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Blood lay in layers on the steps near the summit of the Great Pyramid, the afternoon's flowing over the morning's, the fresh over the dry. My bare foot struck it with a wet slap and came up again with a sound like thin cotton tearing.

Two temples crowned the Pyramid: Huitzilopochtli's, the war-god's, on the right, and Tlaloc's, the rain-god's, on the left.

This evening the blood seeping down the steps belonged to the war-god. It was the annual Festival of the Raising of Banners, when a treat awaited the Fire Priest and his flint knife: something more than the usual shuffling lines of anonymous captives. Today, the merchants, the long-distance traders known as Pochteca, presented their gifts to the god: strong, beautiful dancers, the pick of the slaves in the market, selected, pampered and trained for months to make their last day on Earth a flawless masterpiece.

'You've seen more sacrifices than I have, Yaotl. Did you ever see one go like this before?' The man climbing beside me had a gruff voice made gruffer by the effort of lugging a heavy burden up the side of the Pyramid. He was called Momaimati, and he had the solid, useful look that went with his name, which meant One Skilled with his Hands or, as I thought of him, 'Handy'.

We were so near the top of the pyramid that we had to stop and wait while, just above our heads, the priests ended a man's time on earth and scattered his blood to the four Directions. The rich merchant who had paid for the victim and escorted him all the way to the sacrificial stone looked on like a proud father at a wedding. I knew a hundred ways to die. I had seen maimed, glazed-eyed prisoners of war stumbling insensibly to their fate and captured nobles clinging to their dignity to the end, and even a few mad creatures dancing up the steps crying out brave nonsense about the sweetness of the Flowery Death. No two were ever the same.

'No,' I admitted, 'I never did.'

Behind us a little party trudged up the steps: the next victim and his sponsor, a timid-looking merchant got up in the finery of a seasoned warrior, with his much more ferocious-looking wife on his arm. Their sacrifice was on his feet, though, and apart from his shaven head and the deathly pallor of his skin might have been any slave or retainer running an errand.

I looked ruefully down at our own offering. I was cradling a dead man's head in the crook of my arm so that it would not flop about so obviously. The bloody mush at his temple would be harder to hide than the broken neck, I thought, but I doubted the priests would be fooled either way.

The only escort this one would have on his last journey would be Handy and I: a common man and a slave. The affable young man who had sponsored him had disappeared, along with the rest of his entourage, scattering as quickly as frightened birds when their carefully prepared, expensive victim had run amok. We had dragged the body halfway back up the pyramid from where we had found it, broken by its fall, only to find the rest of our party vanished like mist over the lake and ourselves left with nothing to offer the war-god and his bloodthirsty minions except a human sacrifice who was already dead.

A novice signalled to us from the top of the steps.

'I'll let you do the talking,' Handy grunted, as he picked up the corpse's feet.

'Let's try and keep him upright,' I hissed. 'Maybe they won't notice.'

Smells assailed my nostrils and it was hard to say which of them was the worst. The priests had not bathed for months and gave off a miasma of blood and stale sweat that not even the sweet resinous odour of the temple fires could mask, but what was truly appalling was the stench of putrefying offal that hung in the air around them: the smell of decaying human hearts, torn out of the breasts of sacrificial victims, cast, still beating, into the Eagle Vessel, and left there to rot. I could all too easily imagine my own among them. Slaves, unless they had been bought for the purpose, were not usually killed, but when the priests saw what we had brought them, I was afraid they might be angry enough to make an exception.

Handy and I each got an arm under the sacrifice's shoulders and heaved him forward. Apart from his feet dragging on the stones between us and his head lolling on each of our shoulders in turn, I told myself, he looked convincingly alive.

'What's the matter with him?' demanded the novice who had signalled to us.

‘Passed out,’ I said. ‘They do that, don’t they? It’s the sacred wine they make them drink.’

‘He’s not passed out. He’s dead,’ the novice stated flatly.

‘Dead?’ Handy had decided to play dumb.

‘It looks to me,’ said one of the older priests, ‘like he fell down the steps trying to make a run for it. I wondered what all the fuss was about down there.’

‘Perhaps he slipped.’ I was running out of excuses.

‘So he ran away. How can we offer up a creature like this to the war-god?’

There were six priests up here, grouped around the altar in front of the temple. Five of them wore short ceremonial capes and feathered head-fans hung with pasted paper pendants, and had their cheeks painted with red ochre. Among them was the Fire Priest, whose rôle in the proceedings was all too obvious from the enormous, bloody, glistening flint knife he bore.

It was not the knife which made me nervous, however, but the sight of the sixth priest, the one the others kept looking at for their cue, a man resplendent in a flowing cloak of blue-green quetzal feathers and a towering, shimmering quetzal feather headdress, with a turquoise rod through his nose and an obsidian mirror on his chest. When this man glared at Handy and me, the bars on his cheeks and the star design painted around his eyes rippled menacingly. He was in charge today and he was not happy. As the representative of Peynal, the war-god’s lieutenant, he had just run a circuit of the city, from the sacred precinct all the way up to Tlatelolco and back again, killing several sacrificial victims on the way, and this after an eighty-day fast. Had he not been hungry, exhausted and very irritable he would not have been human, and if a man in Peynal’s position felt slighted then events could quickly turn nasty.

‘The war-god,’ he growled, ‘needs his nourishment.’

I swallowed. Needing inspiration, I looked across to the temple of Tlaloc.

I thought I saw a movement in its shadow.

Without sparing the time to think I called out: ‘Hey, you! What are you laughing at?’

Seven heads snapped round to follow my glance. Only the dead man kept his eyes on the floor.

For long moments nothing happened. The summit of the Pyramid, so far above the bustle of the city, was as silent as a mountain top. We were not a people given to raising our voices and my calling out seemed to have shocked the air into stillness.

Then, just as seven pairs of eyes began turning back towards me and questions began to form on seven pairs of lips, a man stepped out of the shadows.

His gaunt face was stained black with soot, black blood stuck to his temples and he wore a black cloak: a priest of the rain-god, Tlaloc.

He stared at us, his eyes narrowed in an expression that I might have taken for curiosity if I had not noticed a barely perceptible movement at the corners of his mouth.

He was indeed laughing at us.

I stared back at him, savouring the sight and letting it register with the blood-soaked men around me. The rain-god's priest looked away and pointed towards us, and soon he was joined by another, also laughing and gesturing.

As innocently as I could, I asked: 'Who are they, then?'

A priest of Huitzilopochtli answered me without taking his eyes off his neighbours. 'They're nothing. Ignore them.'

'Why do you think they're laughing?' I persisted.

The two priests of Tlaloc were clowning around, one of them rolling his head about in an imitation of a man with a broken neck while the other made mock stabbing motions towards his chest.

'Because they don't know any better,' growled the Fire Priest.

'They love seeing us made fools of,' said the novice who had first called us forward. 'One of the biggest days of the year, a queue of rich merchants waiting on the steps, the Emperor and everyone down there in the sacred precinct, watching – and we're dithering over a stiff!'

Two of his elders started speaking at once. One raised an arm, probably to make a point rather than do violence to anyone, but Peynal stepped sharply round the altar to restrain him. One of the men from the neighbouring temple had fallen over and was slapping the stuccoed floor in a display of exaggerated mirth.

One of the war-god's priests snapped. Shaking a fist at the rain-god's temple, he roared, 'Shut up, you!' in a voice they could have heard on the far shore of the lake.

His colleagues stared at him.

The embarrassed silence was broken by a cough, just a little too loud to be called respectful. There was a procession on the steps behind us, and every member of it, one way or another, was impatient for his moment of glory. I heard a female voice

remark in an audible whisper that if these idiots did not get a move on there was not going to be much of a feast. There would scarcely be time to get their slave's remains back home to Tlatelolco, let alone cook him, and no way was she eating him raw.

Peynal scowled, distorting the bars and stars on his face still further. He was sweating. A moment longer and his paint would start to run. His mouth twitched dangerously.

'He didn't try to run away,' I protested desperately. 'He slipped. It was an accident. It was our fault. We are clumsy and stupid. He was too strong for us, truly worthy of the god.'

The priests looked unconvinced. They seemed more interested in their neighbours' antics.

'Those bastards are laughing at us. One of these days ...'

'Please,' I begged, 'we've brought the war-god an offering. It's not much but it's all we have. He will have his fill of hearts this evening. Can't you accept this one, even if it isn't beating?'

Peynal seemed to come to a decision. He gestured sharply at the Fire Priest. 'Get on with it and get them out of here!'

Then everything happened very fast.

The priests pulled the corpse from our grasp and a moment later had it stretched over the sacrificial stone with one holding each arm and leg and the chest arching towards the sky. The Fire Priest stood over it for a moment, his lips moving swiftly through the words of a hymn. He brandished his blade high over his head and brought it down with both hands.

It crunched into the chest and the whole body bucked in the hands of the other priests as if in a death throes. They were used to the real thing, though – to men who fought for life to the end or whose bodies fought on for them afterwards – and they clung on while the knife rose and fell again.

There was no fountain of blood when the heart came out, just an inert lump of raw meat that the Fire Priest tossed disdainfully into the Eagle Vessel without sparing it a glance.

They dragged the body off the stone by its feet. They took it to the edge of the steps – the great, broad flight that we had toiled up – and threw it away with an easy swing born of years of practice before turning silently back in our direction.

The silence endured.

The six priests stared at Handy and me. Peynal's eyes were narrow with disgust. The Fire Priest shook his flint knife absently, to flick some of the blood off it, and I felt some of the warm fluid splash my face and run slowly down my cheek.

I was suddenly aware of the space between the priests and us. Now that the dead man's cored body had been cast so contemptuously aside, there was nothing in that space but the rapidly chilling evening air and the ugly angular bloodstained hump of the sacrificial stone.

Handy and I looked at each other uncertainly.

Peynal shot a brief, contemptuous glance at the steps his acolytes had thrown the body down, before turning back to us.

'You're going the same way he did,' he spat.

Without looking at each other, Handy and I both took a step backwards. I found myself on the very edge of the temple platform with a void beneath my heels. A squawk of alarm from behind me reminded me that there were people waiting on the top stair.

One of the priests started towards me. He stopped to look uncertainly back at Peynal, and that gave Handy and me our chance.

The big commoner darted sideways and leapt down the pyramid steps. I followed him, my feet slithering on fresh blood, until I found myself staggering at the very top of the World's most terrifying staircase. The vast expanse of the sacred precinct we called the Heart of the World wheeled sickeningly below me, and when I looked up the setting Sun's bloody glare swamped my vision.

I hurled myself blindly down the face of the pyramid.

## 2

Handy and I ran from the Fire Priest's flint knife as fast as we could, alternately bounding down the steep narrow steps and sliding through the slick of blood that covered them.

We caught up with the remains of our sacrifice where they had come to rest, two-thirds of the way down. We were too tired and badly winded to run any further by then, and our panic was beginning to subside. In its place came anger and resentment and as there was no one else about we took them out on the corpse, shoving and kicking it the rest of the way to the base of the Great Pyramid, where the butchers were waiting for it.

As the bodies came bumping down to the bottom of the steps they were promptly hauled to one side and dismembered by burly men wielding knives of flint and obsidian. At times like this, when there were so many victims, the butchers had to work rapidly to keep up with the priests at the Pyramid's summit. They hacked off the head, to be flayed and mounted on the skull rack. They took a little more care over the left arm, stretching it out and severing it as neatly as they could, as it was going to the palace to feed the Emperor and his guests. They discarded the trunk, as a man's entrails and offal were thought fit only for the beasts in the Emperor's zoo. The remaining limbs were placed in a neat pile, ready for the victim's owner to come and take them home, where they would be cooked up into a stew with maize and beans and eaten at a ritual banquet.

Handy and I expected to find the affable young man there, among the crowd of people waiting to collect their offerings, but there was no sign of him.

'Have you seen Ocotl, the merchant?' I asked one of the butchers.

'Are these his, then?' Blood dripped from the man's fingers as he gestured towards a pair of legs and an arm lying next to him. 'You'd better take them quick, before they get mixed up with someone else's!'

‘No, you don’t understand, I’m looking for ...’

Behind me, a series of soft thumps announced the next victim’s arrival at the foot of the stairway. I stepped aside hastily as the butcher made as if to push me out of the way. ‘Look, take your meat and bugger off, will you? Some of us have work to do!’

I caught Handy’s eye and between us we carried the severed limbs to a quieter spot at the edge of the crowd. We waited for the merchant there, but still he failed to appear.

‘The young fool will have to go without his supper,’ Handy observed eventually. ‘Not that there was much eating on this one anyway.’

We both looked dispassionately at the arm and legs.

It was hard to associate them with the living, breathing person we had seen die just a little while earlier, but I knew that was part of the process, the victim’s dismemberment, the final step in his obliteration as a human being.

Not for the first time that day, it occurred to me that there was something not quite right about our offering. His arms and legs looked too skinny to be a dancer’s, and the skin, exposed now, with most of the chalk dust that had been used to give it a corpse-like pallor knocked or rubbed off, was covered in wounds of all kinds: scratches, punctures, bruises, and a few marks that looked like burns.

‘It doesn’t look very appetizing,’ I mumbled non-committally. Not all the marks could have been made by the fall, I realised, and some must be a few days old at least, as they looked half healed. How could that be, I wondered, when I knew the merchants insisted on physical perfection when they selected their victims?

‘Never acquired the taste, myself,’ Handy said. ‘I know it’s only polite to have a mouthful, if someone from your parish brings home a captive, but give me a slice of turkey or dog any day.’ He turned his back on the severed limbs and started rummaging in a cloth bag he had brought with him. ‘I could do with something to eat now, though. Tell you what. I’ve a tortilla left over from lunch. We’ll split it, and you can tell me what that was all about.’

I glanced doubtfully up at the Pyramid. The blue and red of the temples at its summit still gleamed vividly in the sunshine, but the line of shadow creeping up the bloodstained steps told me it was not long before nightfall.

‘Just a bite, maybe. I have to get back. Can’t keep my master waiting.’

We left the merchant's offering where it lay, for want of any better idea of what to do with it. I gave the pathetic pile of flesh a last look as we walked across the Heart of the World towards the marketplace, but nobody came to collect it, even though I lingered as long as I decently could, still wondering about those strange marks.

We sat beside the canal that bordered the marketplace and munched on our round, flat bread.

'I only know what I was told,' I said, 'which isn't much. Go to the merchant's house, join the procession, make sure the sacrifice goes according to plan. My master wanted me there because I know how these things are done. I guess he owed the young man's family a favour. Do you suppose he expected this to happen?'

Handy curled his lip. 'How should I know?' He glanced over his shoulder at a corner of the now deserted marketplace where bearers and day-labourers could be found squatting at daybreak, plying for hire. 'They took me on as an escort the day before yesterday. They needed an extra pair of hands, in case the offering got frisky. Muscle, you know.' Flesh flowed suggestively under the brown skin of his arms, making me glance wistfully at the bony claws holding my food. 'Not much to do in the fields today, so I came here. Too many mouths to feed to be sitting around idle at home. Some young lad came up to me and told me I'd do.'

I had found Ocotl and Handy that morning at daybreak, waiting by the short, stumpy pyramid of the parish temple in Pochtlan, one of the merchants' parishes in Tlatelolco, the northern part of the city.

Ocotl sported an amber lip-plug, green shell-shaped ear pendants and a netted cape, and carried his feather fan and feathered staves with the assurance of a veteran warrior. He was tall for an Aztec, although it was hard to tell what he looked like beneath all his finery; and he had the cheerful, cocksure manner of the young. His name meant a pine torch, or, figuratively, a Shining Light, one who led an exemplary life.

Handy wore what had once been his best clothes – an embroidered breechcloth with trailing ends, a little frayed at the edges, and a two-captive warrior's orange cloak that had lost much of its colour.

There were two servants, too, whose sole charge was the heap of fine-looking cloaks that Shining Light had brought along in case he needed them for his slave's

ransom. He needed these because his offering's last journey to the war-god's temple was not going to be a straightforward one. While the priest dressed as Peynal ran his exhausting circuit of the city, all the offerings due to be presented by the merchants would be conducted first to the parish temple at Coatlan, where a crowd of warrior captives would be waiting in ritual ambush.

The ambush was a curious part of the day's proceedings, whose meaning I had never really understood, unless it was simply to teach the merchants that everything worth having had to be fought for, notwithstanding that they had already paid forty cloaks for it at the slave market. The warrior captives – men who were themselves due to die before sunset – would do their best to take the merchants' offerings away from them, and the doomed slaves were expected to defend themselves with shields and obsidian-studded swords. It was a real fight, fuelled on both sides by sacred wine and the courage of despair, and if a warrior captive managed to get a slave he would kill him unless the slave's owner paid a ransom to the warrior's captor. The ransom was always paid, since otherwise the merchant would have nothing to offer the war-god, and all his expensive preparations would have gone to waste.

One look at the slave himself convinced me that his owner must have little notion of the value of money.

He was not an impressive sight. He had been made to keep vigil at the temple all night and then plied with drink. His hair had gone at midnight and the fine clothes he had been given the night before had been taken away at dawn, when his face had been washed and his skin covered with chalk to give it a deathly pallor. Now he looked twitchy and febrile, starting even at the gentle voice of the woman who attended him, his bather, as she whispered soothing words into his ear. There was not even a suggestion of the dancer he must once have been in his spindly arms and legs and even though the chalk hid the marks on his skin he had one obvious physical blemish. His ears stuck out of his head at a ludicrous angle, like wings.

There was no time for talking as we took our places in the procession but I watched the sacrifice closely. He shuffled along, making no response to the constant chatter of the old woman walking beside him, with his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

At Coatlan, he mutely accepted a shield and an obsidian-studded sword when they were pressed into his hands but made no use of them. That was not altogether surprising: sometimes the sacred wine made the victims fight like wounded jaguars, but you never could tell what they would do in advance. What struck me, as Handy

and I led him back to his master with our ears still full of the warrior captives' jeers, was the young merchant's indifference to losing his ransom. There had been enough cloth there to keep me in some style for two years.

Peynal's arrival at the head of a crowd of panting followers stopped the fight and began the victims' final journey to the foot of the Great Pyramid, where the Emperor sat before a great crowd to watch the war-god receive his due.

Our slave acted his part with the others as they ran or staggered four times around the Pyramid's base before lining up meekly at the bottom of the steps. He watched in silence while Peynal ran to the top, and the sacrificial papers and the paper, cloth and feather image of the Fire-Serpent were brought down and burned. He said nothing as Peynal descended once more to show the war-god's image to the victims before leading them to their deaths at the summit of the Pyramid.

It was only on the way up that things began to go awry.

Shining Light, the victim and his bather mounted the steps side by side, with Handy and me behind them. I could not take my eyes off those absurd ears. The bather had fallen silent at last, but the merchant kept up a cheerful banter.

'Not long now. How I envy you! The Flowery Death! To dance attendance on the Sun and be reborn as a hummingbird, a butterfly! I spend my days scratching around like a turkey after corn, and when I die I will go to the Land of the Dead like every other wretched soul, but you ...'

'Can't see him shouldering the Sun's palanquin, myself,' Handy mumbled. 'You could count to twenty on his backbone. It would help if he held his head up, but he looks all in to me. I thought the merchants were choosier ... Look out! There he goes!'

The slave fooled us. Instead of running down the steps, and so blundering straight into us, or simply racing up them, where there was no escape and one of us would have caught him almost immediately, he broke sideways to dart across the broad face of the Pyramid. He had gone ten paces before Handy and I were after him.

The young merchant kept climbing, seemingly enjoying his moment so much that he failed to notice that his offering had escaped. The bather just stood and stared after her charge.

'Come back here, you ...!' Handy roared as he dashed after the sacrifice. We raced along the narrow steps with a hopping gait, each foot on a different level, and if the gods have a sense of humour then some at least must have been laughing. It

took an agonizingly long time for our quarry to run out of space and find himself looking out over the steep side of the Pyramid from between two of the stone banner-holders that lined the stairway.

I knew he was going to jump.

‘Listen to me, all of you!’ he cried, as though the whole vast teeming city spread out beneath him could hear. ‘It’s the boat – the big boat! Look for the big boat!’

‘Wait!’ I said, desperately. What could I say to a man who was about to die, no matter what he or I might do? I tried to make out his expression, but against the background of the evening sky and the lake shining like gold in the sunset he was just a shadow with large ears.

‘You mustn’t jump. You’re destined for the war-god – you heard your master, you’re going to join the morning Sun ...’

The Bathed Slave turned back towards me then, twisting and stepping backwards at the same time, so that he was poised on the edge of the steps.

‘It’s a lie,’ he said quietly. ‘Bathed Slaves go to the Land of the Dead, like everyone else.’

When he smiled his teeth showed white among the shadows of his face.

‘Just tell the old man,’ he said.

I dived for his feet, almost going over myself as I crashed onto the stones where he had been – but he had taken his last step and was lying, broken, far below me.