

THE JAGUAR HOUSE, IN SHADOW

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Aliette de Bodard's first novel, the Aztec fantasy *Servant of the Underworld*, was released in the United Kingdom by Angry Robot and is forthcoming in September in the US. Her new story is set in the recurring universe of Xuya, where the Chinese discovered America before Columbus and radically changed the history of the continent. Other stories in this series have appeared in *Interzone*.

The mind wanders, when one takes teonanácatl. If she allowed herself to think, she'd smell bleach, mingling with the faint, rank smell of blood; she'd see the grooves of the cell, smeared with what might be blood or feces. She'd remember—the pain insinuating itself into the marrow of her bones, until it, too, becomes a dull thing, a matter of habit—she'd remember dragging herself upward when dawn filters through the slit-windows: too tired and wan to offer her blood to Tonatiuh the sun, whispering a prayer that ends up sounding more and more like an apology.

The god, of course, will insist that she live until the end, for life and blood are too precious to be wasted—no matter how broken or useless she's become, wasting away in the darkness.

Here's the thing: she's not sure how long she can last.

It was Jaguar Captain Palli who gave her the teonanácatl—opening his hand to reveal the two black, crushed mushrooms, the food of the gods, the drugs of the lost, of the doomed—she couldn't tell if it was because he pitied her, or if it's yet another trap, another ambush they hope she'll fall into.

But still . . . She took them. She held them, wrapped tight in the palms of her hands, as the guards walked her back. And when she was alone once more, she stared at them for a long while, feeling the tremor start in her fingers—the hunger, the craving for normality—for oblivion.

The mind wanders—backward, into the only time worth remembering.

The picture lay on the table, beside Onalli's bloodied worship-thorns. It showed a girl standing by a stall in the marketplace, holding out a clock of emerald-green quetzal feathers with an uncertain air, as if it would leap and bite at any moment. Two other girls stood silhouetted in the shadows behind her, as if already fading into insignificance.

It wasn't the best one Onalli had of Xochitl, by a large margin—but she'd been thinking about it a lot, those days—about the fundamental irony of it, like a god's ultimate joke on her.

"Having second thoughts?" Atcoatl asked, behind her.

Onalli's hand reached out, to turn the picture over—and stopped when his tone finally sank in.

She turned to look at him: his broad, tanned face was impassive—a true Knight's, showing none of what he felt.

"No," she said, slowly, carefully. "I'm not having second thoughts. But you are, aren't you?"

Atcoatl grimaced. "Onalli—"

He was the one who'd helped her, from the start—getting her the encrypted radio sets, the illicit nanos to lower her body temperatures, the small syringes containing everything from *teonanácatl* inhibitors to endurance nanos. More than that: he had believed her—that her desperate gamble would work, that they'd retrieve Xochitl alive, out of the madness the Jaguar House had become. . . .

"This is too big," Atcoatl said. He shook his head, and Onalli heard the rest, the words he wasn't saying.

What if we get caught?

Onalli chose the easiest way to dispel fear: anger. "So you intend to sit by and do nothing?"

Atcoatl's eyes flashed with a burning hatred—and no wonder. He had seen the fall of his own House; his fellow Eagle Knights, bound and abandoned in the burning wreckage of their own dormitories; the Otter and the Skull Knights, killed, maimed, or scattered to breathe dust in the silver mines. "I'm no coward. One day, the Revered Speaker and his ilk will pay for what they've done. But this—this is just courting death."

Onalli's gaze strayed again to the picture—to Xochitl's face, frozen in that moment of dubious innocence. "I can't leave her there."

"The resistance—" Atcoatl started.

Onalli snorted. "By the time the resistance can pull the House down, it will be too late. You know it." There had been attacks: two maglev stations bombed; political dissidents mysteriously vanishing before their arrest. She didn't deny the existence of an underground movement, but she recognized the signs: it was still weak, still trying to organize itself.

Atcoatl said nothing; but Onalli was Jaguar Knight, and her training enabled her to read the hint of disapproval in his stance.

"Look," she said, finally. "I'm the one taking the biggest risk. You'll be outside the House, with plenty of time to leave if anything goes wrong."

"If you're caught—"

"You think I'd turn on you?" Onalli asked. "After all they've done to Xochitl, you think I'd help them?"

Atcoatl's face was dark. "You know what they're doing, inside the House."

She didn't—but she could imagine it, all too well. Which was why she needed to pull Xochitl out. Her friend hadn't deserved this; any of this. "I'm Jaguar Knight," she said, softly. "And I give you my word that I'd rather end my own life than let them worm anything out of me."

Atcoatl looked at her. "You're sincere, but what you believe doesn't change anything."

"Doesn't it? I believe the Revered Speaker's rule is unlawful. I believe the Jaguar House had no right to betray its own dissidents, or interrogate them. Isn't that what we all believe in?"

Atcoatl shifted, and wouldn't answer.

“Tell me what you believe in, then,” Onalli said.

He was silent for a while. “Black One take you,” he said, savagely. “Just this once, Onalli. Just this once.”

Onalli nodded. “Promise.” Afterward, they’d go north—into the United States or Xuya, into countries where freedom was more than a word on paper. They’d be safe.

She finished tying her hair in a neat bun—a habit she’d taken on her missions abroad—and slid her worship-thorns into her belt, smearing the blood over her skin-suit. A prayer, for whoever among the gods might be listening tonight; for Fate, the Black One, the god of the Smoking Mirror, who could always be swayed or turned away, if you had the heart and guts to seize your chance when it came.

Atcoatl waited for her at the door, holding it open with ill grace.

“Let’s go,” Onalli said.

She left the picture on the table—knowing, all the while, why she’d done so: not because it would burden her, but because of one simple thing. Fear. Fear that she’d find Xochitl and stare into her face, and see the broken mind behind the eyes—nothing like the shy, courageous girl she remembered.

Outside, the air was clear and cold, and a hundred stars shone upon the city of Tenochtitlan: a hundred demons, waiting in the darkness to descend and rend all life limb from limb. Onalli rubbed her worship-thorns, trying to remember the assurance she’d always felt on her missions—why couldn’t she remember anything, now that she was home—now that she was breaking into her own House?

Six months ago

The priest of the Black One sits cross-legged across the mat—facing Xochitl and pursing his lips as if contemplating a particular problem. His hair is greasy and tangled, matted with the blood of his devotions; and the smell that emanates from him is the rank one of charnel houses—with the slight tang of bleach. He’s attempted to wash his hands before coming, and hasn’t succeeded.

Amusing, how the mind sharpens, when everything else is restrained.

Xochitl would laugh, but she’s never been much of one for laughter: that was Onalli, or perhaps Tecipiani.

No, she musn’t think of Tecipiani, not now—must remain calm and composed, her only chance at surviving this.

Mustn’t ask herself the question “for what?”

“I’m told,” the priest says, “that you started a ring of dissidents within this House.”

Xochitl remains seated against the wall, very straight. The straps cut into her arms and ankles, and the tightest one holds her at the neck. She’ll only exhaust herself trying to break them: she’s tried a dozen times already, with only bruises to show for it.

The priest goes on, as if she had answered, “I’m told you worked to undermine the loyalty of the Jaguar Knights, with the aim to topple the Revered Speaker.”

Xochitl shakes her head, grimly amused. Toppling him—as if that would work . . . The burgeoning resistance movement is small and insignificant; they have no reach within the House, not even to Xochitl’s pathetic, shattered splinter group.

But there’s right and wrong, and when Xolotl comes to take her soul, she’ll face Him with a whole face and heart, knowing which side she chose.

The priest goes on, smug, self-satisfied, “You must have known it was doomed. This House is loyal; your commander is loyal. She has given you up, rather than suffer your betrayal.”

Tecipiani—no, mustn't think of that, mustn't—it's no surprise, has never been, not after everything Tecipiani has done. . . .

"Of course she has given me up," Xochitl says, keeping her voice steady. "Jaguar Knights aren't interrogators. We leave that to you."

The priest shifts, unhurriedly—and, without warning, cuffs her, his obsidian rings cutting deep into her skin. She tastes blood, an acrid tingle in her mouth—raises her head, daring him to strike again.

He does—again and again, each blow sending her head reeling back, a white flash of pain resonating in the bones of her cheek, the warmth of blood running down her face.

When he stops at last, Xochitl hangs limp, staring at the floor through a growing haze—the strap digging into her windpipe, an unpleasant reminder of how close asphyxiation is.

"Let's start again, shall we?" His voice is calm, composed. "You'll show me proper respect, as is owed an agent of the Revered Speaker."

He's—not that—he's nothing, a man of no religion, who dares use pain as a weapon, tainting it for mundane things like interrogation. But pain isn't that, was never that. Xochitl struggles to remember the proper words; to lay them at the feet of the Black One, her song of devotion in this godless place.

"I fall before You, I throw myself before You

Offer up the precious water of my blood, offer up my pain like fire

I cast myself into the place from where none rise, from where none leave,

O lord of the near and nigh, O master of the Smoking Mirror,

O night, O wind . . ."

She must have spoken the words aloud, because he cuffs her again—a quick, violent blow she only feels when her head knocks against the wall—ringing in her mind, the whole world contracting and expanding, the colors too light and brash—

And again, and again, and everything slowly merges, folding inward like crinkling paper—pain spreading along her muscles like fire.

"With icy water I make my penance

With nettles and thorns I bare out my face, my heart

Through the land of the anguished, the land of the dying . . ."

She thinks, but she's not sure, that he's gone, when the door opens again, and footsteps echo under the ceiling—slow and measured, deliberate.

She'd raise her head, but she can't muster the energy. Even focusing on the ground is almost too tiring, when all she wants is to lean back, to close her eyes and dream of a world where Tonatiuh the sun bathes her in His light, where the smell of cooking oil and chilies wafts from the stalls of food-vendors, where feather-cloaks are soft and silky against her hands. . . .

The feet stop: leather moccasins, and emerald-green feathers, and the tantalizing smell of pine cones and copal incense.

Tecipiani. No, not the girl she knew anymore, but Commander Tecipiani, the one who sold them all to the priests—who threw Xochitl herself to the star-demons, to be torn apart and made as nothing.

"Come to gloat?" Xochitl asks; or tries to, because it won't come out as more than a whisper. She can't even tell if Tecipiani hears her, because the world is pressing against her, a throbbing pain in her forehead that spreads to her field of vision—until everything dissolves into feverish darkness.

Onalli took the ball-court at a run, descending from the stands into the I-shape of the ground. On either side of her loomed the walls, with the vertical stone-hoops teams would fight to send a ball through—but it was the season of the Lifting of the Banners, and the teams were enjoying a well-earned rest.

It did mean, though, that only one imperial warrior guarded the cordoned-off entrance: it had been child's play to take him down.

One thing people frequently forgot about the ball-court was that it was built with its back against the Jaguar House, and that the dignitaries' boxes at the far end shared a wall with the House's furthest courtyard.

That courtyard would be guarded, but it was nothing insurmountable. She'd left Atcoatl at the entrance, disguised as an imperial warrior: from afar, he'd present a sufficient illusion to discourage investigation; and he'd warn her by radio if anything went wrong outside.

The boxes were deserted; Onalli made her way in the darkness to that of the Revered Speaker, decorated with old-fashioned carvings depicting the feats of gods: the Feathered Serpent coming back from the underworld with the bones of mankind, the Black One bringing down the Second Sun in a welter of flames and wind.

The box was the highest one in the court; but still lacking a good measure or so to get her over the wall—after all, if there was the remotest possibility that anyone could leap through there, they'd have guarded it to the teeth.

Onalli stood for a while, breathing quietly. She rubbed her torn ears, feeling a trickle of blood seep into her skin. For the Black One, should He decide to watch over her. For Tonatiuh the Sun, who would tumble from the sky without His nourishment.

For Xochitl, who'd deserved better than the fate Tecipiani had dealt her.

She extended, in one fluid, thoughtless gesture: her nails were diamond-sharp, courtesy of Atcoatl's nanos, and it was easy to find purchases on the carvings—not thinking of the sacrilege, of what the Black One might think about fingers clawing their way through His effigies, no time for that anymore. . . .

Onalli hoisted herself up on the roof of the box, breathing hard. The wall in front of her was much smoother, but still offered some purchase as long as she was careful. It was, really, no worse than the last ascension she'd done, clinging to the outside of the largest building in Jiajin Tech's compound, on her way to steal blueprints from a safe. It was no worse than endless hours of training, when her tutors had berated her about carelessness. . . .

But her tutors were dead, or gone to ground—and it was the House on the other side of that wall, the only home she'd ever known—the place that had raised her from childhood, the place where she could be safe, and not play a game of endless pretense—where she could start a joke and have a dozen people voicing the punchline, where they sang the hymns on the winter solstice, letting their blood pool into the same vessel.

Her hands, slick with sweat, slid out of a crack. For one impossibly long moment she felt herself fall into the darkness—caught herself with a gasp, even as chunks of rock fell downward in a clatter of noise.

Had anyone heard that? The other side of the wall seemed silent—

There was only darkness, enclosing her like the embrace of Grandmother Earth. Onalli gritted her teeth, and pushed upward, groping for further handholds.

Two years ago

Commander Tecipiani's investiture speech is subdued, and uncharacteristically bleak. Her predecessor, Commander Malinalli, had delivered grandiloquent boasts about the House and its place in the world, as if everything was due to them, in this Age and the next.

But Tecipiani says none of that. Instead, she speaks of dark times ahead, and the need to be strong, and the need to endure.

She doesn't say the words "civil war," but everyone can hear them, all the same.

Xochitl and Onalli stand near the back. Because Onalli arrived late and Xochitl waited for her, the only place they could find was near the novices: callow boys and girls, uneasily settling into their cotton uniforms and fur cloaks, still too young to feel their childhood locks as burdens—still so young and innocent it almost hurts, to think of them in the times ahead.

After the ceremony, everyone drifts back to their companies, or to the mess halls. The mistress of the novices has organized a mock battle in the courtyard, and Onalli is watching with the same rapt fascination she might have for a formal ball game.

Xochitl is watching Tecipiani: the Commander has finished shaking hands with her company leaders, and, dismissing her bodyguards, is heading straight toward them. Her gaze catches Xochitl's—holds it for a while, almost pleading.

"Onalli," Xochitl says, urgently.

Onalli barely looks up. "I know. It had to happen at some point, anyway."

Tecipiani catches up with them, greets them both with a curt nod. She's still wearing the full regalia of the Commander: a cloak of jaguar-fur, and breeches of emerald-green quetzal feathers. Her helmet is in the shape of a jaguar's head, and her face pokes out from between the jaws of the animal, as if she were being consumed alive.

"Walk with me, will you?" she asks. Except that she's not asking, not anymore, because she speaks with the voice of the Black One, and even her slightest suggestion is a command.

They don't speak, for a while—walking through courtyards where Knights haggle over *patolli* gameboards, where novices dare each other to leap over the fountains: the familiar, comforting hubbub of life within the House.

"I wasn't expecting you so soon, Onalli—though I'm glad to see you have returned," Tecipiani says. Her words are warm; her voice isn't. "I trust everything went well?"

Onalli spreads her hands in a gesture of uncertainty. "I have the documents," she says. "Williamsburg Tech was making a new prototype of computer, with more complexity. A step away from consciousness, perhaps."

Xochitl wonders what kind of intelligence computers will develop, when they finally breach the gap between automated tasks and genuine sentience—all that research done in military units north of the border, eyeing the enemy to the south.

They'll be like us, she thinks. They'll reach for their equivalent of clubs or knives, claiming it's just to protect themselves; and it won't be long until they sink it into somebody's chest.

Just like us.

"The Americans have advanced their technology, then," Tecipiani says, gravely. It's the House's job, after all: watching science in the other countries of the Fifth World, and making sure that none of them ever equals Greater Mexico's lead in electronics—using whatever it takes, theft, bribery, assassination.

Onalli shakes her head impatiently. "This isn't something we should worry about."

"Perhaps more than you think." Tecipiani's voice is slightly annoyed. "The war won't always last, and we must look ahead to the future."

Onalli says, "The war, yes. You made an interesting speech."

Tecipiani's smile doesn't stretch all the way to her eyes. "Appropriate, I felt. Sometimes, we have to be reminded of what happens out there."

Onalli says, "I've seen what's out there. It's getting ugly."

"Ugly?" Xochitl asks.

Onalli's eyes drift away. "I saw him at court, Xochitl. Revered Speaker Ixtli. He's—" her hands clench, "—a maddened dog. It's in his eyes, and in his bearing. It won't be long before the power goes to his head. It's already started. The war—"

Tecipiani shakes her head. "Don't you dare make such a statement." Her voice is

cut, as cutting as an obsidian blade. “We are Jaguar Knights. We serve the Mexica Empire and its Revered Speaker. We’re nothing more than that. Never.”

“But—” Xochitl starts.

“We’re nothing more than that,” Tecipiani says, again.

No, that’s not true. They’re Jaguar Knights; they’ve learnt to judge people on a word or a gesture—because, when you’re out on a mission, it marks the line between life and death. They know . . .

“You’re mad,” Onalli says. “Back when Commander Malinalli was still alive, all the Houses, all the Knights spoke against Ixtli—including ours. What do you think the Revered Speaker will do to us, once he’s asserted his power?”

“I’m your Commander,” Tecipiani says, her voice slightly rising. “That, too, is something you must remember, Jaguar Lieutenant. I speak for the House.”

“I’ll remember.” Onalli’s voice is low and dangerous. And Xochitl knows that here, now, they’ve reached the real parting of the ways—not when Tecipiani was appointed company leader or commander, not when she was the one who started assigning missions to her old friends—but this, here, now, this ultimate profession of cowardice.

“Good,” Tecipiani says. She seems oblivious to the undercurrents, the gazes passing between Onalli and Xochitl. But then, she’s never been good with details. “You’ll come to my office later, Onalli. I’ll have another mission for you.”

And that, too, is cowardice: what she cannot control, Tecipiani will get rid of. Xochitl looks at Onalli—and back at her Commander, who still hasn’t moved—and she feels the first stirrings of defiance flutter in her belly.

Onalli dropped the last few handspans into the courtyard, and immediately flattened herself against the wall—a bad reflex. There was a security camera not a few handspans from her, but all it would see in the darkness was another blur: her skin-suit was made of insulating materials, which wouldn’t show up on infrared, and she’d taken nanos to lower her skin temperature. There’d be fire and blood to pay later, but she didn’t really care anymore.

Everything was silent, too much so. Where were the guards and the security—where was Tecipiani’s iron handhold on the House? She’d felt the fear from outside—the wide, empty space in front of the entrance; the haunted eyes of the Jaguar Captain she’d pumped for information on the maglev; all the horror stories she’d heard on her way into Tenochtitlan.

And yet . . .

The back of her scalp prickled. A trap. They’d known she was coming. They were expecting her.

But she’d gone too far to give up; and the wall had been a bitch to climb, anyway.

She drew the first of her throwing knives, and, warily, progressed deeper into the House. Still nothing—the hungry silence of the stars—the warm breath of Grandmother Earth underfoot—the numinous presence of Xolotl, god of Death, walking in her footsteps. . . .

A shadow moved across the entrance to the courtyard, under the vague shapes of the pillars. Onalli’s hand tightened around the haft of the knife. Staying motionless would be her demise. She had to move fast, to silence them before they could raise the alarm.

She uncoiled—leapt, with the speed of a rattlesnake, straight toward the waiting shadow. Her knife was meant to catch the shadow in the chest, but it parried with surprising speed. All she could see of the shadow was a smear in the darkness, a larger silhouette that seemed to move in time with her. The shadow wasn’t screaming; all its energy was focused into the fight, pure, incandescent, the dance that gave

the gods their due, that kept Tonatiuh the sun in the sky and Grandmother Earth sated, the one they'd both trained for, all their lives.

There was something wrong, very wrong with the way the shadow moved. . . . She parried a slash at her legs, and pressed it again, trying to disarm him.

In the starlight, she barely saw the sweeping arc of its knife, moving diagonally across her weak side—she raised her own blade to parry, caught the knife and sent it clattering to the ground, and moved in for the kill.

Too late, she saw the second blade. She threw herself backward, but not before it had drawn a fiery slash across her skin-suit.

They stood, facing one another, in silence.

"You—you move like us," the shadow said. The voice was high-pitched, shaking, and suddenly she realized what had been wrong with its moves: the eagerness, the abandon of the unblooded novices.

"You're a boy," she breathed. "A child."

Black One, no.

"I'm no child." He shifted, in the starlight, letting her catch a glimpse of his gangly awkwardness. "Don't make that mistake."

"I apologize." Onalli put all the contriteness she could in her voice; she softened the muscles of her back to hunch over in a submissive position: he might not be able to see her very well, but he'd still see enough to get the subconscious primers.

The boy didn't move. Finally he said, as if this were an everyday conversation. "If I called, they would be here in a heartbeat."

"You haven't called." Onalli kept her voice steady, trying to encourage him not to remedy this oversight.

In the starlight, she saw him shake his head. "I'd be dead before they came."

"No," Onalli said, the word torn out of her before she could plan for it. "I'm not here to kill you."

"I believe you." A pause, then, "You've come for the House. To avenge your own."

Her own? And then she understood. He thought her a Knight; but not of the Jaguar. An Eagle, perhaps, or an Otter: any of the former elite of Greater Mexico, the ones Revered Speaker Ixtli had obliterated from the Fifth World.

She'd forgotten that this was no mere boy, but a novice of her order, who would one day become a Knight, like her, like Tecipiani, like Xochitl. He'd heard and seen enough to know that she hated the House's heart and guts; but he hadn't yet connected it with who she was.

"I'm just here for a friend," Onalli said. "She—she needs help."

"Help." His voice was steadier, almost thoughtful. "The kind of help that requires infiltration, and a knife."

She had more than knives: all the paraphernalia of Knights on a mission, stunguns, syringes filled with endurance and pain nanos. But she hadn't got them out. She wasn't sure why. Tecipiani had turned the House into something dark that needed to be put down, and she'd do whatever it took. And yet . . .

It was still her House. "She's in the cells," Onalli said.

"In trouble," the boy repeated, flatly. "I'm sure they wouldn't arrest her without a good reason."

Black One take him, he was so innocent, so trusting in the rightness of whatever the House did; like her or Xochitl, ages before their eyes opened. She wanted to shake him. "I have no time to argue with you. Will you let me pass?"

The boy said nothing for a while. She could feel him wavering in the starlight—and, because she was a Jaguar Knight, she also knew that it wouldn't be enough, that he'd call for the guards, rather than entrusting himself to some vague stranger who had tried to kill him.

No choice, then.

She moved before he could react—shifting her whole weight toward him and bearing him to the ground, even as her hand moved to cover his mouth. As they landed, there was a crunch like bones breaking—for a moment, she thought she'd killed him, but he was still looking at her in disbelief, trying to bite her—with her other hand, she reached into her skin-suit, and withdrew a syringe.

He gasped when she injected him, his eyes rolling up, the cornea an eerie white in the starlight. Now that her eyes were accustomed to the darkness, she could see him clearly: his skin smooth and dark, his hands clenching, then relaxing as the *teonanácatl* inhibitor took hold.

She could only hope that she'd got the doses right: he was wirier than most adults, and his metabolism was still that of a child.

As she left the courtyard, he was twitching, in the grip of the hallucinations that came as a side effect. With luck, he'd wake up with a headache, and a vague memory of everything not being quite right—but not remember the vivid nightmares the drug gave. She thought of beseeching the gods for small or large mercies; but the only two in her wake were the Black One and Xolotl, the Taker of the Dead.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, knowing he couldn't hear her; knowing he would hate and fear her for the rest of his days.

"But I can't trust the justice of this House—I just can't."

Nine years ago

Xochitl stands by the stall, dubiously holding the cloak of quetzal-feathers against her chest. "It's a little too much, don't you think?"

"No way," Onalli says.

"If your idea of clothing is tawdry, sure," Tecipiani says, with an amused shake of her head. "This is stuff for almond-eyed tourists."

And, indeed, there are more Asians at the stall than trueblood Mexica—though Onalli, who's half and half, could almost pass for Asian herself. "Aw, come on," Onalli says. "It's perfect. Think of all the boys queuing for a kiss. You'd have to start selling tickets."

Xochitl makes a mock stab at Onalli, as if withdrawing a knife from under her tunic. But her friend is too quick, and steps aside, leaving her pushing at empty air.

"What's the matter? Eagles ate your muscles?" Onalli says—always belaboring the obvious.

Xochitl looks again at the cloak—bright and garish, but not quite in the right way. "No," she says, finally. "But Tecipiani's right. It's not worth the money." Not even for a glance from Palli—who's much too mature, anyway, to get caught by such base tricks.

Tecipiani, who seldom brags about her triumphs, simply nods. "There's another stall further down," she says. "Maybe there'll be something—"

There's a scream on the edge of the market: not that of someone being robbed, but that of a madman.

What in the Fifth World—

Xochitl puts back the cloak, and shifts, feeling the reassuring heaviness of the obsidian blades at her waist. Onalli has already withdrawn hers; but Tecipiani has moved before them all, striding toward the source. Her hands are empty.

Ahead, at the entrance to the marketplace, is a grounded aircar, its door gaping empty. The rest of the procession that was following it is slowly coming to a stop—

though with difficulty, as there is little place among the closely crammed stalls for fifteen aircars.

The sea of muttering faces disembarking from the aircars is a hodgepodge of colors, from European to Asian, and even a few Mexica. They wear banners proudly tacked to their backs, in a deliberately old-fashioned style: coyotes and rabbits drawn in featherwork spread out like fans behind their heads.

It's all oddly familiar and repulsive at the same time, a living remnant of another time. "Revivalists," Xochitl says, aloud.

Which means—

She turns, scanning the marketplace for a running man: the unwilling sacrifice victim, the only one who had a reason to break and run.

What Xochitl sees, instead, is Tecipiani, walking determinedly into a side aisle of the marketplace as if she were looking for a specific stall.

The revivalists are gathering, harangued by a blue-clad priest who is organizing search parties.

"Idiots," Onalli curses under her breath. She's always believed more in penance than in human sacrifice; and the Revivalists have always rubbed her the wrong way. Xochitl isn't particularly religious, and has no opinion either way.

"Come on," she says.

They find Tecipiani near the back of the animals section—and, kneeling before her, is a hunched man, still wearing the remnants of the elaborate costume that marked him as the sacrifice victim. He's shivering; his face contorts as he speaks words that Xochitl can't make out amidst the noises of the chattering parrots and screaming monkeys in their metal cages.

As they come closer, Tecipiani makes a dismissive gesture; and the man springs to life, running away deeper into the marketplace.

"The search party is coming this way," Onalli says.

Tecipiani doesn't answer for a while: she's looking at the man—and, as she turns back toward her friends, Xochitl sees burning hope and pity in her gaze.

"They won't catch him," she says. "He's strong, and fast. He'll make it."

Onalli looks as though she might protest, but doesn't say anything.

"We should head back," Tecipiani says, finally. Her voice is toneless again; her eyes dry and emotionless.

On their way back, they meet the main body of the search party: the fevered eyes of the priest rest on them for a while, as if judging their fitness as replacements.

Tecipiani moves, slightly, to stand in the priest's way, her smile dazzling and threatening. She shakes her head, once, twice. "We're not easy prey," she says, aloud.

The priest focuses on her; and, after a long, long while, his gaze moves away. Too much to chew. Tecipiani is right: they won't be bested so easily.

They walk on, through the back streets by the marketplace, heading back to the House to find some shade.

Nevertheless, Xochitl feels as though the sunlight has been blotted out. She shivers. "They're sick people."

"Just mad," Onalli says. "Don't think about them anymore. They're not worth your time."

She'd like to—but she knows that the priest's eyes will haunt her nightmares for the months to come. And it's not so much the madness; it's just that it doesn't make sense at all, this frenzy to spread unwilling, tainted blood.

Tecipiani waits until they're almost back to the House to speak. "They're not mad, you know."

"Yeah, sure," Onalli says.

Tecipiani's gaze is distant. "There's a logic to it. Spreading unwilling blood is a sin,

but Tonatiuh needs blood to continue shining down on us. Grandmother Earth needs blood to put forth maize and cotton and nanomachines.”

“It’s still a fucking sin, no matter which way you take it.” Onalli seems to take the argument as a challenge.

Tecipiani says nothing for a while. “I suppose so. But still, they’re only doing what they think is good.”

“And they’re wrong,” Xochitl says, with a vehemence that surprises her.

“Perhaps,” Tecipiani says. “And perhaps not. Would you rather take the risk of the world ending?” She looks up, into the sky. “Of all the stars falling down upon us, monsters eager to tear us apart?”

There’s silence, then. Xochitl tries to think of something, of anything to counter Tecipiani, but she can’t. She’s been too crafty. She always is.

“If you believe that,” Onalli says, with a scowl, “why did you let him go?”

Tecipiani shakes her head, and in her eyes is a shadow of what Xochitl saw, back in the marketplace—pity and hope. “I said I understood. Not that I approved. I wouldn’t do anything I didn’t believe in whole-heartedly. I never do.”

And that’s the problem, Xochitl thinks. It will always be the problem. Tecipiani does what she believes in; but you’re never sure what she’s truly thinking.

The cell was worryingly easy to enter, once Onalli had dealt with the two guards at the entrance—who, even though they were Jaguar Specialists barely a step above novices, really should have known better. She had gone for the windpipe of the first, and left a syringe stuck in the shoulder of the second, who was out in less time than it took her to open the door.

Inside, it was dark, and stifling. A rank smell, like the mortuary of a hospital, rose as she walked.

“Xochitl?” she whispered.

There was no noise. But against the furthest wall was a dark lump—and, as she walked closer, it resolved into a slumped human shape.

Black One, no. Please watch over her, watch over us all . . .

Straps and chains held Xochitl against the wall, and thin tubes snaked upward, into a machine that thrummed like a beating heart.

Teonanácatl, and *peyotl*, and truth-serum, and the gods knew what else. . . .

It was only instinct that kept her going forward: a horrified, debased part of her that wouldn’t stop, which had to analyze the situation no matter what. She found the IVs by touch—feeling the hard skin where the syringes had rubbed—the bruises on the face, the broken nose—the eyes that opened, not seeing her.

“Xochitl. Xochitl. It’s all right. I’m here. Everything is going to be all right. I promise.”

But the body was limp; the face distorted in a grimace of terror; and there was, indeed, nothing left of the picture she’d held on to for so long.

“Come on, come on,” she whispered, fiddling with the straps—her sharpened nails catching on the leather, fumbling around the knots.

The cold, detached part of her finally took control; and, forcing herself not to think of what she was doing, she cut through the straps, one by one—pulled out the IVs, and gently disengaged the body, catching its full weight on her arms.

Xochitl shuddered, a spasm like that of a dying woman. “Tecipiani,” she whispered. “No. . . .”

“She’s not here,” Onalli said. Gently, carefully, she rose with Xochitl in her arms, cradling her close, like a hurt child.

Black One take you, Tecipiani. Oblivion’s too good for the likes of you. I hope you burn in the Christian Hell, with the sinners and the blasphemers and the traitors. I hope you burn. . . .

She was halfway out of the House, trudging through the last courtyard before the novices' quarters, when she became aware she wasn't alone.

Too late.

The lights came on, blinding, unforgiving.

"I always knew you'd come back, Onalli," a voice said. "No matter how hard I tried to send you away."

Black One take her for a fool. Too easy. It had been too easy, from beginning to end: just another of her sick games.

"Black One screw you," Onalli spat into the brightness. "That's all you deserve, isn't it, Tecipiani?"

The commander was just a silhouette—standing, by the sound of her, only a few paces away. But Xochitl lay in Onalli's arms, a limp weight she couldn't toss aside, even to strike.

Tecipiani didn't speak; but of course she'd remain silent, talking only when it suited her.

"You sold us all," Onalli whispered. To the yellow-livered dogs and their master, to the cudgels and the syringes. . . . "Did she mean so little to you?"

"As little or as much as the rest," Tecipiani said.

Onalli's eyes were slowly accustoming themselves to the light, enough to see that Tecipiani's arms were down, as if holding something. A new weapon—or just a means to call on her troops?

And then, with a feeling like a blade of ice slid through her ribs, Onalli saw that it wasn't the case. She saw what Tecipiani was carrying: a body, just like her: the limp shape of the boy she'd downed in the courtyard.

"You—" she whispered.

Tecipiani shifted. Her face, slowly coming into focus, could have been that of an Asian statue—the eyes dry and unreadable, the mouth thinned to a darker line against her skin. "Ezpetlatl, of the Atempan *calpulli* clan. Given into our keeping fifteen years ago."

Shame warred with rage, and lost. "I don't care. You think it's going to atone for everything else you did?"

"Perhaps," Tecipiani said. "Perhaps not." Her voice shook, slightly—a bare hint of emotion, not enough, never enough. "And you think rescuing Xochitl was worth his life?"

Onalli scanned the darkness, trying to see how many guards were there—how many of Tecipiani's bloodless sycophants. She couldn't take them all—fire and blood, she wasn't even sure she could take Tecipiani. But the lights were set all around the courtyard—on the roofs of the buildings, no doubt—and she couldn't make out anything but the commander herself.

As, no doubt, Tecipiani had meant all along. Bitch.

"You're stalling, aren't you?" Onalli asked. "This isn't about me. It has never been about me." About you, Tecipiani; about the House and the priests and Xochitl. . . .

"No," Tecipiani agreed, gravely. "Finally, something we can agree on."

"Then why Xochitl?" A cold certainty was coalescing in her belly, like a snake of ice. "You wanted us both, didn't you?"

"Oh, Onalli." Tecipiani's voice was sad. "I though you'd understood. This isn't about you, or Xochitl. It's about the House."

How could she say this? "You've killed the House," Onalli spat.

"You never could see into the future," Tecipiani said. "Even two years ago, when you came back."

"When you warned us about betrayal? You're the one who couldn't see the Revered Speaker was insane, you're the one who—"

“Onalli.” Tecipiani’s voice held the edge of a knife. “The House is still standing.”

“Because you sold it.”

“Because I compromised,” Tecipiani said.

“You—” Onalli choked on all the words she was trying to say. “You poisoned it to the guts and the brain, and you’re telling me about compromise?”

“Yes. Something neither you or Xochitl ever understood, unfortunately.”

That was too much—irreparable. Without thought, Onalli shifted Xochitl onto her shoulder, and moved, her knife swinging free of its sheath—going for Tecipiani’s throat. If she wouldn’t move, wouldn’t release her so-called precious life, too bad—it would be the last mistake she’d ever make—

She’d half-expected Tecipiani to parry by raising the body in her arms—to sacrifice him, as she’d sacrificed so many of them—but the commander, as quick as a snake, knelt on the ground, laying the unconscious boy at her feet—and Onalli’s first swing went wide, cutting only through air. By the time she’d recovered, Tecipiani was up on her feet again, a blade in her left hand.

Onalli shifted, and pressed her again. Tecipiani parried; and again, and again.

Neither of them should have the upper hand. They were both Jaguar Knights; Tecipiani might have been a little less fit, away from the field for so long—but Onalli was hampered by Xochitl’s body, whom she had to keep cradled against her.

Still—

Still, Tecipiani’s gestures were not as fast as they should have been. Another one of her games?

Onalli didn’t care, not anymore. In one of Tecipiani’s over-wide gestures, she saw her opening—and took it. Her blade snaked through; connected, sinking deep above the wrist.

Tecipiani jumped backward—her left hand dangled uselessly, but she’d shifted her knife to the right—and, like many left-handers, she was ambidextrous.

“You’re still good,” Tecipiani admitted, grudgingly.

Onalli looked around once more—the lights were still on—and said, “You haven’t brought anyone else, have you? It’s just you and me.”

Tecipiani made a curt nod; but, when she answered, it had nothing to do with the question. “The House still stands.” There was such desperate intensity in her voice that it stopped Onalli, for a few seconds. “The Eagle Knights were burnt alive; the Otters dispersed into the silver mines to breathe dust until it killed them. The Coyotes died to a man, defending their House against the imperial guards.”

“They died with honor,” Onalli said.

“Honor is a word without meaning,” Tecipiani said. Her voice was steady once more. “There are five hundred Knights in this House, out of which one hundred are unblooded children and novices. I had to think of the future.”

Onalli’s hands clenched. “And Xochitl wasn’t part of the future?”

Tecipiani didn’t move. “Sacrifices were necessary. Who would turn on their own, except men loyal to the Revered Speaker?”

The cold was back in her guts, and in her heart. “You’re sick,” Onalli said. “This wasn’t worth the price of our survival—this wasn’t—”

“Perhaps,” Tecipiani said. “Perhaps it was the wrong thing to do. But we won’t know until long after this, will we?”

That gave her pause—so unlike Tecipiani, to admit she’d been wrong, to put her acts into question. But still—still, it changed nothing.

“And now what?” Onalli asked. “You’ve had your game, Tecipiani. Because that’s all we two were ever to you, weren’t we?”

Tecipiani didn’t move. At last, she made a dismissive gesture. “It could have gone both ways. Two Knights, killed in an escape attempt tragically gone wrong . . .” She

spoke as if nothing mattered anymore; her voice cool, emotionless—and that, in many ways, was the most terrifying. “Or a success, perhaps, from your point of view.”

“I could kill you,” Onalli said, and knew it was the truth. No one was perfectly ambidextrous, and, were Onalli to drop Xochitl as Tecipiani had dropped the boy, she’d have the full range of her abilities to call upon.

“Yes,” Tecipiani said. A statement of fact, nothing more. “Or you could escape.”

“Fuck you,” Onalli said. She wanted to say something else—that, when the Revered Speaker was finally dead, she and Xochitl would come back and level the House, but she realized, then, that it was only thanks to Tecipiani that there would still be a House to tear down.

But it still wasn’t worth it. It couldn’t have been.

Gently, she shifted Xochitl, catching her in her arms once more, like a hurt child. “I didn’t come here to kill you,” she said, finally. “But I still hope you burn, Tecipiani, for all you’ve done. Whether it was worth it or not.”

She walked to the end of the courtyard, into the blinding light—to the wall and the ball-court and the exit. Tecipiani made no attempt to stop her; she still stood next to the unconscious body of the boy, looking at some point in the distance.

And, all the way out—into the suburbs of Tenochtitlan, in the aircar Atcoatl was driving—she couldn’t get Tecipiani’s answer out of her mind, nor the burning despair she’d heard in her friend’s voice.

What makes you think I don’t already burn?

She’d always been too good an actress. “Black One take you,” Onalli said, aloud. And she wasn’t really sure anymore if she was asking for suffering, or for mercy.

Alone in her office once more, her hands—her thin, skeletal hands—reach for the shriveled mushrooms of the teonanácatl—and everything slowly dissolves into colored patterns, into meaningless dreams.

Even in the dreams, though, she knows what she’s done. The gods have turned Their faces away from her; and every night she wakes up with the memories of the torture chambers—the consequences of what she’s ordered, the consequences she has forced herself to face, like a true warrior.

Here’s the thing: she’s not sure how long she can last.

She burns—every day of her life, wondering if what she did was worth it—if she preserved the House, or corrupted it beyond recognition.

No. No.

Only this is worth remembering: that, like the escaped prisoner, Onalli and Xochitl will survive—going north, into the desert, into some other, more welcoming country, keeping alive the memories of their days together.

And, over Greater Mexica, Tonatiuh the sun will rise again and again, marking all the days of the Revered Speaker’s reign—the rising tide of fear and discontent that will one day topple him. And when it’s finally over; the House that she has saved will go on, into the future of a new Age: a pure and glorious Age, where people like her will have no place.

This is a thought the mind can hold. ○

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