

OBSIDIAN HARVEST

Rick Cook & Ernest Hogan

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In the flamboyant, colourful, and hugely entertaining story that follows, audaciously mixing the mystery genre with the Alternate History tale, they join forces to take a hard-boiled Private Eye down some Mean Streets much meaner, much weirder, and much more profoundly dangerous, than any ever seen by Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade...

* * * *

I HAVE ALWAYS LIKED YOU, my boy," Uncle Tlaloc rumbled. He smiled at me, showing a row of jade-inlaid teeth.

I nodded politely, sipped my bitter chocolate and listened to my head throb. I wondered what the old bastard had in store for me this time.

Classical music keened and thumped to a crescendo on the main floor of the Hummingbird's Palace as the tone-deaf current object of Uncle Tlaloc's affections belted out the line about the unhappy ending of the romance between Smoking Mountain and White Lady. She didn't even come near the high note. In the old days they skinned singers for performances like that. But times change and the world decays as cycles end; so she smiled, bowed and received enthusiastic applause as she blushed through her yellow skin dye. The combination of the blush and the dye made her look more jaundiced than attractive.

The pungent mixture of tobacco and drug smoke stung my eyes as it blended with the piney-sweet reek of burning copal incense, almost hiding the odours of spices, citrus flowers—and a hint of stale urine creeping in from the privy in back.

Uncle Tlaloc, as fat and ugly as his Rain God namesake, leaned back in his chair, the

one with Death carved beneath his right hand and the Earth Monster beneath his left. "In fact I consider you more of a nephew than an employee."

Something bad. Whenever Uncle went into that almost-a-relative routine it meant he had something especially nasty in store for me.

He signalled the kneeling pulque girl, and she glided forward to refill his cup. Her eardrums had been pierced so she could not hear, but he kept silent until she had withdrawn, as noiselessly as she had come.

He glanced around conspiratorially and leaned forward towards where I knelt at his feet, took a hefty swig of pulque out of the skull he used for a chalice and belched malodorously. "I have a small task for you."

"I am yours to command, Lord Uncle."

"Your cousin, Ninedeer . . ."

About as bad as it can fucking get!

"I know him, Uncle-tzin." My voice betrayed nothing.

"He is an acolyte of the Death Master, I believe."

"So I have heard."

"The Death Master has — something — in his temple. I would like to know how it came to die and whatever else your cousin might know about it."

"Am I permitted to know what this thing is, Uncle-tzin?"

Uncle Tlaloc paused, as if considering whether to tell me, and leaned even closer.

"It is a huetlacoatl. An important one."

* * * *

It was raining when I stepped out of the Hummingbird's Palace, a soft, warm drizzle that felt like Tlaloc Himself was pissing on me. Just like his whoreson namesake inside. I pulled my cloak tighter around me, fingering the single row of featherwork at the neck of my cape. Hummingbird feathers, the mark of a warrior, of the war god, Left-Handed Hummingbird Himself, and hence an inalienable symbol of nobility. Of course, the greater nobles supplemented hummingbird feathers with the plumes of the quetzal, symbol of Lord Quetzalcoatl; but it had been a while since I had any dealings with the nobility, minor or otherwise.

It had been a good deal longer since I had dealt with any of my clansmen. My

relatives and I would much rather it stayed that way. But Uncle Tlaloc commanded, and his word was the closest thing there was to law down in English Town. I stepped over a sleeping beggar on the sidewalk, threw back my head, squared my shoulders, and marched off towards the Death Master's temple—every inch a Child of the Hummingbird on his way to his destiny on the Field of Flowers.

The guards at the Temple Precinct passed me on the strength of my cloak, the clan tattoo on my cheeks—and my bearing. None of Uncle's other employees could have entered the sacred quarter of the Atlahuac so easily, which was why the old bastard had chosen me for this job.

The Death Master's temple was at the far end of the sacred quarter, close to the bay and downwind of the major temples. I strolled easily and unremarked among the other nobles, priests and servants who were out at this hour. Floodlights cast the painted and carved friezes in garish light. Here and there neon tubes outlined the temples on top of the pyramids in reds, the colour of fresh blood, and purples, the shade of clotted blood. It was different—harsher—than I remembered, and yet I knew the sacred quarter hadn't changed.

Ninedeer hadn't changed either. He was as thin and gangly as I remembered him. Adulthood hadn't cured his weak chin, and the elaborate jade lip plug he affected only heightened the deficiency. We had never particularly liked each other.

"I didn't expect to ever see you again," he said when a temple servant ushered me into his presence.

I cast an arm at the stone tables behind him and the draped burdens a few of them bore. "Working here? Surely I would have thought you'd expect me to turn up sooner or later."

The years had done as much to improve his sense of humour as they had to improve his jawline. "I didn't expect to see you alive," he amended. "You're not even supposed to be here."

I smiled in the way I had learned since I had been with Uncle Tlaloc. "You could call the guards and have me sent away," I said mildly. "Of course, then I would have to seek you elsewhere to conduct our business."

His expression told me that rumours about what had happened to the last relative who crossed me had leaked into clan gossip. "What do you want?" he asked sullenly.

"I want a look at one of your charges," I said. "And I want to know what you can tell me about it."

"It? You mean an animal?" That was possible, of course. The Death Master's duties included collecting the bodies of animals who had died in the city, as well as dead

humans, sacrificial victims and executed criminals. But he knew damn well it wasn't any animal, and his voice showed it.

"I mean the huetlacoatl."

Ninedeer flinched as if I had slapped him. "No! Absolutely not."

I leaned against the wall in an attitude of exaggerated ease. "One way or another, cousin. One way or another."

He hesitated, weighed his alternatives, and decided it would be better to give me what I wanted now. He shrugged, gestured and led me down a short corridor. The room at the end was narrow and low, but cleaner than the main receiving chamber. There were sweet herbs strewn on the floor and the gas torches gave a steady, bright light. Normally a room like this would be used to receive the bodies of high nobles and other important functionaries. What lay on the table now was not a noble, and perhaps not a functionary, but it was clearly important.

"Make it quick," he said as we entered the chamber. "They are coming for the body soon."

I gestured and Ninedeer flung back the red cotton sheet that draped the corpse.

The thing on the slab was man-sized and had walked on two legs. Beyond that there was little enough resemblance to a human. The skin was greenish-grey, shading to fish belly white between the legs. The head had a prominent muzzle filled with sharp teeth made for tearing. The huge middle claw on each foot was drawn back in the rigor of death. The hands were more delicate and supple, but were frozen in a raking gesture. The corpse lay half on its side because its tail would not let it lie on its back.

Huetlacoatl, the old Serpent Lords, mysterious inhabitants of Viru, the continent to the south. In spite of hundreds of years of trading, raiding and occasional open warfare, and in spite of the fact that they had a trading post on an island in the bay, I had never seen one in the flesh before.

"Satisfied?" Ninedeer demanded and made to re-cover the body.

I frowned and gestured him away. The corpse was split from the crotch almost to the neck. There were other wounds on the body, stab wounds to the upper chest showing how the creature had died, and a dark line around the neck that I took to be the bruise left by a garrotte.

I pointed to the gaping wound and cocked my eye at Ninedeer. "It was done after he was dead," he admitted. "At least if the thing works like a human being or an animal. The heart—or whatever kept its soul — had stopped pumping."

"Is the heart still here?"

"Quetzalcoatl, yes!" Ninedeer exclaimed, wide-eyed. "As least as best the Death Master can tell. This one wasn't sacrificed, if that's your meaning."

I bent down to examine one of the three-fingered hands with its raking talons. "Any blood?"

"No. Nor on the big claw on the foot, either. Now will you please get out of here?"

"Shortly. Now what else can you tell me?"

"Nothing. Go away." I didn't need to be a spirit reader to follow his thoughts. As a lesser noble and scion of a Reed clan, I had every right to be here. But my clan membership, and my life, were the only things they had not taken from me when they cast me out. And in spite of a clansman's theoretical rights, I doubted the authorities would appreciate even a clansman in good standing poking around something as sensitive as a dead huetlacoatl. If I were found here they might not spare my life this time. But whatever they did to me, Ninedeer would be in trouble, and that was all he cared about.

Since Ninedeer put more value on his record than I did on my life, the rest was easy. "I've got all night, you know."

Ninedeer ground his teeth. "It was done where it was found, in the alley. At least if these things bleed the way animals do."

That made sense. A deserted alley was as good as any other place for such butchery. I reached down and examined the hem of the thing's drab cotton cloak. "What's this?"

He shifted from one foot to the other. "I don't know. Honestly, I don't."

I held the hem to my nose and sniffed, trying to drown out the snake stink. "Candle grease." I dropped it and looked the body over. Whoever had done this had stood over the thing for a while.

Ninedeer was almost dancing with impatience. "The Speakers to the Huetlacoatl will be here any minute to retrieve the body. If they find you here it will be hard on both of us."

"No sweet herbs and winding sheet?"

"We do not know what the huetlacoatl's customs are on these things. Now go!"

* * * *

There wasn't much else to learn there, so I went. I stood in the shadows across from the Death Master's temple for a while, under a carved Earth Monster that protected

me from most of the rain, while I thought about what my cousin had told me. I wasn't ready to return to the Hummingbird's Palace. Uncle Tlaloc likes complete reports, not mysteries.

The first mystery was how the thing had died. A fight among the huetlacoatl? Possibly. They were supposed to kill by disembowelling with the ripping claws on their feet, but the wound had been made from the bottom up, not the top down. What's more, the flesh was sliced neatly, not torn as by a claw. And the marks of the garrotte and the stab wounds to the chest suggested human assistance, at least.

Not for the first time I wondered what Uncle Tlaloc was doing sticking his nose in this business. That in itself suggested human involvement.

So, assume the huetlacoatl had been killed by men. It had taken several of them, one to hold it by the garrotte around its neck and more to stab it—probably two more, at least, judging from the stab wounds.

Then why had humans gone to all that trouble to kill a huetlacoatl? True, they were unpopular—so unpopular they seldom left their treaty island in the bay and almost always travelled with an escort of human guards. Yet, there was neither sign nor mention of any guards. Was this one out on privy business?

The swish of rubber tyres on rain-slick pavement made me step back further into the shadows. A land steamer, long, low, and as black as the polished jet in Lady Death's necklace, pulled up to the entrance to Death Master's temple. Steam hissed from beneath the hood as the door swung open. A door too wide and low. Four heavily cloaked and hooded figures emerged silently; the first three as a group, followed after a moment by the fourth.

The three were human, in spite of their elaborate guise and stiff-legged walk. The fourth was not. It was fluid where the others were stiff, strutting where they were jerky, and completely natural where they were studied. It leaned forward and picked its feet high under the muffling cloak. The portal to the temple swung open and the four vanished silently inside.

So. Whatever this was, it was important enough to bring out a huetlacoatl in addition to the Speakers. I knew virtually nothing about huetlacoatl clans, but I did know they weren't noted for family feeling. Clearly it wasn't sentiment that had brought this one along with its human servants. This was looking more and more interesting.

Within minutes the portal opened again and the cloaked figures emerged, a human in the lead, then Lord Huetlacoatl; and then the others, carrying a wrapped bundle between them. The huetlacoatl entered the land steamer first, followed by the burden bearers and the third man. As the door silently closed, the land steamer belched once and then swished off into the night.

I turned and headed back towards the dock area, but not to the Hummingbird's

Palace. The night was young enough. The storm clouds were clearing to reveal the dull, starless night sky over the blackened waters of the bay. The colossal statue of the Storm Goddess on the quay smiled at me with chipped teeth and weathered lips. The city of Atlahuac provided other avenues to explore.

* * * *

The Serpent's Court was no Hummingbird's Palace. It was garishly modern where the Palace was determinedly antique. Tinny modern music coming out of a beat-up horned machine grated the nerves and set the mood. Its clientèle was way down the scale as well, but Uncle Tlaloc's word carried weight here and some of the clients might prove useful.

I paused in the entrance alcove and shook the rain off my hat as the blast of the air conditioning chilled me in my rain-soaked cloak. I scanned the room for a useful face.

There weren't many possibilities. The watchmen from the evening shift had finished their drinks and had gone home long ago, and the night shift would not end until dawn. The other patrons, criminals, whores and hangers-on, couldn't help me. The only one who looked likely was Sevenrain, sitting by himself in the corner. Not my first choice, but he would do.

Sevenrain was well into his fourth decade, with lines on his face, scars cutting through the tattoos on his arms and chest, and the burly, slightly bloated build of a man who likes corn beer too much and exercise too little. A sneer formed on his face as I crossed the room.

"Well, young lordling," he said just a little too loudly as I approached. "You honour us with your presence."

I gave it back to him with a condescending nod. "The honour is mine entirely, oh estimable hound of men," I lisped in a parody of a noble accent. "Allow me a small token of my appreciation by purchasing your next pot of beer."

He glared at me as I sat down next to him, trying to decide if the game was worth continuing. He apparently remembered what had happened the last time he had pursued it—or who I still worked for—and decided it wasn't.

"What in the Nine Hells do you want?" he growled.

"Just a few minutes' conversation, and perhaps a chance to show my gratitude afterwards." Sevenrain knew damn well whose gratitude might be shown; and so, probably, did everyone else in the bar who was at all interested. But better not to mention such things.

I shifted my stool so no one else could see my lips move. "There was a killing today

down in the warehouse district."

"Quetzalcoatl's dick! Do you expect me to remember every miserable person who gets his throat slit in my precinct?"

"I didn't say it was a person." I said softly.

His face froze. "Yeah," he mumbled. "There was one of those."

"Where exactly?"

His eyes darted left and right, but his lips hardly moved at all. "Behind the warehouses off the English Docks. Between the third and fourth one."

"Time?"

"Found it an hour before dawn. Not one of our people, a sailor looking for a place to puke." His face split in a mirthless grin. "Puked his fucking guts out when he saw."

"Any leads?"

A longer pause this time. "No. No one saw anything. No one heard anything. Nothing at the scene but that—and a big puddle of sailor puke."

I nodded. "You'll send word if you learn anything more?"

"I'll see it reaches the right ears." Meaning he wasn't going to take a chance on me cutting him out of Uncle's generosity.

I nodded and rose, flipping a coin down onto the table so that the silver rang loudly on the stone top. "For your refreshment, my good man," I lisped and swaggered out to the metaphorical sound of grinding teeth behind me.

* * * *

The night was heavy with the Storm Goddess' moist, salty breath. I could feel more than the usual number of disease spirits floating in the air. My sweat soaked my bed. I threw off the blanket. Sleep was impossible on nights like this.

My eyes caught something. I strained to see it in the darkness. There was a figure at the door, walking towards the foot of my bed.

I wanted to run. I wanted to reach for the sword by my pillow. But I couldn't move. I couldn't even breathe.

The figure knelt at the foot of my bed. It picked up the box I kept there.

When it opened the box, a cold, green light was released that lit up its skinless face.

Skinless, not fleshless. The eyes, muscles, and other meat of the body were still present. It was a flayed man. Of course, there was only one flayed man of great significance in my life.

I looked into the lidless eyes, and recognized them. The colour of watery chocolate.

"Smoke?"

I couldn't tell if he was smiling. He didn't have lips.

"I've come to visit my skin," he said. "A night like this can be cold to one without skin."

"How sweet."

His teeth glistened in the green light. "I also came to remind you that your life grew in my death as corn grows in the death of the Corn God."

"My life. How marvellous."

"And to remind you that you could be the one who walks at night without his skin."

He snapped the box shut. The light was gone. I was alone.

Shaking, I crawled to the foot of the bed. I could barely see in the moon-light from the window, but I could feel that the layer of grime on the box had not been disturbed. No one had touched the box. Smoke was not here. It was a dream.

I had only looked into the box at Smoke's skin once, when Uncle Tlaloc gave it to me after he had saved what was left of my life. I haven't been able to make myself open it and look at the dried and neatly folded, tattooed skin since.

"The thing you desire most," Uncle had said when he presented me the box with his own hands. And he was right—then. Then I desired nothing more than Smoke's slow, painful death for leading me into shame and abandoning me to save himself. But like most of Uncle Tlaloc's gifts, this one had two edges, and a point keener than obsidian. By killing my enemy in such a fashion, he cut me off from any possibility of return to my former life. By presenting the skin to me, he tied me inexorably to the deed. And he reminded me, oh so subtly, who held the power of life and death in English Town.

* * * *

Smoke did not return that night, but my dreams were uneasy and peopled with things I would rather forget. I awoke bolt upright, clutching a dagger before I realized that someone had nudged the foot of my bed. It was my man, Uo, standing over me,

impassive despite the knife in my hand. "One to see you," he said as soon as he was sure I was awake.

"Who?"

He shrugged. "She is veiled."

"Weapons?"

His flat peasant face didn't change expression. "A high-born lady."

My visitor was standing in the middle of my front room, arms at her sides and rigid, as if to touch anything was to contaminate herself. Her mantle bore a single conservative row of embroidery which proclaimed her status without specifying her clan.

"My Lady."

She turned to face me, cotton mantle still over her head. Her eyes were large and dark, but not crossed enough to be truly beautiful. Like the eyes of another woman, from a long time ago. The memory grabbed at my gut with chilled talons.

"Are we alone?" she asked when my servant had withdrawn. I nodded and she dropped her mantle, showing her face.

She was handsome without being beautiful. Her skull was not flattened in the Frog fashion. Her hair was lustrous, her lip plug small like the jade spools in her ears. On her chin were the four lines of a high-class married lady. It took me a second to put the picture together and recognize her.

"Well, at least you are not drunk," she remarked.

"Threeflower?"

"*Lady* Threeflower." Her voice was hard and cold. She would not unbend an inch.

"And how may I serve the gracious lady?"

Her eyes flashed. Once, in another life, she was the elder sister of the one I was supposed to marry. Now what was she?

"Ninedeer told of meeting you."

"I am not surprised my cousin could not keep the news to himself. But was that enough to bring you running to me?"

She snorted. "Let us say he reminded me of your existence." She stressed the last word as if I were actually dead. Which, I suppose I was, from her viewpoint.

"Then what brings you to English Town?"

"A relative. Fourflower."

Oh ho. A gambling debt perhaps, and Threeflower using our past connection to charm her way out of it? That didn't seem right. "I do not know the lady."

"She was hardly a child when you left." Again that emphasis.

By now I was sick of her attitude, sick of the things she represented, and sick of the skinless face of Smoke floating in my mind. I softened my voice. "My Lady, you obviously want something. Will insulting me help you to gain your end?"

A pause. "You are correct," she said, suddenly coldly gracious. "I am trying to *find* Fourflower. She disappeared three days ago, seemingly kidnapped at the Forest Market."

"Seemingly?"

"Her maid heard a muffled scream, and when she turned her mistress was gone."

I cocked an eyebrow at her and she flushed. "The maid was questioned very thoroughly. She held to her story to the end."

"Then Fourflower probably has been kidnapped."

Lady Threeflower glared at me. "I wish her return."

"Then I would suggest contacting a go-between. I can give you a name..."

"The go-betweens say they know nothing of the matter," she cut in.

That stopped me. Kidnapping was an old, if not honourable, profession, and one of the reasons the nobles kept their women and children close. But there was an order to these things, a procedure. And that called for the approach to be made through a go-between.

"Three days, you said?"

"Mid-morning on the day of the Ocelot last." Plenty of time for a go-between to contact the family.

Mentally I ran down the list of possibilities. The most obvious one was that the snatch team had bungled the job and the girl was dead. Or perhaps this was an unusually complicated bit of business. Someone had dropped the ball, or the girl's other relatives had been contacted and were keeping it quiet. Too many things could have happened.

"Was Fourflower important?"

"She was of the line of the Emperor Montezuma Himself."

Which was a polite way of saying she was very well-born and had nothing else. No position, no title of her own, no fortune, and no prospects. A cousin-companion to Threeflower, perhaps chosen for her name, and ranking little higher than a servant. But a young noblewoman could become attached to such a one. Especially if her blood sister was a beautiful, faithless, empty-headed ninny. I broke that train of thought off sharply.

"Then there is more to this than you think. Best you go home and await word."

"I want her found!"

"Do you think I can snap my fingers and conjure her here for you?"

"I think you can contact your friends who kidnap."

"They are my associates, not my friends, and they only kidnap for ransom." A thought came. "Was Fourflower pretty?"

"Very," she snapped, and the colour drained from her cheeks as she caught the implication. "I suppose you know brothel keepers as well," she said with cold fury.

"Many of them," I said and smiled at her discomfiture. "But none of the ones I know would be foolish enough to kidnap a high-born maid off the streets in broad daylight." *Not unless they were very well paid, I thought, and well enough protected not to fear Uncle Tlaloc and his peers.* But word of something that big should have got around. This was begin-ning to sound interesting.

"Did she have lovers?"

"She was untouched," Threeflower said. "The maid confirmed that before she died."

"A flirtation, then?"

"I would have known even that."

"So." I was silent for a long time.

"I will pay well for Fourflower's safe return," Threeflower said.

"Undoubtedly, Lady. But I will be honest with you. I doubt very much the child is still alive."

"Then I will pay for her killers."

If the girl had died in a bungled kidnapping, the head of the ring would gladly give the skins of her killers as a peace offering and pay wergild besides.

"I will see what I can discover."

She nodded, reached beneath her mantle and tossed something at me. I dodged instinctively, and the deerskin pouch hit the floor with the metallic clink.

"That will do for a start, I think."

I kicked the pouch back to the hem of her skirt. "I am not doing this for money," I told her.

She smiled for the first time. "You shall have nothing else of me. My husband cannot restore you and I would not ask it of him even if he could."

"You misread me," I said coldly.

"I read you well enough to know that in an age when things were done properly you would have been killed instead of merely banished."

"And in an age when things were done properly you would be whipped naked from one temple plaza to the next for visiting a man not a relative, unescorted, and at night." I looked at her speculatively. "That could still happen, you know."

She snorted, threw her mantle over her head and stalked out. Uo must have met her at the door because I did not hear it slam as she left. I was already reaching for the tequila.

* * * *

It was late the next afternoon when I awoke with a pounding head, a foul taste in my mouth and a sourness in the pit of my stomach that was more than physical. Twice in two days I had had to deal with ghosts from my former life and that was two times too many.

I dressed in a clean tunic and cloak, bolted down a cold tamale that settled in my stomach like a lump of basalt, and hurried out. It was not long until the market gates would close, and there was someone I wanted to see, as much for my own peace of mind as anything else.

The streets about the Fireflower Market were thronged with porters, slaves, housewives and their maids. Here and there were caged parrots with their mouths open, hanging their wormlike tongues as if they were dying of thirst. A barefoot Frog girl, barely old enough to be married, blocked my way to the entrance. She was holding a baby who had wooden blocks tied to his skull to make it slope like the

forehead of a reptile, but she broke off her plea as we were pressed back against the wall to make way for a green-plumed noble and his retinue.

I followed in his convenient wake, being forced to pause only twice, as he stopped to watch the tiny daughter of a featherworker delicately plucking the feathers off of a skewered hummingbird with thin bone tweezers; and then as he paused by the tattooist, who was beating the line that would make a young man's pretty face look as if it were covered with scales. Around us, the busy market was beginning to clear out. A few of the vendors had already shut their stalls, and here and there sweepers were at work. I dove into the maze of twisty lanes between the stalls, checked my bearings once, and pulled up before a narrow doorway hidden by a reed mat which still bore the stained and weary outline of a jaguar.

"Who comes?" A voice croaked as I thrust aside the matting and stepped through the door into the darkness.

"A pilgrim seeking wisdom from Mother Jaguar," I answered. There was a shifting sound behind me, as if someone had just relaxed, and perhaps lowered a weapon.

"Enter then and be welcome," the voice called, stronger this time. I stepped through the second doorway, thrust aside a cotton curtain and came face to face with Mother Jaguar.

She was kneeling at a low clay altar table, casting and recasting knucklebones too small for a deer or a pig. "Sit, my son," she said in a voice that was stronger and younger than the one which had greeted me at the door. "What do you seek?"

She didn't look up until I tossed three silver coins onto the table next to the knucklebones. She was ancient, but her eyes were black and sharp as obsidian points in her wrinkled, tattooed face.

"There is a maid named Fourflower, a high-born maid," I began. "It is said she was stolen from the marketplace on the day of the Ocelot, last. Her family seeks her and would be grateful for any aid."

Mother Jaguar nodded. "I have heard this story, but I know nothing of such a maid or such a stealing. Nor do any of my ones in the world of spirits know of such a thing."

"A kidnapping for private reasons then? Perhaps lust?"

Mother Jaguar cast the bones again and shook her head. "I and my spirits know nothing," she repeated.

I nodded. If you paid Mother Jaguar for information, and if she took your money, then she would tell you the truth. Which meant that neither Mother nor any of her kind knew anything about what had happened to Fourflower.

"Thank you for your wisdom," I said and rose to go.

"Your money," Mother Jaguar said.

I tossed a fourth coin on the table. "It is yours. I asked, and you gave of your wisdom. It is not a fault that the answer was other than I hoped." I turned to pass through the curtain.

"Wait," Mother Jaguar said. I turned and she cast the bones, once, twice, and again, while I waited.

"Your maid is not the only one so taken," Mother Jaguar said at last.

"There have been several others, all of impeccable lineage, but perhaps not favoured by fortune."

"All maids?"

"Some maids, some boys, a few unmarried men and women, perhaps a hand count in all. All in the last two cycles of days."

"Who?"

"No one knows. Nor why." She turned again to her casting and the coins vanished from the altar as if by magic.

* * * *

Uncle Tlaloc was impassive when I told him what I had found out about the kidnapping that evening.

It was still early and Uncle was drinking mate rather than alcohol. He took a last long pull on the gourd through his golden straw as I finished my report. "Diverting perhaps," he rumbled, "but I fail to see why it should be of concern to us."

I frowned. "There are ransoms, Uncle."

He waved that away. "Assuming they are alive."

"They aren't?"

"The odds are strongly against it. Besides, I understand the Emperor's Shadow has taken an interest in the matter."

I started to ask why, realized it was a stupid question and closed my mouth. Kidnapped humans could be sacrificed, especially ones of little note but of excellent lineage. And, of course, it was treason for anyone other than the Emperor or the

Imperial Priests to conduct a human sacrifice, since it implied a relationship to the Gods which was the Emperor's alone. Yes, the Emperor's Shadow would investi-gate a thing like that. And the Emperor's Shadow was very bad news indeed.

"Uncle, do you think this is somehow related to the matter of the huetlacoatl?"

"It was not sacrificed, you said. Besides the Emperor's Shadow has shown no interest in that matter." He shifted his position on his great chair and sucked the gourd dry noisily. "No, I think for now we can consider such a connection unlikely.

"Meanwhile, my boy, I have another job for you. One that might shed some light on—the other matter."

* * * *

I leaned against the low stone railing with the mid-afternoon sun behind me and looked down upon the former lords of creation.

Not far away, a howler monkey bellowed and a jaguar cried.

Long ago, the Hero Twins, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, slew the water monster Cipactli. They made the world out of its mangled carcass, and human creation began. Before that, these, or ones like them, had ruled the Earth.

For their evil, lust and impiety, the Gods had sent fire from the sky, and their rule had ended. Only on the southern continent, hidden behind a veil of storms, did they remain as a warning to men of the power and majesty of the Gods.

Or so the story went. Personally, I thought that if the Gods allowed man to continue, they owed the huetlacoatls an apology.

There were four of them in the pit below me, picking at the mass of greenery in the mangers on the walls. When one of them stretched erect, its head came to within a few feet of the parapet. And these were not the biggest of the huetlacoatls, only two-legged browsers that walked with their bodies nearly horizontal and their tails straight out behind them. One of them lifted its head, with leaves dripping from its jaws, and cocked an incurious eye at me. For an instant, I wondered what the old lords of creation thought of the new. Then it dropped its gaze and went back to the manger.

That was about the closest I'd come to an insight in the course of a long, tedious afternoon at the Imperial Menagerie. Uncle Tlaloc wanted more information, and I'd hoped for something that would give me an idea, anything, about the murder of the huetlacoatl from studying the other creatures of the Viru.

I'd seen big huetlacoatls and bigger ones. Ones that were big and ferocious enough to be demigods, and ones that were ponderous and stupid. Apparently the southern

continent was overrun with the things in all sorts of nightmare shapes. But nothing I saw gave me insight.

It was a rare sunny day, and the menagerie was thronged with nobility and their servants. There was even a fair sprinkling of commoners, admitted by "special dispensation"—actually a small bribe to the keepers. The commoners were wearing their feast day best and the nobles the bright mantles appropriate to their stations. The people were far more colourful than the huetlacoatls, and a lot more interesting than tanks of water monsters, and cages of woolly beasts of the distant north.

I forced my attention back to the huetlacoatls below me, but as I turned something flew past my shoulder into the huetlacoatl pit. They shifted and honked nervously. Then a hand of bananas landed close to the first object, a red-and-green mango. I turned to see four or five other people crowding up against the rail, male and female and most dressed in the plain tunics of commoners. They were chanting prayers and throwing fruit into the pit like worshippers at a shrine. Some of them were rocking back and forth with their eyes closed, as if in ecstasy.

Two of the menagerie attendants came running up, shouting at the congregation and waving their staffs of office. They laid into the little group of worshippers with the heavy mahogany sticks, sending them scattering and screaming. One guard struck a young woman across the kidneys. The woman stumbled towards me, and the attendant caught her a glancing blow on the side of the head. The woman tried to run, but the guard was almost on top of her, striking again and again with his stick.

I waited until she staggered by me and casually shifted my stance. The guard tripped over my foot and went sprawling face-first into the dirt.

While he was down, I took the young woman's arm and motioned towards the alley between the pens with my eyes. In spite of the blood running down her cheek she smiled and darted off. I turned my attention to helping the attendant to his feet. By the time he shook off my ministrations, the girl and the others had vanished.

Meanwhile, other attendants had entered the pit and were busy gathering up the offerings. They scurried among the huetlacoatls' huge clawed feet, ducking beneath the great tails to grab the smashed remnants of fruit. The huetlacoatls were still nervous and any second I expected to see an attendant smashed as flat as that first mango.

There was a low whistle over my right shoulder. All four of the beasts below me jerked upright as if on a string. Their heads swivelled towards me and they pushed closer to the wall. Instinctively I took a step back and groped under my cloak for my sword.

"It's all right," someone said. I turned and there was an old man. He was wearing a dirty cloak with the three lines of feathers of the middle nobility and leaning on a heavy, carved stick. "They're just looking for me. Aren't you, my pretties?" At the

sound of his voice all the huetlacoatl's began to whistle and hiss.

He stumped to the parapet and looked down. The animals pressed against the wall and craned their necks even higher. He leaned out at a dangerous angle and reached down with his stick to scratch the tallest ones on their muzzles. "How are we today?" he crooned. "All healthy and happy?" The smaller ones were making little leaps to try to bring their muzzles within range of his cane.

"Magnificent, aren't they?" he asked without taking his eyes from them. "I'm their mother, you know." He glanced sideways to see if the statement had the desired effect.

"It must have been a difficult labour, Uncle."

He cackled at the thought. All the while the cane tip kept caressing the monsters in the pit.

"I raised them from eggs," he said as he straightened up to the audible disappointment of his "children". "I was the first thing they saw when they hatched and I stayed with them night and day when they were in the nest, fed them chewed-up leaves. When they were older they followed me everywhere. Oh yes, they are my children."

"You know them well? The huetlacoatl's, I mean."

His face cracked into an improbable smile. "As well as anyone. I am Foureagle, the keeper of the Emperor's animals."

"What can you tell me about the huetlacoatl's?"

"More than you want to know, young one. Or would believe if I told you."

"Would you share your wisdom with me—" I made a quick mental judgment "--over a bowl of pulque?"

Again the smile. "Lead on, young sir."

A grog seller had his cart, brightly painted with many portraits of Lady Mayahuel, the inventor of the sacred drink, just outside the gates of the menagerie. I purchased a couple of gourds, received a perfunctory blessing, and Foureagle and I settled in the shade with our backs to the wall. The old man took a long, deep pull, wiped his mouth and sighed lustily.

"Those damn fools," he said, jerking his head to indicate where the fruit-throwers had been. "They don't understand that those beasts can't digest fruit. It makes them sick."

"Is that why they throw it?"

He snorted. "They think they are worshipping them, making offerings to the avatars of their gods. What they're really doing is killing the poor things—if we don't stop them." He took another swig from his gourd. "All this whoring after new gods, young sir. No good can come of it."

I nodded gravely, as if the old man had said something profound. "But of the huetlacoatls themselves, what can you tell me of them?"

"Ah," he sighed and took another pull. "They thrive only down on Viru, you know," he said by way of a beginning. "Only there. They do not do well here, just as man does not prosper there."

"The ones here—" I gestured to the menagerie behind us "--seem to do well enough."

"Only because we care for them," the old man said. "It took generations for us to learn how to do so. There are many kinds, and each has subtly different needs. That pen the duckbills are in, for example: it would not do for the long necks, nor the spike-tails. And if you tried to keep the big meat-eaters in there, they'd be out and among the visitors in less than a day-cycle." Another pull on the gourd. "Those meat-eaters can jump."

"Do they share a common language?"

Again the cackle. "The ones here? They are mere beasts. The huetlacoatl version of deer and jaguar. Only the talking huetlacoatls are intel-ligent in the way of man."

Shit! An afternoon wasted. I had never thought of the huetlacoatls as intelligent in the sense that men are intelligent, but I assumed they were more than beasts.

"They were unknown to us until we reached the southern lands," said Foureagle. "They are big, powerful and strange, so men try to worship them."

"Do they ever sacrifice them?"

The old man snorted. "Here? To what end? Their blood will not aid our corn, nor can their deaths help keep the balance with our Gods. They are of an older creation, a different order of magic, if you believe in such things."

"So you have never heard of one being sacrificed?"

"On this continent? Never."

"I have heard it said that they carry powerful medicine within them. Valuable medicine."

The old man looked at me sharply. "Who told you such nonsense? Inside a

huetlacoatl is nothing but bone, guts and muscle, just like a deer or a man. I should know. I have seen the inside of enough of all of them."

"Nothing worth cutting one open for, then?"

Again the sharp look. "I did not say that. There is knowledge to be gained."

A kind of divination? "Knowledge of the future?"

"Shit, no! Knowledge of the huetlacoatls. How they work. And how they are related to us."

"We are relatives?"

"Not close. They are closer to lizards and snakes, and closer yet to croc-odiles and birds. But yes, we are related as all animals are related." He sucked his gourd dry and looked at me expectantly.

"Allow me to provide you with another," I said, rising to return to the vendor's cart for fresh gourds of the milky brew.

While the vendor refilled the gourds, I pondered what Foureagle had told me. By the time I returned I had my new line of questions framed and ready.

"It is said," I began when the old man raised his nose from the gourd again, "that a priest can tell the future from the entrails of a deer." *Or a man.* "Could a priest not do the same from the entrails of one of these?"

"It is said that in England men are born with prehensile toes to better grip the earth so that they may not fall off it," he retorted. "Even those who believe such things know that like calls to like. Better to read the entrails of a chicken, unless you wish to know what portends on the southern continent."

"And yet..."

"And yet you seek after phantoms," the old man said, pouring the last of his pulque on the ground and levering himself erect. "You treat these things as if they were supernatural, not of this world. They are not, I can assure you. They are of the same world and the same flesh as we are. Older, it is true. Far older, but there is nothing miraculous to be had from them. Now I thank you for your generosity, young sir, but if you will excuse me I will seek a quiet place to piss."

* * * *

I had just debarked from a water taxi and gone perhaps two streets back towards the Hummingbird's Palace when I realized I was being followed. A single man, far enough back not to be obvious and no apparent threat. I loosened my sword in its

scabbard under the cover of adjusting my cloak and continued on without breaking stride.

It could be I was simply being shadowed for some reason, I told myself. After all, no one would risk Uncle Tlaloc's wrath by attacking me while I was about his business. *Yeah, right.*

I made two blocks more when there was a low whistle from behind me and three more men glided out of the darkness. All were stubby, thick-set, and muffled in coarse black cloaks. Grey turbans were tied about their heads and adjusted to hide their faces and painted to look like death-heads.

I turned to face the one to my left, fumbling under my cloak as if for my sword. The man hung back and our eyes locked. I sensed rather than heard his companions rushing me.

At just the proper moment I thrust backwards through my cloak and into the body of the man behind. Then I sidestepped, slashed at the man on my right. That made him jump back and left me free to concentrate on the one to my left for just a split second. A quick upward slash and I felt my blade bite flesh and scrape along bone. He grasped his arm and reeled away while I turned to take on the man on my right as he closed in, sword held hilt low for a finishing thrust.

With a single motion, I swept my cloak off and tossed it at his head, sidestepping towards him as I moved. He dodged away from the cloak, but he was still off balance when I stepped in and split his skull.

I turned to put my back to the wall and looked around. The one with the arm wound was pattering off down the street. The one with the split skull was dead and the third man would soon join him. Now he was rolling on the ground and clutching his belly. My follower, the one who had whistled, had disappeared.

I was breathing hard, and my hands were shaking so badly I could hardly resheathe my sword. *Damn! And that was my second-best cloak.* The blood had soaked into the featherwork and there was no way to get it clean. I left it behind as a calling card and, with a final look up and down the streets, hurried off to the Hummingbird's Palace. Uncle Tlaloc doesn't like it when a messenger is late, and it takes more than an attack by three men to deflect his displeasure.

After delivering my report to Uncle Tlaloc, I sat in the bar at the Hummingbird's Palace, sipping snow wine and keeping my back to the wall while I tried to figure out my next move.

Uncle Tlaloc had been much amused and mildly interested by my adventure with the Silver Skulls. I was much less amused and a lot more interested. Obviously, someone wanted me dead even more than usual. Badly enough to hire one of English Town's strong-arm gangs to try to take me out. But who? Who had I seriously

annoyed recently? Threeflower? Unlikely. Certainly this wasn't connected to my errand for Uncle Tlaloc.

And anyway I couldn't imagine anyone in English Town setting the Silver Skulls on me. They were the best-known of the muscle gangs, but the local opinion was they were much better at making threats and breaking knees than killing people. Which implied that my enemy was someone with more money than knowledge. Which brought me back to Lady Threeflower, but that was ridiculous.

The Emperor's Shadow? Even more ridiculous. If they wanted me dead, I'd be dead. It would be an accident, a fair duel, the work of mysterious unknowns, or perhaps at the hands of the Death Master, but it would not be done by a bunch like the Silver Skulls. A warning from the Emperor's Shadow then? No, that was too paranoid even for English Town.

The one thing I was sure of was that I didn't like all this attention. Not only would I have to watch my back with more than usual care, but I'd probably have to pay wergild to the Silver Skulls for the men I had killed. And I'd have to replace my feathered cloak.

I sipped my wine and thought about my tailor for a while. Certainly a more pleasant subject than the Emperor's Shadow, or the Silver Skulls.

* * * *

I was wandering the streets through a dark, starless night. Disease spirits floated through the air, brushing by me as they passed.

A dark alley filled with rapid, delicate noise. A blue hummingbird was fighting with a black butterfly. The noise of battle grew louder and louder. I ran away.

Then a rubber ball came bouncing towards me. I was about to hit it with my hip, the way I would try to play the sacred ball game as a boy. The ball suddenly stopped bouncing.

It wasn't a ball any more. It was Smoke's skinless head.

"Who are you disappointing this time, Lucky?" it asked.

And a voice said, "Lucky, over here!" I knew that voice. All too well.

I found myself in the neighbourhood where I grew up, where I am forbidden ever to return.

Turning to look, I saw Twoocelot. She was standing in the doorway of a rotting Frog-style hut. She wore a bride's dress, but her lips were painted black like a prostitute's.

"Lucky, where have you been all these years?" she asked. Her eyes were so much friendlier than her older sister's.

I tried hard to politely look away. "You know. I know. We're not supposed to talk about it."

"Am I so horrible? Do you prefer my sister Threeflower?"

"No."

She stepped close to me. There was something wrong with her face. Her skin hung slack, like a limp mask.

"Why do you look at me like that? Am I so ugly?" She grabbed a handful of the skin hanging from her face, pulled and tore it away. Underneath was her sister, Threeflower.

"You miss the old days, and your old life, don't you?" she sneered. "You wish that you could have been a gentleman, instead of a thug!"

"I am what the Gods made me to be." I turned to go.

"Lucky," her soft voice called. Something about it stopped me in my tracks. I thought my heart was going to explode. Against my will, I looked over my shoulder at Threeflower.

"Are you really? Do the Gods make us, or do we make ourselves?" Her skin rippled, became blotchy and bloated. Flesh-eating worms emerged like long pimples and ate away her face; except for her teeth, which grew long and rearranged themselves until she had the face of a huetlacoatl.

* * * *

The next day started in the same way as the day before—which is to say late in the afternoon in a fog of leftover alcohol. No visit from Threeflower, of course. I waited until my reflexes were back together, even if my head wasn't, before I ventured out. Between the padded cotton tunic and the light mail shirt over it, a regular tunic over that, and a rain cloak on top of it all, I was seriously overdressed for the wet season, but I still felt better for it.

I stepped out of my building with all my senses on full alert. The way was thronged. There were overdressed merchants with retinues like nobles, too-well-dressed individuals whose professions weren't immediately apparent but obviously unsavoury. There were slaves staggering under burdens, house servants whose tunics clashed with each other and the brightly tiled walls of the houses. On the corner a vendor was hawking fruit juices from a cart. All perfectly normal and all

guaranteed to put my nerves on edge this day.

I moved along at a leisurely amble with my stomach going tight every time someone moved past me or I passed the mouth of an alley. I had gone two blocks like this when someone called my name.

"Hsst. Sir Lucky." Beside me was a boy perhaps ten years old wearing a dirty yellow tunic that marked him as someone's not-too-important house servant.

"I know someone who's got something for you," he hissed without moving his lips. His eyes were darting around and his head swivelled from side to side as if looking for eavesdroppers. Obviously he was enjoying this.

I wasn't, so I gave him my best supercilious stare. "Who might that be?"

"Oh, a beautiful lady who misses your company." The line was the standard panderer's come-on but he flashed a sign with the hand hidden between our bodies. The sign of the jaguar.

"Not in the market," I said gruffly. "Go away." I raised my hand as if to strike him and he grinned and vanished into crowd. I resumed my leisurely pace and at the next corner I turned right and headed for the market.

The gates were closed by the time I got there, but Mother Jaguar wasn't hard to find. There is a dive called the Vulture's Rest on the street of third-rate wine shops and fourth-rate brothels that runs along the market wall near where Mother Jaguar has her divining business. As usual, Mother was in a tiny nook in the back, well hidden from the doorway and doubt-less close to one of her many bolt holes.

"I found something that might interest you," she said without looking as I slid in across from her.

"Any words of the wise woman are as spring rain on my ears." She cackled and pressed her hand into mine beneath the table. I felt her make the sign for gold.

Without comment I withdrew my hand, and slid out my other hand bearing three gold pieces beneath the table.

Mother's head sank upon her withered breasts and she seemed to drop into sleep, or a trance. I waited as she rocked back and forth and her breathing steadied.

"One of those has been found," she mumbled in her reedy trance voice.

My lips barely moved. "Ransomed?"

"Dead, quite dead," she keened softly. "In the street of warehouses behind the English Docks. A man of most excellent family, of the Watermonster Clan, and most excellent prospects."

Meaning he was well-born, but otherwise unremarkable, and had reached at least middle age without accomplishing anything of note.

"How was he found?" I asked thinking of the huetlacoatl.

"By the smell," Mother Jaguar intoned. "The smell of those who die slowly. His belly had been slit, and days ago."

"Sacrificed?"

"Who knows? Who knows?" Mother Jaguar wailed softly. Then she dropped her voice even lower. "Others came and took him even before the Death Master arrived. Shadows fell and the poor man vanished forever."

"Forever," she repeated even more faintly and pitched forward onto the table, seemingly unconscious.

"Thank you for your wisdom, Mother," I said loudly enough to be overheard. And, rising from the table, I placed three more gold coins upon it.

I was even more nervous when I left the Vulture's Rest than I had been when I went in. I didn't have to ask who the shadows were, or who had taken the body, or why the Emperor's Shadow was interested in the death of a very minor noble. The slit belly implied he had been sacrificed.

I thought briefly of Lady Threeflower and what had likely become of her friend. Then I thought in more detail about the effect this was likely to have on my career and longevity. Being interested in anything that involved the Emperor's Shadow was not a positive career move, to say nothing of its possible effect on your lifespan. I suspected the only reason Mother Jaguar had the courage to tell me about it was that the story was all over English Town. I just hoped my interest in the matter wasn't.

I considered my options and the more I thought about them, the more convinced I became that this was a time to spend a quiet evening at home. That wouldn't help me if the Emperor's Shadow came after me, but it was the last place my other enemies would expect to find me at this time of night. Besides, if I decided a sudden retirement to the country was in my best interest, I'd need items that were at home, such as gold and a certain casket that sat near my bed.

Lady Threeflower was waiting for me in my chambers. She kept her mantle over her face but I knew her by her carriage.

"Is there news of Fourflower?" she asked without preamble.

"None, my lady."

"I had heard—" She stopped and gathered herself, "I had heard that someone was

found today. Someone who had been taken."

"It was not her, Lady. It was a man." I debated telling her how he had been found — or what the implications were for Fourflower.

She sighed deeply, as if a weight had been lifted from her. "There is one other matter," she said. "My lord husband found out about my visit to you. He is extremely angry, and he may seek vengeance on you."

So that was it! "He already has, lady." My smile was one part irony and one part relief.

She cocked an eyebrow. "I take it he was not successful?"

"Let's say he caused me a certain amount of uncertainty, cost me the price of a new cloak, and probably the out-of-pocket cost of a couple of back-alley thugs, but overall it was little enough."

"Nevertheless, I shall repay you," she said, reaching beneath her mantle.

There was something in the way she moved that made me reach out and jerk the mantle from her face. One eye was purple black and nearly swollen shut. There were livid spots on her neck where someone's fingers had dug into her pale flesh.

"I think," I said slowly, "I would rather be recompensed of your lord husband."

Her chin came up and her dark eyes flashed. "You would see me shamed, then. Does it please you? Does it excite you?" With a jerk she loosened the pin at her shoulder and her mantle and dress cascaded to the floor. "Here. Would you like to see all of what my lord husband did to me?"

I averted my eyes but I still had a glimpse of matronly hips and full breasts, the brown nipples crisscrossed with lash marks. There were other lash marks on her flat stomach and down the sides of her thighs. "I'm sorry."

"What is between a man and wife is no business of anyone else, especially not a clanless brigand," she said, stooping to gather her garments. There was a rustle as she replaced them. "You have served me and I have paid you. Now it is at an end between us."

Even if I had my full clan rank Threeflower would have been too proud to accept help.

Besides, I recognized bitterly, she was right. She knew the risk she ran in coming to me in the first place and so did I. She had been caught and paid the price. It was not my affair.

The tequila pot was empty, so I slept badly that night.

* * * *

"Ah, Lucky my boy," Uncle Tlaloc rumbled when I showed up at the Hummingbird's Palace the next afternoon. "We have a request for the pleasure of your company." My stomach clinched at the words.

"A high-born lady, I hope." At least he hadn't used the nephew routine, so how bad could it be?

Uncle sighed gustily. "Nothing so romantic, I am afraid. This is from a priest—of sorts." He caught my look. "Oh, not one of your relatives, I can assure you," he said, holding up a flipperlike hand. "At least not one close enough to claim the relationship, but with the way you nobles inter-marry, who can say?"

I cocked an eyebrow at my mentor and employer.

"I do not know why," Uncle said. "He simply asked, very politely, to see you." Then he reached out and took a sip from his skull mug. "Life is so charmingly full of surprises, is it not?"

Personally my life had been way too full of surprises recently, and none of them pleasant. But I smiled and took my leave as if Uncle had done me the greatest of favours. The first rule in this game is never let them see you sweat. The second rule is never let them see you bleed.

* * * *

The Cloud Villas were on the other side of the city, so I took a water taxi for the first part of the trip, and then a cable car up into the hills. Once, a long time ago, the area had been a suburb, a pleasant retreat beyond the city walls for nobles seeking refuge from the heat and insects of summer. Then, as the Empire tightened its grip and clan warfare was sublimated into other channels, the wealthy and noble began to live here year around. Now those seeking a summer refuge used the distant moun-tains, only a few hours away by steam train. Proximity to the Great Plaza and the invention of air-conditioning had drawn the nobles back to their compounds and the wealthy had found it more convenient to live closer to their businesses. So the neighbourhood had filled up with smaller houses and less important residents and the big houses had been divided into apartments or put to other uses.

The temple had started life as a nobleman's mansion, or more likely two or three adjacent mansions. It had been knitted together with a glazed brick exterior, brilliant blood red around the bottom and sunburst yellow on top. There was an elaborate frieze about two-thirds of the way up the side and the wall was subtly shaded to represent a stepped pyramid rather than a flat surface. A set of four broad stone steps led up to the recessed space in front of the door, flanked by two life-size carvings. The two muscular servants in feathered cloaks who stood by the oversized

carved doors bore no weapons, but they were guards nonetheless.

The place looked like a child's picture of a temple. Awesome and splendid, but overdone. I'd seen worse, such as the Whore's Temple to Tlazolteotl, down in English Town, but this place spoke of dark old gods put to bright new uses in a way I found unsettling.

A temple virgin guided me from the door, down a maze of halls and up a flight of inside stairs to a rooftop pavilion where my host awaited.

Toltecutli was large, paunchy, middle-aged and as much of a mixture as the temple he presided over. His head was flattened, Frog-fashion, until he looked like a painting on a Frog temple wall rather than a human being. His lip and ears had been pierced for the heavy jade spools the Frogs favoured, but the holes were empty. He wore a green-feathered short cloak that covered his shoulders and came within a finger's breadth of being blasphemy against the priests of Quetzalcoatl. His tunic was snowy white set off with gold bangles and a stomacher of lizard skin, and a beaten gold pectoral depicting Lord Quetzalcoatl hung from his neck. His eyes were permanently crossed but that didn't add to his beauty. The whole effect combined the barbaric, foreign and modern in a way that was not in the least laugh-able. He sat rigid as a statue on a carved stool, staring out over the rooftops at the city and the bay beyond.

Wordlessly he gestured me to a seat on the step below him, and wordlessly I took it. He kept his gaze on the horizon as I kept mine on him. Although he never turned his face towards me I got the feeling he was sizing me up just as carefully as I was sizing up him.

"Tworabbit," he said at last, in a voice as distant as his gaze. The name startled me. It was my natal name and should have been my everyday name, save that it was notoriously unlucky.

"I am called Lucky," I said quietly.

He turned and suddenly focused hard and sharp as a hunting hawk on me. That unblinking crossed stare gave me the feeling he could see all the way inside me to the black nodules of my inmost soul. A nice trick, that stare.

"Do not discard what you are," he said sharply. "For it is what you are in the beginning that determines what you will become in the end."

"If the fates allow."

"Ah yes, fate." He was silent for an instant. "You represent a noble branch of a fine clan," he continued. "Brought low by unfortunate circumstances."

I said nothing. If this one was trying to unsettle me ... well, I had been played upon

by masters.

"I owe you thanks," he said at last. "You helped someone two days ago."

I shrugged. "The attendant was clumsy. He tripped over his own feet."

"Still, thanks are in order. And a seeker of wisdom you have become."

I shrugged. "Anything that turns a profit."

"Don't lie to me," he snapped. "Profit is not what drives you."

"Not entirely," I said as I thought of the small casket beside my bed.

He smiled in a particularly unsettling manner. "Nor revenge either, much as you would like that believed. No, you seek wisdom, albeit you do not do so wisely."

I licked my lips and wondered where this one got his information. "What would be the wise way to seek wisdom?"

"There is no wise way," he said. "Wise ways are for cowards, fools and those who do not seek to know. Wisdom is found by treading unwise paths."

I wondered if the extreme skull binding had affected his brain somehow. This "priest" appeared more than half mad, but if it was madness it was combined with an unusual force of character.

"The cycle closes, Tworabbit," he said. "Venus will not cross the sun thrice before the Monkey Baktun draws to a close."

"The cycle dies as all things must." It was the first thing that came into my mind.

He made a dismissive gesture. "That it dies is unimportant. How it is reborn is all that matters. For that is in our hands. Each time the cycle turns we have it in our power to re-create the world entire. To bring together the elements that are tearing our world apart and to form them together as a potter forms clay. To temper them in the fires of the end times until the new world emerges whole and unbroken."

"I had thought that was in the hands of the Gods," I said carefully.

"The Gods do not play dice with the world," the priest said sharply. "They show man the path and each cycle they offer him the chance anew to take it. That we do not is our own doing."

This conversation had started off peculiar and it had got weirder and weirder. "You wished to see me," I said, hoping to force the talk back to a path that made sense.

Again that stare like a cross-eyed hawk. "And I have seen you. The cycle turns,

Tworabbit, and neither you nor I can escape our place upon the calendar stone of fate. Now is the time to weld together all the elements so they may be mixed as potter's clay."

This part vaguely reminded me of some of the street-corner priests of the English Quarter. "You mean nobles and commoners?"

"Oh, more than that, Tworabbit. Far more than that. Nobles, commoners, Reeds and Frogs, Englishmen and others, yes, even the huetlacoatl. To create a thing transcending anything the world has ever seen. A new being for a new cycle."

"That would be a thing to be seen," I said as neutrally as I could.

"And it will be seen, Tworabbit, if we all play the parts we are destined to play."

This wasn't just weird any more. It had started to remind me of those conversations one had with one's age mates at noble parties. Conversations where nothing was stated, no matter how bright the surface, and much was implied: threats, offers, information swapping, all wrapped up in inconsequential talk. Only here I didn't know the language or understand symbolism. Was I being offered something? Was I being threatened? Was I being pumped for information? It was like one of those dreams where Smoke came to talk to me about his skin. Just as bizarre and just as menacing.

"If we are destined to, then we shall play those parts." Not much in the way of snappy repartee, but it was the best I could do without knowing what the hell was going on here.

This time the stare held me even longer, as if Toltecutli tried to pin me to my cushion by the force of his eyes. "See that you play your part well, Tworabbit. Play it well indeed."

"Forgive me, uncle, but I do not know what my part is."

"That is because your part is ignorance, Tworabbit. Cling to that ignorance. Cherish it. Profess it to all who ask. That is your part."

Then he looked back out over the sea and I waited for him to speak again until the temple virgin touched my shoulder to tell me the interview was at an end.

As I left the temple, I paused at the bottom of the stairs. The frieze showed a polyglot of symbols. There was Quetzalcoatl in both his Reed and Frog aspects. There were human forms representing all ranks and stations. There were signs of the zodiac and the glyph for the end of the cycle. And mixed in with it all were stylized huetlacoatls, running, walking, commanding and lying in repose. Here and there were the conventional symbols for the burden of time, but instead of burdens or the traditional monsters, these glazed brick figures of humans were locked in the

embrace of huetlacoatls. There was something vaguely erotic about their posture, and much more that bordered on the obscene.

As I made my way down the street to the cable car stop, I pondered Toltecutli and his religion. New religions weren't anything out of the ordinary, especially here in the south where the Mexica Reeds mixed with the native Frogs and the regime of the priests was not as strict as it was back in the Valley of Anahuac by the shores of the Lakes of Mexico. I had heard vaguely of the Toltec and his followers, but I had classed them as another huetlacoatl-worshipping cult. Wrong. Even though Toltec was definitely concerned with the huetlacoatls, he was not a huetlacoatl worshipper. It was a lot more complex than that and tied in with the coming end of the cycle.

If I had more than my usual share of luck I might live to see the end of the cycle. It was two hand-spans of fingers and a finger away. Not the Great Cycle, when the Universe is re-created, but the smallest of the great cycles, the Baktun, or 394 and a half English years. Baktun 13, the Grass Baktun. A time when the world, or man's part of it, was traditionally broken apart and remade new. I was no student of religion, much less of ephemeral cults, but I couldn't ever remember one that tied the huetlacoatls to the end of the cycle before.

Every cycle's end brought with it prophecies of doom of one sort or another. In the time of the Emperor Montezuma they had seemed fulfilled when the first English had landed and stirred rebellion among the subject tribes. But the English had succumbed to the Empire's might and when the English came again years later it was the English English, not the Spanish English, and they built English Town as traders rather than conquerors. Eventually Montezuma's successor, Montezuma V, *the* Emperor Montezuma of popular legend, had welded the empire together even more firmly than it had been before the coming of the English.

Aside from that, the end of cycles had passed with only the usual quota of wars, plagues, and rebellions to mark them. Or so they taught in the schools of the nobles. Each time, the new cycle began with the lighting of the sacred fire atop the Grand Pyramid at the Great Plaza on the shores of the Lakes of Mexico. The Emperor was reconfirmed and life continued, largely unchanged from one cycle to the next. Only the unofficial cults changed as the old ones were discredited when the predicted miracles and wonders didn't appear.

Since leaving my old life I found the common folk saw matters differently. To them the end of a cycle marked a profound change, a chance to strike the world's balance anew—and by implication to ease the lot of the commoners.

But only by implication. Even here in the tolerant South, the priests would not countenance a cult that spread unrest or criticized the divinely inspired order of things. Still, was it such an odd notion that the world as we knew it was coming to an end? Was the Empire as strong or the Emperor as vigilant as he had been? Was there more unrest, more muttering in the cities and banditry in the countryside? Was there more injustice and less punishment for it? Was it really such a strange notion

that Reeds and Frogs, nobles and commoners, and yes, even huetlacoatls, might somehow be combined into something new and better for the next cycle?

That thought was still with me when I hailed a water taxi to take me back through the increasingly noisome canals to the English Quarter.

* * * *

Uncle Tlaloc kept me waiting for nearly four hours at the Hummingbird's Palace before he heard my report. Not that there was anything to report, but I didn't want Uncle getting ideas about my meeting with Toltecutli.

When he finally got around to me he heard me out with a bored expression and waved me away without a word, a sign he wasn't pleased. I didn't bother to finish my last drink and headed for home. It was raining again, and I felt as if all three worlds were pissing on me.

The hall was dark when I reached my apartment building. Not terribly unusual. The gas torch at the end was old and cranky and so was the porter who was supposed to see to it. But tonight it struck me wrong. I pressed myself against the wall and drew my sword. Then I sidled down the corridor with my back to the wall, silently testing every door behind me as I went.

They were all securely locked, but mine wasn't. I pressed flatter against the wall beside the door and reached out with my sword to work the latch. The door swung open noiselessly. Which meant something was really wrong. I deliberately left the hinges unoled.

The apartment was dimly lit by the gas lamp at its lowest setting. I wasn't about to go stumbling about in the semi-dark, so I reached over and turned the light full on.

Shit. The apartment was a mess. The cushions had been slit, items pulled off shelves and scattered on the floor, the shelves themselves had been moved. A low table was upended, as if someone had searched the base.

I made straight for the bedroom. Everything there was in disarray, except the box at the foot of the bed. It was sitting just as I had left it—almost.

I'm very particular about that box. It is arranged just so with a hair clasped in the front corner between the lid and the box. Whoever had searched it had got it almost right. The box was within a finger-breadth of where I had left it, the angle was almost right. The hair was missing, having fallen out unnoticed when the box was opened.

I turned away, damning myself for keeping such a thing in the first place. Then I realized I hadn't seen my servant Uo, or his body, anywhere. With my sword still drawn, I went looking.

I found him on his pallet by the kitchen fire, alive, amazingly enough. He barely stirred when I kicked him and a brief examination showed he was drugged. From the looks of it there'd be no information to be had out of him before morning.

I went back to the front room, turned the table right side up, pulled up one of the least-damaged cushions, and got out the tequila jug. I needed to settle my nerves, but most of all I needed to think.

Whoever did this wasn't a personal enemy. That the skin was still in its box told me that. No, this was business, and obviously that business involved something I was supposed to have. It wasn't the skin and it wasn't money—although my strongbox had been cleaned out. So what was it?

I thought back to the priest's words. That my part in the changing of the cycles was ignorance. That I was to cling to ignorance, profess ignorance and cherish it. Screw that! I was sure as hell ignorant, but this kind of ignorance was likely to get me killed. The obvious conclusion for whoever searched my apartment was that I'd been clever about hiding whatever it was. Their next obvious action was to grab me and question me. I doubted very seriously they'd take "I don't know" for an answer—not unless I said it with my dying breath.

By this time the tequila was half gone and so was I. I braced a chair against the door to prevent unwelcome night visitors, kicked Uo again to see if he was any closer to waking, and when he obviously wasn't, I staggered off to bed.

* * * *

Sleep ended abruptly. I felt the presence of someone's eyes and breath on me. It was not my servant. "Smoke?" I mumbled. There was no answer. A stranger had been in my room, over my bed, like a disease-ridden spirit coming in an open window. I was not in the mood for another nightmare.

My spine from neck to tailbone became unnaturally cold. I did not move.

Dawn was breaking. The light of fallen warriors accompanying the Sun on today's arc through the sky filtered in weakly through the mosquito netting. After some intense staring into empty space, my eyes adjusted to the half-light.

Then some of the neighbourhood roosters crowed inharmoniously. My nerves were scrambled, but I was wide awake.

Carefully, I let my eye dart about the room. No one was there. Nothing lurking in the corners or shadows.

I felt that *something* was near. It had to be almost touching me.

There is a time-honoured method of revenge in which poisonous insects or reptiles

are placed inside a person's body through the sorcerer's art. If skill at sorcery is lacking, the cruder method of simply putting a small deadly creature in a person's bed will do. In these times, among those who deal in not-so-flowery wars between clans, the later, cruder method is preferred.

My sleep was deep, but restless. I was tangled in my sheet. With a slow, deep breath I tried to relax all my muscles without moving them too much, raised my head, looked with my eyes, felt with the entire surface of my skin.

I saw and felt nothing, and almost breathed a hearty sigh of relief. Then something glinted in light that grew slowly brighter. Something shiny sparkled. It was close to me. Near my face. Close to my heart.

There, precariously balanced on the knot of sheets under my chin was a delicate work of the carver's art that horrified me. It was a butterfly, masterfully carved of black volcanic glass. A real obsidian butterfly, a manifestation of the goddess of nocturnal visions. The Emperor's Shadow, in the tradition of the poet-emperors of old, used this fragile, razor-sharp metaphor as a warning.

Popular knowledge says that if you are careful and take the obsidian butterfly off your body, pick it up and set it aside without breaking it or cutting yourself, you are destined to live. To cut yourself or to break the delicate symbol meant you are doomed.

I remembered how my mother was always telling me to be careful, and how my carelessness finally disappointed her for good. With an agonizing effort, I pulled a hand free of the sheets. The butterfly teetered and slipped between a fold of cloth. I carefully reached for it, aiming my fingers at the flat surface of the wings.

"Holy Shit!" I screamed as the edge of one of those black, transparent wings bit into a fingertip. Instinctively, I jerked back my hand. As if alive, the butterfly soared across the room, to shatter into spray of black crystal against the wall.

I sprang from bed, sucked the blood from my finger like a thirsty god, and thought, they may call me Lucky, but there's no question that I was born on the second day of the Rabbit.

* * * *

Uncle Tlaloc wasn't drinking when he summoned me into his presence. That was a very bad sign.

As I knelt before him I felt his eyes boring into the back of my head. He didn't bid me to rise and sit as usual. He just kept looking at me like an ocelot looks at a baby bird—it can't decide whether to play with or just eat right away.

"I understand there was some excitement at your quarters last night," he said at last.

His face didn't change while I told him the story.

"It sounds as if someone wants something you have," Uncle Tlaloc said mildly.

"So it would seem, Uncle-tzin."

"What?" His voice had the sting of a cracking whip. "What is it they seek?"

"On my grave, Uncle, I do not..."

"What did you take from the huetlacoatl?" he roared. I flinched from the sound.

"Nothing, Uncle. I swear it. Ask Ninedeer, if you do not believe me."

"Others are already asking," Uncle said slowly. "Your cousin Ninedeer was taken yesterday. By the Emperor's Shadow, apparently. It seems His Imperial Majesty has decided to interest himself in the matter of the huetlacoatl's death after all."

I realized I was sweating in spite of the air-conditioning. Sweat had already soaked the armpits of my cotton tunic and was starting to trickle down my chest and back. This could probably get worse, but right now I couldn't imagine how.

He looked at me again in a way that wasn't at all settling. "It is not unknown," he said softly, "for someone to try to keep something back if the prize is rich enough."

I remembered what had happened to those people—the ones Uncle Tlaloc had chosen to make an example of—and shuddered. There are worse fates than being slowly flayed alive.

"Uncle-tzin, I swear to you that I hold nothing back. On my own grave I swear it."

Uncle was looking at me in a way that indicated that might not just be a metaphor. Then he leaned back, rested one hand on Death and the other on the Earth Monster and smiled in a way that was totally unsettling.

"And I believe you, my boy. You swear you do not have this thing, whatever it is, and of course you would never lie to me."

"Of course not, Uncle," I croaked.

"So the matter is closed," he said with the same terrifying geniality. "But, nephew..."

"Yes, Uncle?"

"If you do find this thing, you will tell your old uncle, will you not?"

"Of course, Uncle. Absolutely." He gestured at me and I backed away, still on my

knees.

* * * *

I wandered the streets, examining the gathering clouds and play of light on the waters of the bay. There wasn't any place I was going. There also wasn't anybody I could talk to. People who seem to know anything about this mess keep ending up dead.

On a busy corner an old man with the matted hair of a traditional priest was holding out a limp, obviously drugged, rattlesnake. When he saw me, he practically shoved it in my face.

"For only one small gold coin," he said in a voice that had been destroyed by years of exposure to sacred smokes, "I will let you pet the noble serpent who warns before striking, the brother to the Feathered Serpent who gave us our law and culture. It will bring you good luck."

The snake's face was close to mine. Its mouth opened, and its fangs slipped out of their sheaths. All the while, its tail and rattle hung limp, probably because of the drug.

"I don't know, unwashed one," I replied without slowing down. "Your friend looks like he may make an exception and rattle after he bites me."

"Blasphemer!" the old man screamed as he walked away. "The Gods will punish you!"

"I know, I know," I said and turned away.

The problem was, that I didn't know. At least about just what it was that everyone seemed to think I had. I'm an axe, a sweeper, not a sneak-thief. And what is it that I could have slipped under my cloak and smuggled out of the Death Master's, and to my apartment or some secret location? What could be that important? And why would it be on the body of a dead *huetlacoatl*?

Or maybe it was *in* the body ...

The thought was too disgusting to pursue. Besides, the hairs standing on the back of my neck told me that I was being pursued. The old geezer with the groggy rattlesnake was still glaring at me. And his weren't the only eyes on me. People on the street looked away when I looked at them, but I could tell that they were aware of me. Every window and corner made me nervous.

I put my hand on the hilt of my sword. Somehow it did not make me feel secure.

Suddenly, I felt the need to flee. There were too many people. I couldn't sort out who—if anybody—I should be looking out for. I walked faster, until I was just short of a run.

I glanced into some deserted alleys. Unfortunately, they were too deserted. Someone could be cornered, killed, left in a pile of garbage, and not be found for days, flayed by the rats and scavengers that feed off corpses.

Then someone grabbed my sword arm. Something else struck the back of my head. Everything went white hot, then dead black.

* * * *

The sound of conch trumpets filled the air. It was the long, deep tone that announces the approach of a hurricane. Near the English Docks, the great statue of the Storm Goddess looked at me and licked her ragged, stone lips with a pink, fleshy tongue. The water withdrew, back towards the southern continent, leaving ships to sink into the muck on the sea floor. I ran towards higher ground.

The city was deserted. The only signs of life were cages containing parrots that had been reduced to skeletons, and the ants that were picking away at the last remaining bits of meat. Was I asleep when the city was evacuated? No one was in the streets. Nothing moved except for the debris that flew about in the winds.

The clouds boiled. There was a rumbling deep in the earth that echoed through my bones and across the sky. The wind grew stronger, making a noise like the mother of all disease spirits.

Then it rained. The things that pelted me and the empty streets were not raindrops, but eggs. When they hit the ground, they cracked open, leaking a steaming purple fluid and revealing the tiny bodies of creatures that looked almost human.

"Earthmonster, devour me!" I screamed.

"Be calm, Lucky." It was Mother Jaguar. "Things will be all right. Look." She held out a polished obsidian mirror.

I looked into it, and saw myself. My skin hung loosely around my face. Grabbing a handful, I tore it away. Underneath I had a huetlacoatl snout.

"Face your destiny, Tworabbit," said Toltecutli, who was suddenly holding the mirror. As I looked into the mirror I was plunged into darkness. Pungent smoke curled up and I coughed at the vile snake scent.

"He wakens," came a voice from far, far away.

Then the world reeled, the hood was yanked from my head, and I was blinking in the light.

My first thought was that this wasn't the doing of Threeflower's husband. Then where I was actually sank in.

The room was low, gloomy and damp. The gas torches were turned too low for me to see the extent. The furniture was uncomfortably low as well. Uncomfortable for humans, at least. There were three men standing before me and one more crouched down in the background. Correction: There was one more something crouched down behind them, but it wasn't human. It was a huetlacoatl, the first intelligent one I had ever seen—alive, that is.

"We want the body," one of the Speakers said abruptly.

"What?"

"The body of the slain one. We want the rest of it. Come. Do not waste the Great One's time. Give it to us." One of the other three had turned to the huetlacoatl and croaked and squeaked at it as if translating. I couldn't see the huetlacoatl well enough to make out its expression and that was probably just as well.

"You have the body," I said.

This was translated and produced a roar from the huetlacoatl.

"All of it," the Speaker cried. "We must have all of it."

"But it wasn't sacrificed. It was all there."

"*Lies!*" the Speaker screamed. "You think you can lie to us because we do not torture like animals. But we will have the truth and we will have the treasures of the line, the rest of the Great One's body."

I thought fast. Ninedeer had said that all the parts of the *body* were there. They must mean something else, something that was on the body. An insignia of rank perhaps. That made sense in light of Uncle Tlaloc's comment about something being taken from the body. Some priests referred to the sacred objects they wore as part of themselves. And there were stories that the huetlacoatls adorned themselves with rare and costly jewels—as well as less pleasant things. The Speakers were notoriously hard to communicate with, but it made sense.

"Describe this thing to me. The thing that was missing from the Great One's body."

The translation produced another roar from the huetlacoatl and I thought the Speaker would explode, the way he turned red and puffed up. "The treasures of the line," he screamed. "The things that make the Great Ones. We must have them now!"

Treasures. Multiple. Then several things had been taken from the body. I tried to remember if there were any spots on the dead one's cloak where something might have been torn off. Or perhaps they had been attached directly to the skin and that was why it had been cut up.

The huetlacoatl spoke for the first time except in response to the translator: a long collection of hisses, squeaks and squeals that ended with a clash of teeth like a gunshot. All three of the Speakers turned towards the creature and froze in identical postures, one foot in front, bowing forward from the waist and the right fist pressed to the forehead.

"We waste the Great One's time," the Speaker spat as he turned back to me. "If an animal you act, then an animal you shall be treated."

"We are civilized," the Speaker snapped. "We do not offer ourselves in the marketplace for food."

I wondered just what it was the huetlacoatls were trading for—or what they thought they were trading for. "But it is meat that our enemies be hunted in a civilized manner, to expiate their crimes." He gestured to the slaves holding my arms, turned and strode away with me being dragged after him.

"There!" The Speaker gestured over a balcony and down to a court-yard below.

At first I couldn't see anything but a flagged stone yard with a water I rough. Then there was a "wheeping" sound from beneath the balcony, and another, and another. Then four huetlacoatls came bounding into the court, wheeping and craning their necks to see what was on the balcony.

There was nothing to give me scale, so it took me a minute to realize these huetlacoatls were smaller than usual. It took me a minute longer to infer from their clumsy movements and their tussling that these were immature huetlacoatls. As a group they were as cute as a nest of baby rattlesnakes. Only I didn't think they had the high ethical standards of rattlesnakes. And I didn't like the way they were looking up at me and wheeping expectantly.

"We tie you by your arms," the Speaker said. "Then we lower you down so the young can practise hunting. Just your feet and ankles first, then your legs. So you may reconsider your theft from the Great Ones."

Well, at least I'll be able to kick the little bastards' teeth in. Not much comfort, but you take what you can find.

The Speaker leaned close. "Only first we break your legs so you cannot hurt the little Great Ones."

I was digesting this information and trying desperately to come up with a plausible lie when a huetlacoatl whistled so high that it almost hurt. I managed to twist around in the slaves' grip and see that a new group of humans had entered the room.

There were six of them, cloaked in grey, with grey hoods drawn over their heads, and grey masks covering their faces. I'd never seen that outfit before, but I knew

what it was. It was the closest thing to a uniform ever worn by the Emperor's Shadow.

There was a long palaver between the Speaker and one of the Shadows. I divided my attention between trying to overhear them and listening to the plaintive cries of the young huetlacoatls below me, who obviously weren't used to waiting for their supper. Finally, after an extended, involved discussion, the adult huetlacoatl made a slashing gesture and a steam whistle bellow. The Speakers bowed and stepped aside, letting the Emperor's Shadow have me. Personally, I would have preferred the huetlacoatls, but my wishes didn't count for a whore's fart.

Another hood, another journey, but this time I was awake. I know we walked for a ways, there was a boat ride across the bay, a slower, smellier ride through the city's canals, and then more walking. No one spoke, and the ones who held me never loosened their grip.

This time when the hood came off I was in a low-ceilinged room with stone beneath my feet. There was a single blinding light shining in my eyes. I squinted and tried to twist my head away but the ones behind me forced me to look straight ahead.

"Young sir," came a voice from the darkness, "you must learn to associate with more wholesome companions." He hobbled into the light and I saw it was old Foureagle, the menagerie keeper. "If you consort with those who want to be huetlacoatls, evil will befall you."

"What about the company you keep? What's a tender of caged beasts doing with the Emperor's Shadow?" I remembered his remark about having seen the insides of a lot of people and tried not to show it.

He smiled. "A man is many things. It not only keeps life interesting, but it is necessary in times such as these." I decided I had liked the old man a lot better when we were sucking down pulque outside the menagerie. I also realized I had gone fishing for information on a very sensitive matter by questioning a high officer of the Emperor's Shadow. *Shit!* One thing about my luck. It's consistent.

"But come, young sir, you do not seem pleased to see me."

"I think I'd be better off with the huetlacoatls."

Wrong answer. It made Foureagle frown and earned me a kidney punch from one of the Shadows. I sagged forward, retching.

"These ones with their costumes and silly antics have no idea of what they are doing," Foureagle said. "They've got it all wrong, dead wrong."

"They speak to the huetlacoatls well enough."

Foureagle snorted. "They speak as a dog speaks to its master. They sense emotion well enough but they understand only a little. The rest is deception. They deceive themselves and the huetlacoatls deceive and use them."

"Like you use the beasts in the menagerie?"

"The relationship between man and beast can be understood," he said, his eyes narrowed into slits, "but between man and these thinking, talking *creatures*? Where do we begin to know anything? How can we trust?"

"You understand them."

He shrugged. "I know when they are afraid. Even if their language is mostly a mystery, the prattling of the Speakers is easy to understand. The huetlacoatls are upset and they are driven to the point of hysteria. The thing you took from the body was very important to them." He smiled. "Important enough that the huetlacoatls brought the affair—forcefully—to the attention of the Emperor Himself. You were unwise to upset them so, young sir. If we cannot understand each other, we cannot trade, and the Emperor values the trade with the huetlacoatls very highly."

We were still in the intellectual fencing stage, which meant I would remain whole and functioning for a least another few minutes. What Foureagle said made sense. The huetlacoatls hadn't been really upset until they recovered the body with whatever-it-was missing. Then it took time for the word to reach the capital and for the Emperor to turn his Shadow's interest to this new case. All very logical, but I was damned if I could see how it helped me.

"Uncle, I swear to you I took nothing from the body."

"So Ninedeer maintained," the old man said, as if savouring a memory.

I shook off the sudden chill down my spine. "If something was taken, it must have been by someone else. The sailor who found the body, for instance. Or the city guards who investigated it."

A gauntleted fist slammed into my face. I had to cough and hack to clear the blood so I could breathe.

"These possibilities have been explored—thoroughly," Foureagle said. "So we come to you by a process of, ah, 'elimination'."

"But I took—" This time the blow was from the front and knocked the breath out of me. Somewhere off to one side there was the sudden odour of burning charcoal as someone lit a brazier. I twisted and gasped and knew this was only the bare beginning of what they'd do to me before I died.

Unless...

The Speakers kept referring to the missing thing as "part of" the huetlacoatl. The huetlacoatls themselves might have continued that use, but the Speakers would have known enough to employ human usage when questioning a human.

Another blow to the face ended my speculation.

"Uncle," I gasped. "These things, how do they bear their young?"

"Eh?" This wasn't the way he expected the conversation to go. "Why, eggs, of course. Like crocodiles, or birds."

Shit! Another beautiful theory murdered by a gang of ugly facts.

"Although," Foureagle continued slowly, "not all of them lay the eggs in a nest. Some of them, like some snakes, hold the eggs in their bodies until the young hatch." He looked at me sharply. "Like the huetlacoatls."

"And the one who died was female." It wasn't a question. "Toltectecuhtli keeps talking about a great joining of humans, English, and even huetlacoatls. To make that work he's going to need something like the Speakers." The effort made me cough, which hurt my ribs even more. I wondered how many were broken.

"Except they would be huetlacoatls raised among humans rather than the other way around," the old man finished my thought. "Young sir, I believe you have it." He smiled, and I felt the grip on my arms loosen imperceptibly. Then he frowned. "But it is still just a theory, of course. And it does not tell us where the eggs are."

"I think I know," I said slowly. "Uncle, may I beg the boon of a handspan of days to find out?"

Foureagle rubbed his chin. "I will give you one day," he said.

Considering the obvious alternative, I took it.

* * * *

One thing about being beaten up, it makes disguise easier—if you're disguising yourself as a cripple, that is. And I was. Some artificial scars and pockmarks helped the effect. But the bruises on my face and the swollen eye were real. So were the limping, halting gait and the painful, gasping breath. The ragged tunic was my servant's, but the sword underneath was mine.

The public parts of the temple were easily accessible. There was no service tonight, but a fair number of pilgrims wandered the halls, pausing at small shrines to pray and make offerings. No guards, of course. One would have to be truly mad *or very young and stupid* to profane or steal from a temple, even a temple of such an odd

religion.

I hadn't really seen much of the place the last time. It turned out the inside was just as gaudy and probably just as disturbing as the outside. "Probably" because the place was lit by torches rather than gas lamps and much of it was lost in the gloom.

Now if I were a huetlacoatl egg, where would I be?

Someplace secure, of course. Out of the way, yet an important place. A sacred place. Then I remembered the use the Frogs traditionally made of their temples that the Reed folk did not. If this place followed the custom, there would be a crypt beneath the structure, a place for the burial of kings. *Or the birthplace of kings.*

The place had probably been a maze to begin with and the group's alterations hadn't improved that any. I drifted along the corridors, stopping at shrines to pay my respects and generally trying to look like I belonged.

Toltecutli came striding down the corridor, resplendent in a headdress of quetzal plumes and beaten gold. He still wore the lizard-skin stomacher and the gold Quetzalcoatl gorget, but his elaborately embroidered kilt was new. From his belt hung a maquahatl, the flat wooden war club fitted with blades of keen obsidian along the edges. With his sloped head he looked like he had stepped out of a temple wall painting.

What the hell? I followed him. He went to the centre of the ground floor, then down a stairway that was framed by the masterfully sculpted gaping jaws of gigantic huetlacoatls. It reminded me of stories of the underworld, the many Hells beneath the earth. An undistinguished soul on his way to oblivion, or one of the Lords of Death?

Down the stairs it grew dark, and the air became clammy. I heard moaning. Horrible moaning. I shuddered. Could the myths be true?

At the end of the narrow stair was a long corridor, with light showing from a side passage far down and off the right. I pressed myself against the wall and glided towards the light. The dank silence was broken only by an occasional moan.

Toltecutli stood in the middle of a wide chamber lit with many lamps. The light flickered and shifted, making it hard to see things. Which was, perhaps, for the best.

The place was a ghastly parody of the Death Master's laying-out room. Stone tables dotted the room and forms covered with sheets lay on most of them. Toltecutli was bending over one of the tables with his back to the door. He did something, and the thing on the table moaned like one who has been flayed but is not quite dead yet.

As Toltecutli stood up I could see that the person on the table still had her skin, at least from the waist up. The priest strode away from the table to a door in the rear of the room. He unlocked it, passed through, and I heard the lock click as he

relocked it from the inside.

I stayed where I was, listening hard. There was no sound through the damp, close air, not even from the tables. But there was a smell: the stink of strong tequila.

I moved carefully into the room and approached the table where Toltecutli had uncovered the woman. She was young, with breasts that were full but had not yet begun to sag. She might have been pretty once, but suffering had drained all the beauty, and most of the humanity, from her.

"Fourflower?" I whispered. She turned drug-dimmed eyes to me. They were like the eyes of a dumb animal. No hope, no pleading.

Then I saw why. There was a gaping red wound from breastbone to groin. The belly skin was pink and healthy with no flush of infection, but the edges of the wound were separated by a hand-breadth and the belly was pushed out, as if bloated.

I looked closer and saw there was something in the wound, inside the woman.

It was greyish, rounded and netted all over like a melon. I didn't have Foureagle's knowledge of human insides, but I knew that this thing didn't belong in a human belly. I shifted to get a better view and saw it was about twice the size of a large goose egg.

Eggs? Then all the fragments fell together. Like a shattered obsidian butterfly reassembling itself and flying away.

There are priest-surgeons, specialists, who can open a man up without killing him to treat a sickness of the body. They use the finest obsidian blades, take the greatest care not to cut into the bowels and carefully sew the flesh and skin together after dousing the area with the purest double-distilled tequila. Most of the time the patient even recovers.

Toltecutli wanted a blending of huetlacoatl and human. What better way to blend the two essences than incubating huetlacoatl eggs within human bodies?

There was a crash behind me of something shattering on the stone. I whirled and saw Toltecutli standing in the door I had come through. The remains of a jug at his feet and the stronger smell of tequila told me where he'd been. In the semi-darkness with the lamps hitting him from below he looked like a vengeful wall painting come to life. About a ten-foot-tall wall painting.

"Good evening," I said pleasantly, to distract him while I figured out whether I'd have to take him out or could just run.

If Toltecutli's eyes were crossed, there was nothing wrong with his hearing.

"You do not belong here, Tworabbit."

"I couldn't agree with you more," I said amiably. "So I'll just be going."

"Your part was ignorance! I told you to play your part in the great change."

"Ignorance is an expensive commodity," I said, moving sideways towards the main door. "Too expensive for a lowly person such as me."

He growled in inarticulate fury and leaped to the door, blocking my way out. In a single swirling motion he went for the bladed war club at his belt and launched a furious overhand swipe at my head.

I ducked and barely got my sword up to parry. The force of the blow drove my forearm down onto my forehead and twisted my sword in my grip. But the club went skittering off my sword and missed my body altogether. I tried a fast counterslash to his chest, but the old man twisted away easily and brought his maquahatl up in a disembowelling blow. I parried and gave ground and he came after me swinging left-and-right at my head.

That damn club was heavy, which made it hard to parry, and the obsidian blades set along the edge could open me up as efficiently as any steel sword. In spite of his age this priest was strong as an ox and fast as a teenager. I was neither and I was in a lot of trouble.

I tried to dodge around to his left side, but he spun on his toes before I could complete the move. He aimed another at my head. I raised my sword to parry and with a twist of the wrist he dropped the blow towards my legs. I scrambled back, but the tip raked me across the shins, leaving bright wellings of blood on both legs.

Frantically I dodged around a stone table. He struck at me over it and I flinched back, feeling the air stir as the maquahatl whistled past my face. The person on the table looked at me with dumb, pain-ridden eyes.

As Toltecutli came around the table, I whipped my cloak off and threw it at his face, trying to blind him. While the cloak was still in the air I followed through with a lunging thrust. I missed but his reflexive return stroke didn't—quite. The club came down on the point of my right shoulder and tore an ugly gaping wound that left my whole arm numb.

He saw what he had done to me and started forward in triumph, his club coming up for an overhand blow.

I tossed the sword to my left hand and parried. This time his eyes widened and he stepped back. "Huitzilopitchli," he whispered hoarsely. "Lord Left-Handed Hummingbird."

I don't know what was going on in that god-ridden, madness-fogged brain, but obviously I had triggered something. I pressed the advantage ruthlessly, striking left and right in my turn before he could recover his composure.

He parried, but more clumsily. Madness aside, fighting a left-handed swordsman is difficult for a right-handed. You have to do some things backward and very few nobles ever train in the art because left-handedness is considered unlucky. Uncle Tlaloc's retainers are more practical about such things.

Then I remembered there was another difference between a maquahatl and a sword. I faked a downward slash at his belly, which brought his club up in a parry that made my blade slip off. Then instead of continuing with another slash, I brought the point up and lunged towards his belly with my hand low.

I felt a moment's resistance as the point pierced the lizard-skin stomacher, then a slow, easy slide as I sliced into his bowels. The blow forced him back against the edge of the one of the tables and his eyes widened.

I leaned into the sword, putting my weight behind it, forcing the point deeper into his belly and ripping up until it grated on the breastbone. His eyes widened, his mouth moved, but only blood came out to run down the beaten gold gorget of the god Quetzalcoatl. I eased the pressure and he slumped to the floor, my sword still in him.

I leaned back against the wall, my chest heaving. The cuts on my legs were bleeding profusely, my shoulder was still numb with pain, but there was more blood running down my right arm and that side of the chest. My left wrist was throbbing as if I had sprained it. All in all, I looked like the victim of a particularly inept sacrificial priest. But I was alive, and right now that felt better than being crowned Emperor Himself.

"Well done, young sir," came an all-too-familiar voice from the doorway, "well done indeed."

Foureagle came stumping into the room, accompanied by five or six hard-looking men. "I trust you have recovered the missing items."

I gestured towards the still figures on the tables. "In there. One in each."

The old man bent over the nearest table and examined its burden. "Ah, yes. Ingenious and even, perhaps, theologically sound—from Toltecutli's perspective, of course."

"What will you do with them?" Not that I really cared.

"Why, return them to the huetlacoatls, of course. Oh, you mean the people? We will save them, if we can." He gestured to the men behind him and they disappeared down the corridor.

"You look as if you could use some tending to yourself." He laid his hands, oddly gentle, on my shoulder, testing the wound. "Yes, we must get that attended to. But not here. Can you walk? Ah, excellent. I am afraid this place will shortly suffer an unfortunate accident. A fire, I believe." He looked around appraisingly, nodded, and stroked his chin. "Yes, I think a fire will do nicely."

He half-supported me as he guided me towards the door. "But I do hope you will come and visit me. After you have healed, of course. We have so much to discuss. Your future, for example, and perhaps some additional employment. Yes, I think we must discuss that, young sir."

I thought about how I would explain working for the Emperor's Shadow to Uncle Tlaloc. Then I thought about Uncle Tlaloc's probable reaction. Then I thought about what Foureagle certainly would do to me if I refused. Turning of the cycle or not, my luck hadn't changed.

With that thought, I let them guide me down the corridor and out into the piss-warm rain of night.

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