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It was a fine evening at the beginning of the year Thirteen Rabbit, after the winter rains had ceased but before the time for planting maize and amaranth. A few stars were out, sparkling frostily in the clear sky. In front of a little palace a girl kneeled to prepare chocolate, while I watched her and thought about fate.

On the day I was born, a soothsayer had told my parents that I would prosper and grow rich. This was on account of that day being One Death, which was sacred to Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror, the god who fixed our destinies and ruled our daily lives.

When I grew up, I learned exactly why the seer had thought that particular god would favour me. He would have consulted the Book of Days, the long screenfold volume which had every possible combination of day, month and year inscribed on its stiff bark paper pages. On the strength of his advice I had become a priest, which was a rare thing for a commoner's child but which my father had obviously thought a promising way to the fortune and renown that were my due.

As a priest I often had to look at the Book of Days myself, committing the pictures in it to memory: the glyphs for the days, months and years, and the harsh, angular, stylised images of the gods who presided over each of them. I knew exactly what the soothsayer had seen, and in his place would have made the same prediction. Nonetheless, on this evening in Thirteen Rabbit, as my eyes lingered over the sight of slim brown fingers gently turning a gourd bowl, then tipping it delicately until the warm, foaming contents spilled into another vessel, I asked myself what that learned man had actually done, all those years ago. Perhaps he had not looked my future up in a book after all. Why go to the trouble, when all he had needed to do was to take a few sacred mushrooms and give himself a vision of me as I was now, idling away my time on a marble patio, with half my attention on the game I was supposed to be

playing and half on the girl and the rich aroma rising from those bowls. That, I thought contentedly, ought to have told him all he needed to know.

My opponent's peevish voice roused me from my reverie.

'Are you going to make your throw or do you intend spending the entire evening eyeing up that young woman?'

A torch, flickering behind me, caught the tiny hairs on the girl's arm, so that they glittered as she skimmed foam off the top of one of the bowls with a spoon and shook it into a third vessel. With my last, wistful glance, I caught what may have been the tiniest hint of a smile flickering across her beautiful face before I turned reluctantly back to the cross-shaped mat spread out in front of me.

'All right. Here we go... Oh, not again!' Four beans spilled out of my fist to fall, every one of them, white side up beside the mat. Nothing. I could not move.

The game was patolli: a race around a cross-shaped board where the first player to get all his counters back to where he started from was the winner. It resembled life, the centre and arms of the board representing the world's five directions, the fifty-two points on it standing for a full bundle of years, which however long a man actually lived was thought of as his natural time on Earth. It was seen as a means of revealing what the gods had in store for us, although as often as not we played it for fun or money.

'Bad luck, Yaotl,' the other player chuckled, as he gathered the beans for his own throw. He managed a four, his beans all landing with their black faces showing, which, since he had just one counter left on the board exactly four points from home, meant he had won. 'Your divine patron isn't with you tonight, is he?'

I grinned in spite of myself. 'I thought you told me it was a game of skill! But it's funny you should mention Tezcatlipoca. I was just thinking about all the tricks the god has chosen to play on me and what a funny one this one has turned to be!' I glanced about me, deliberately taking in all our surroundings, from the elegant house behind us to the girl who was now taking the foam she had skimmed off the surface of the chocolate and spreading it carefully over little clay cups full of the stuff. 'Do you think this is what he had in mind for us all along?'

I had served the god as a priest; but in my time I had also been a thief, then one of the water-folk, raking scum off the surface of the lake for a living, as well as a drunk, a prisoner and a slave. To the best of my knowledge no soothsayer had ever predicted any of that.

‘You mean this place?’ To my surprise, my opponent seemed to take me seriously. The weather-beaten face that the elderly merchant turned towards me wore a frown. ‘I shouldn’t count on it if I were you. There’s a reason why they use this game to foretell the future. Anything can happen! And remember, none of this is really ours. What the god or even the king gives us can be taken away, just like... that!’ To illustrate his point he threw all the beans in the air.

We tracked them with our eyes as they dropped to the floor. They bounced and spun across the marble and for a few moments it was not clear what they were going to do. Even after they had come to rest, it was hard to take in what had happened. Then we both stared at them in shocked silence.

We saw the dark sides of two beans and the white side of a third, but it was the fourth that we both noticed, for it lay poised on its edge.

I had never seen such a thing before. It was so rare that if it happened during the course of a game, the player whose throw it was would win all the stakes. Eventually I said weakly: ‘I see what you mean!’

The old man’s response was a whispered curse. ‘Well, bugger me! How come that never happens when I’m playing for serious money?’

Then the girl announced that the chocolate was ready. At the same time, a soft footstep just behind me told me that my opponent’s daughter had come out to join us.

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The chocolate was perfect: neither too warm nor too cold, the froth whipped up until it would tremble but not break under my breath, the flavouring delicate, hinting at vanilla and honey and little marigold flowers. Yet when I sipped it that evening it seemed to have lost a little of its savour.

ICNOYO, the old merchant whose name meant ‘Kindly’, was telling his daughter about his last throw. The beans still lay where they had fallen, although the one that had landed on its edge had eventually toppled over. ‘Can you believe it? I was just trying to remind Yaotl here how unpredictable life is and what happens? In all the years I’ve been playing this game I’ve never seen anything like it!’

The woman sipped her chocolate while she thought about her reply. Watching her was part of what had darkened my mood. Her name was Oceloxochitl – ‘Tiger Lily’ – and her handsome face and the hands that held her cocoa bowl might have made her father’s point for him, if she had arrived a few moments before she did. Not all the lines that creased her forehead had been put there by age, although she was, like me, well into her middle years. Pain had etched some of them, stretched the skin a little more tightly over her high cheekbones and added a few extra streaks of grey to her dark hair. And she held the vessel clamped between her wrists because her bandaged fingers were still too tender to be of any use, and she was too proud or stubborn to let anyone else hold it for her.

The men who had hurt her, just a few days before, had been acting in the name of Cacamatzin, ‘Lord Maize Ear’, the king of Tetzco. But they had not been obeying his orders, and it had been the king who had rescued Lily, and me, from them. The lordly residence we were now living in belonged to him; it was near his retreat, on the beautiful wooded hill called Tetzcotzinco, overlooking the great lake that dominated the valley of Mexico. So we were drinking the king’s chocolate, prepared by his servants, and as Kindly had pointed out to me, none of it was ours.

This was doubly true for me. My relationship with Lily and her father was a complex one. The woman and I were connected by loss – mine, of someone I barely recalled, years before; Lily’s sharper, more immediate and irreparable: the loss of her son. What we knew of one another’s suffering had thrown us together, and the repercussions of it, unexpected, hideously violent and culminating in the wounds she was still recovering from, had made us inseparable.

We had briefly been lovers and we both knew we might be again. However, I was still a slave. Lily had bought me out of a marketplace in Mexico, the great capital city of the Aztecs, where we both came from, to save me from a particularly hideous form of human sacrifice. The man who had put me up for sale, my former master, was Tlilpotonqui, lord Feathered In Black, who just happened to be the Aztec chief minister, the most powerful man in the world after the emperor Montezuma himself, and for reasons of his own he had been very much looking forward to watching my death throes. So Lily and her father, the old merchant, had brought me to lord Maize Ear’s kingdom to escape lord Feathered In Black’s fury.

As I thought about the dangers and torments that had befallen us, it occurred to me that here was a fine example indeed of the whimsical god of chance up to his usual tricks. All our lives had been imperilled and preserved so many times lately that I had lost count, and now even my status was in doubt. You could usually tell an Aztec’s rank and occupation merely by looking at him: cotton and feathers for a lord; black-painted skin and unkempt hair for a priest; the soldier’s mantle, breechcloth and jewellery, the emblems whose design told you exactly how many war captives he had taken. But if that soothsayer really had looked into my future and seen a vision of me now, there was no telling what he might have made of it. Did I look like a modestly dressed lord, or merely like a middle-aged, undernourished slave who had got above himself?

Lily set her cup down awkwardly before replying to her father. ‘I don’t understand why you were playing patolli with Yaotl in the first place, since he doesn’t have a cocoa bean to his name.’ Then she added, with a resigned sigh: ‘All right, Yaotl, just how much do you owe him?’

I glanced down at the tally I had drawn, with a piece of charcoal, on the stone floor next to me. ‘Um... five large cloaks, two small ones and seven bags of cocoa beans.’

She rolled her eyes in despair. ‘Don’t you ever learn?’

Kindly grinned. 'I'm trying to teach him! Double or quits next time, Yaotl?' 'Maybe.' I looked uncertainly at Lily, who had not been sleeping well. 'It's getting late.'

'It is,' she confirmed. 'I think we should finish the chocolate and go indoors before the raccoons and foxes come out.'

'Suit yourselves,' her father said. 'I don't think you'll see a fox or a raccoon up here, though. Even a centipede would have trouble getting past the guards at the bottom of this hill.' Lord Maize Ear lived in fear of assassination by one of his brothers, who had his own designs on the throne, and his retreat at Tetzcoctzinco was ringed day and night by fierce warriors. Lily and I both enjoyed the peace and quiet this gave us, though her father, who liked company, found it unnerving.

As I looked out over the edge of the patio in front of the palace and down the hill, however, I realised that our peace was about to be disturbed. 'It looks as if somebody managed to get past the sentries, though. Who's this coming up the hill? At this time of evening?'

'Some flunky, I suppose,' the old man suggested in a bored voice. 'The royal chefs probably ran out of newts or something like that, so they had to send out for some in a hurry. It won't be anything to do with us.'

Kindly's eyes were too poor to see much in the gathering gloom, but his daughter craned her neck to follow my gaze. 'Torches,' she said. 'And you're wrong, father. Whoever that is down there, he's more than a servant. Those men are carrying a litter! Yaotl, you don't think...?'

Lily's last words were spoken in a whisper, through a throat constricted by sudden terror, and when I stood up to stand by her, the hand I laid upon her arm for comfort was trembling.

Why we should both have been seized at that moment by the same sense of foreboding, I could not say. Perhaps it was something about the litter's painfully slow progress up the hillside, or the delicacy with which its bearers set it down in the forecourt of a small house set in the hillside below us, lowering their charge to the ground as gently as a mother laying her baby on his cradleboard.

My former master was a frail old man, who would demand that sort of care; but why should he be here?

'Lord Feathered in Black doesn't know where we are,' I said. The tremor I felt through the thin material of her blouse reminded me how much effort she was putting

into living from one day to the next, and how close she still was to falling into the abyss that surrounded her, the memory of what she had just been through. ‘And we’re the king’s guests, remember?’

‘He could have changed his mind.’

‘He made a promise, Lily. He ate earth.’ I tightened my grip on her shoulder, wondering whether kings considered themselves bound by a form of oath that I myself had violated on occasion.

I stared down the hill, but in the gloom it was impossible to identify the person in the litter, which was draped in cotton and bedecked with feathers. A few human shapes moved about: the thick shadows of the litter bearers, the slighter forms of attendants with flickering torches, and another, whose brisk, determined stride gave him, even in the dark and at a distance, the look of an officer.

My breath caught in my throat when I saw which way he was going, and I heard a startled gasp from Lily at the same time, for he was coming up the steps leading to our house.

I looked accusingly at Kindly. ‘“It won’t be anything to do with us,” you said.’

‘Can’t be right all the time,’ he murmured in a troubled voice.

‘“Some flunky,” you said. “Royal chefs run out of newts.”’ Fear made me fling the words at him. ‘I suppose this man’s here to borrow a cup of chocolate!’

Lily hissed: ‘Yaotl, that’s enough! We’ll know in a moment.’

The lone man reached the top step and skirted the small pond at the front of our residence. His long cloak, glittering labret and earplugs and piled-up hair seemed to confirm my first impression of him: here was a veteran warrior, whose valour in combat had earned him much wealth and prestige in his own right. Only a king or a great lord could have sent such a man on an errand. I knew where the king of Tetzcoco was now: in his palace at the summit of the hill, and not being carried around in a litter like a cripple. If any other great lord had business with us, it was unlikely to be good news.

Still, as Lily had remarked, we would know in a moment. The officer stood on the edge of the pond, glancing at each of us in turn as though unsure which of us to address. Finally, with his eyes on the floor in front of him, he gave an embarrassed cough and began: ‘My lords...’

I gaped at him. I wondered briefly who he thought we were, before blurting out: 'Oh, it's all right, he's got the wrong house. No lords here!'

Lily silenced me with a bony elbow in the ribs. Stepping forward, she greeted the stranger graciously, with the customary words: 'You have expended breath to get here, you are tired, you are hungry. First you must rest and have some food.'

I giggled hysterically. 'We've got pots full of newts!'

'Yaotl, shut up!' my mistress cried, exasperated.

The soldier's astounded gaze swung from one to the other of us like a spectator's at a ball game, but at the mention of my name it came to rest on me. 'Yaotl,' he repeated.

I looked wildly around as though another Yaotl might have appeared out of the shadows beside me. 'It's a common enough name,' I said defensively.

'My lord...' he began again.

'No, look, there must be some mistake,' I protested, but I fell silent as I took in the expression on the man's face. For all his warrior's strength and vigour, his cheeks were hollow and his eyes darted about in their sockets as though looking for a means of escape. Something had terrified him, I realised suddenly: something he had seen very recently, perhaps this very evening.

I became aware that he was still speaking. I had not been paying attention: it had been some long, formal pronouncement, delivered in a monotone.

Kindly answered: 'An invitation? To what, though?'

'Lord Maize Ear, the Great Chichimec, lord of the Acolhuans...'

'The king, yes. Spare us all his titles, he's a friend of mine,' the old man lied outrageously. 'What about him?'

The officer looked wretched, his tension evident from the sweat glistening on his forehead. What frightened him was the possibility that we would not respond to his message as we were meant to, and he, the messenger, would get the blame. Kindly knew this and was making the most of it. I wondered if Lily's father had sensed that there was more to the man's fear than that, however.

He stammered: 'Although my master's house is mean, and he can offer but poor food...'

'You mean the king? Rubbish, he lives in a palace, of course. Mind you, if he's run out of newts again...'

‘Father!’ Lily snapped. ‘Will you let the poor man finish?’ She turned to the officer and smiled weakly at him. ‘Forgive us,’ she said gently. ‘We haven’t been the king’s guests for long, and this is all new to us. He wants to see us, is that right? Just tell us when and where.’

The man seemed to gain a couple of fingers’ breadths in height, like a porter straightening his back after untying his tump-line and dropping his burden on the ground. His formal manner vanished. ‘Up the hill.’ He jerked his head in the direction of the king’s palace at the summit. ‘Be there at dawn tomorrow.’

‘Then please tell his lordship we will come...’ Lily began, but in my agitation I could not restrain myself from speaking across her.

‘You didn’t come straight here from Maize Ear’s palace, though, did you? You came from down there.’ I gestured towards the house where we had seen the litter taken. ‘So if this invitation is from the king, it includes someone else. Whoever it is, you asked him first, then you came to us. And I’m guessing as well that whatever it is that’s put the wind up you, it’s something more than whatever lord Maize Ear will say if he doesn’t see our faces beaming at him over breakfast. So just who is this scary person? Who are we calling on tomorrow – besides your king?’

He took a step backward, until one of his heels was over the water: any farther and he would have been in. No doubt he was not used to hearing slaves speaking like that. But he had an answer for me: a name. It was the one name guaranteed to silence me.

‘Lord Feathered in Black.’ His voice shook with awe. ‘The chief minister of the Aztecs is here to see you.’