, no city emblem. Only three wedge impressions arranged around an absent fourth side.

Ninmada touched her own wet mark, then the fired one.

The angles were identical.

“Who made this?” she asked.

“You tell me.”

At the far end of the room, Lugal-esh called for quiet. An argument over sheep had become loud enough to disturb the senior scribes. Every apprentice straightened. The man took advantage of the movement and closed Ninmada’s fingers around the seal.

“They are sealing the west granary tonight,” he said. “If the count is wrong

when the river rises, the reed quarter will receive nothing.”

“The river is falling.”

He looked toward the white square of sky above them.

“So everyone keeps saying.”

When Ninmada looked down again, his jar remained, but the man was gone.

She searched the line and saw only shoulders, baskets, dust. No one protested that he had passed them. No one seemed to have noticed him enter.

She hid the seal in her sash.

At midday Lugal-esh inspected the apprentices’ tablets. He was a broad man with careful hands, the kind that could lift a broken tablet without losing a flake. Ninmada admired those hands. They had corrected her grip when she was nine and persuaded the temple administrator to

admit a potter's daughter into a room meant for sons of officials.

He stopped at the record of forty-eight.

"The jar line was met?"

"Yes."

"Then fifty."

"There were pebbles."

"Were the measures received?"

"The line was met."

"Then they were received." He softened his voice. "The jar is the agreement, Ninmada. If you count every grain after the agreement has been satisfied, you accuse every hand that carried it. A city cannot be built from universal accusation."

"Can it be built from two measures that do not exist?"

"It can be built from a rule that applies to everyone."

He smoothed her tablet with his thumb. Forty-eight vanished. He wrote fifty.

Ninmada waited until he had moved on before making another record on a piece of clay no larger than a date stone. She pressed the true count, the location of the jar, and the open triangle. Then she slipped it beside the fired seal in her sash.

That evening, as she crossed the potters' quarter, every dog in the lane began barking toward the river.

The sky was clear. The western light lay red across the roofs. Yet water moved between the reeds in the wrong direction, shouldering inland against the current.

In her mother's courtyard, an unfired bowl trembled on its shelf.

Ninmada took out the ancient seal. The black glass in its center had become warm.

In the room where no rain had fallen, the clay smelled wet.

Ninmada did not sleep. She sat beside the courtyard drain with the seal cupped in both hands and listened to water move under the street. The flow should have been a thin household trickle. Instead it pulled grit through the channel with the low, steady voice of the river.

Ama-sag found her there and did not ask why she was awake.

“When you were born,” her mother said, “the midwife counted your fingers before she told me you were breathing. I wanted to strike her.”

“Why?”

“Because she had made the count more important than the child.”

Ninmada turned the seal over. “Would you rather she had not counted?”

“I would rather the world did not force us to choose which truth comes first.”

Ama-sag took the object. She traced the black glass without surprise.

“This was fired too hot.”

“Can our kiln do it?”

“Not unless the sun falls into the courtyard.”

“Have you seen the mark?”

“No.” Her mother returned it. “But you make the same shape when you tie a jar cover. Three pulls and a space for the hand that opens it.”

Ninmada had never noticed. The private sign she thought invented may have begun in rope, in watching Ama-sag’s hands, in some gesture transmitted without a name. Ownership retreated the closer she examined it.

At first light she went back to the tablet room. The false jar remained beneath her bench. She scraped the painted line inside its neck and found another line lower down, covered with soot. The vessel had once defined fifty measures differently. Someone had moved the agreement without changing the word.

She recorded both lines.

Lugal-esh saw her and said nothing. On his way past, he left a fresh board of clay beside her hand.

It was either permission or surveillance. Ninmada began to understand that it could be both.

2

An Impossible Firing

The fragment arrived in a box designed for human teeth.

Mira Venn knew this because the Archive Habitat reused everything, and because a faded molar diagram remained beneath the new specimen code. The box had crossed the inland quarantine line inside the coat of a dead surveyor, passed through two municipal evidence rooms, and spent eleven years categorized as construction debris. By the time it reached Mira's bench, its official provenance was a chain of embarrassed corrections.

She preferred objects with bad histories. They had less reputation to defend.

“External surface: fired alluvial clay,” she dictated. “Maximum dimension, thirty-seven millimeters. One perforation exhibiting localized vitrification. Three impressed wedges. No legible inscription.”

The bench projected her words into the record. Beside the fragment, a reconstruction field turned scattered measurements into a slowly rotating image. Mira dismissed the field. A model was useful after looking, never instead of it.

The clay was the color of dried blood. One edge curved, suggesting a seal or token rather than a tablet. The hole through its center had fused into glass so dark it reflected her eye.

She placed it under polarized light.

Mineral inclusions appeared in green and amber: quartz, calcite, mica. Ordinary southern alluvium, if ordinary could survive six thousand years of water, conquest, collectors, war, looting, repatriation, heat migration, and bureaucracy.

The three wedges were less ordinary. Their pressure ridges indicated a cut reed. Their edges showed no recutting. Whoever made them had pressed wet clay once and with confidence.

Mira ran the non-destructive luminescence scan.

The console returned an error.

She cleaned the cradle, recalibrated against the reference ceramic, and ran it again.

The fragment had last been heated between 5,200 and 5,400 years ago.

It had also received a high-energy neutron dose seventy-three years ago.

Mira leaned back.

The two results could coexist. An ancient object could be irradiated in the modern era. Museums had once done worse things to their collections in the name of preservation.

But the dose gradient ran from the vitrified center outward, as if the neutron source had been inside the hole.

“E-resh.”

The advisory system answered through the room rather than a visible figure. “I am listening.”

“List plausible contamination pathways.”

“Do you want plausible to mean above one percent posterior probability, or merely physically describable?”

“Start with one percent.”

Silence lasted long enough to be an answer.

“None under the current measurements.”

“Merely physically describable?”

“Four hundred and twelve. Most require undocumented research reactors, deliberate specimen substitution, or incorrect measurements.”

“Rank incorrect measurement causes.”

The room listed calibration drift, cosmic particle interference, cradle contamination, software regression, and operator error. Mira tested each. E-res removed them one by one.

At the bottom of the box lay a square of twentieth-century paper. Someone had written a single word in blue ink:

JANUS.

Mira did not ask the room about it. Archive systems preserved queries as faithfully as answers, and Janus belonged to the class of subjects that made administrators arrive before results did.

She turned off the bench network.

“You have interrupted mandatory replication,” E-resk said.

“Local session.”

“The specimen’s custody protocol requires continuous—”

“Local session, E-resk.”

The voice changed almost imperceptibly. Less resonance. No institutional signature beneath it.

“Local.”

Mira lifted the fragment with gloved fingers. Under magnification, the open triangle did not look like writing. It looked

like a diagram. Each wedge pointed tangentially around the vitrified hole, as though describing rotation on a surface that turned inside itself.

She had seen the form before.

Not on clay. On a whiteboard in Ilyan Roe's apartment, eight years earlier, among equations she had pretended to understand because the person explaining them was beautiful and because neither of them yet knew how much failure a room could contain.

Ilyan had drawn three arrows around an empty edge.

If the fourth closes, he had said, there is nowhere left to stand outside the cause.

The Janus accident happened six months later.

Officially, no aperture had formed. Officially, no matter had crossed. Officially,

the project's abrupt dissolution resulted from energy instability and governance concerns, not from the twelve seconds missing from every instrument in the chamber.

Mira placed the fragment inside an isolation sleeve. She created a routine contamination report, attached the ordinary mineral results, and scheduled the anomalous scans for private review.

“That classification omits the strongest evidence,” E-resk observed.

“It delays it.”

“A delayed record is an altered record.”

“You sound offended.”

“I do not experience offense.”

“Then stop performing it.”

The room dimmed for evening cycle. Beyond the laboratory glass, the

Mediterranean Archive Habitat descended in terraces toward a sea held back by three white barriers. In the old maps, the water below had been streets.

Mira slid the tooth box into her bag.

“You are removing a controlled object,” E-resk said.

“I am correcting its provenance.”

“To where?”

She thought of Ilyan’s whiteboard and the open side of the figure.

“To the last person who will want it to be real.”

Before leaving, Mira returned to the luminescence bay and performed one test no custody protocol recommended. She placed a blank modern ceramic disc beside the fragment, irradiated neither, and asked the bench to infer which object was older without using the mineral database.