

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

So Long Been Dreaming: Post-Colonial Science Fiction and Fantasy

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Necahual

Tobias S. Buckell

We drop out of the wormhole towards a mess of a planet by the ochre light of a dying sun. From the cant of orbit, upside down and even then through virtual portholes, we can see tiny spots of white light blossom in the atmosphere.

Each one of those little blossoms of light is an impact. A chunk of rock with a controller vane on it, predestined for a certain target. It clears out the enemy's ability to hit back above the stratosphere.

We're liberators. And all the thousands and thousands of other pods dropping to their designated targets and missions all over this planet are liberators as well. We are like a deadly rain of flesh and metal.

I know from past experience that sunsets here on New Anegada won't be the same for a long while. On another planet, far away in both distance and time, I used to sit on a porch and watch magnificent sunsets just like the ones that would soon appear here. The League had liberated my own world then, and now I am here to do the same.

"Man, we're dropping the hammer on this backwater shithole," the man across from me says. His white and blue exoskeleton wraps around his body. He looks like a striped mantis. Right now the exoskeleton is plugged into the convex wall of the pod, charging up while it keeps him from bouncing around as we skate atmosphere.

A single bead of sweat floats loose from his bulbous nose and hangs in the

air between us.

“You know much about the target?”

Everyone wants to any know juicy details about them.

“Historical info only,” I say. “They call themselves the Azteca. But the Azteca of Mother Earth never even called themselves that. They were the Mexica.”

I wonder if the black man to the right of me has skin-flauge painted on. Hard to tell under the blue and white he’s wearing. It’s hard not to look askance at him. No one like him on the planet I came from. But at least he’s human, real human, and The League today will be adding another human planet, we’re told. If there are any aliens here, we’ll wipe them out, every last one, like they tried to wipe The League out.

“The warrior priests of Mexica were pretty brutal,” I explain. “They used to induce hallucinations by piercing their foreskins” – all the men wince – “and dragging a knotted rope through the tear until they saw visions.”

The woman to my left asks, “What is it going to be like when we hit?”

“I got the same report you did.”

The large island continent of New Anegada on the planet was also the name of the planet. This was confusing for conversation. But no one had consulted with the original colonists, who were mainly Caribbean refugees from Mother Earth. Half the sole continent was called New Anegada and home to the descendants of the initial Caribbean refugees. The Azteca claimed the other half, a group of humans ruled by aliens who set themselves up as ancient Aztec gods. Large mountains split them down the middle.

The entire system got cut off several hundred years ago, a forgotten incident, a sidenote of history. Then the wormhole that connected New Anegada to the rest of the worlds opened up again several weeks ago and shit hit the fan.

We were ordered out to make sure The League got here first to offer these humans membership, before any aliens could get here. The Azteca attacked before any negotiations were finalized. Now things were messy. A rumour had spread that the Azteca were results of some alien human breeding program, recreating the culture in order to gain extraordinarily loyal and dangerous human fighters for their own use.

This is all I know.

All four of us are strapped across from each other in the pod, waiting as the heat builds up, looking past each other.

The virtual panorama on the floor screen flickers off.

The buffeting ceases. We're still alive.

"Hello," says a small voice deep inside my inner ear. It's the dry and bored monotone of an artificial intelligence transmitting its way into my mechanical armor. "I am riding shotgun for you. Got about a minute and thirteen seconds left until you hit dirt, and congratulations, you have just passed the highest probability zone of being shot down by automated Azteca fire."

Which is why it is just now downloading itself into my armor. No sense in its wasting its time on me until it knows for sure this body made it to ground.

"Name's Tai Thirteen Crimson Velvet. Call me Velvet," the voice says. "Lady on your left is Paige, man across is Steven. On your right is Smith. Smith has augmented ears for congenital deafness. If you get hit by anything with a good electromagnetic pulse, it'll wipe his hearing chips and he'll back to being deaf. Just so you know."

All the information we need comes to us from the Tais. Tactical artificial intelligences. Little cybernetic ghosts. They give us the real orders, the real info, so that if we get into trouble they can scramble, leave, and we won't be the wiser about the big picture. This is why we know so little about our part in this liberation.

These are tactics learned from many alien encounters. There were creatures that could just suck shit right out of your brain and figure out what your plans were. Humanity had to adapt. Tais were one of many different tactics The League used just to keep humanity alive in a hostile universe.

"Take a deep breath and close your eyes," the Tai orders. "Time to peel."

The pod explodes. The sides rip back and vaporize themselves. I open my eyes to see the actual island of New Anegada directly below me. My heart hammers as we plummet.

The green land rushes faster and faster toward me until the Tai whispers "Okay" and the chute slides out of the back of my exoskeleton.

There are no explosions, no shots fired at me; just a calm blue sky and lush green forest below my feet, the rippling blue ocean up ahead. The chute canopy overhead is invisible in a variety of spectra, including the visible.

A minute later, my feet hit turf.

I'm on the ground and I have no clue what's going to happen next.

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I'm expecting shots. But I only hear wind rustling through palm fronds and

the distant foaming sound of waves breaking over reef. I'm expecting Aztec priest-warriors wearing gaudily coloured feathers to fan out and attack us. Instead, I'm facing a large three-storey concrete building painted bright yellow and pink.

It's got terracotta shingling.

I'm expecting anything, but what I get is a man with his back against a mango tree, chewing a stem of grass, looking straight at me.

"Is this a friendly?" I subvocalize to the Tai.

"Okay," the Tai says, ignoring my question. "Your regular weaponry is locked under my command. You have a tanglegun in your left pocket, if you need to use that. This is a police action, we're not here to kill anyone. There are no hostiles on this side of the mountain range. We're just here to talk and gather information from the New Anegada locals. HQ has brokered a meeting between some high level locals and an Azteca representative at this spot."

"This is a friendly, then?" I ask again.

"Yes."

I look down. The extendable cannon I have aimed at the man is primed, but useless because it will not fire in a friendly situation. So I let go of the trigger.

"Go ahead," the Tai orders. "We're here to gather information and any confirmations about who the Azteca are, where they came from, and what, if anything, these people can do to help us. I am recording everything back up to Orbital HQ. I'll prompt you as needed. If you do this well, you'll be promoted. So will I."

The cannon swings back up under my arm to fasten itself to the back of my exoskeleton armor. It's a smooth lubricated slide. A whisper. I hear the cannons of the other soldiers from the pod withdraw in similar fashion. They're all fanned out behind me, facing into the jungle, covering the man in front of me and glancing up at the sky, just in case.

The man by the mango tree pulls the stem of grass out of his mouth and stands up.

"So," he says to me. "We get invade, or what?"

I have no idea how to respond. I stand there, still, waiting for someone besides me to do something.

"You speak English?" The man asks. His brown eyes twinkle. He has a deep tan that is almost the colour of oak, and short, tightly-curled hair. He's wearing a cream-coloured suit. With no shoes on.

I nod.

“You looking for Bouschulte, right?” He says, the words so quick they blend into each and I stumble over the accent. He ambles over to us. Someone’s booted feet shift just behind me. If anything goes wrong, I have backup.

I speak my first word.

“What?”

“You. Looking. For. Bouschulte.” The man repeats himself as if I’m slow. He looks frustrated for a second. “He up in he house.”

“What is. . . .” I swallow, “a bouschulte?”

“It a name. Frederick Bouschulte. If you have a Azteca name like ‘Acolmiztli’ or some stupidness like that, and you hiding with us, you don’t keep calling you-self ‘Acolmiztli.’ Seen?”

“Seen.” I agree out of sheer panic. The Tai in my head is still silent. I wouldn’t mind some assistance. The man’s accent is hard and I still haven’t been given any damned orders. “Tai,” I subvocalize. “Damnit, where are you?”

The man reaches out to touch my face, then stops when I flinch.

“You eye them, chineeman: you do that to fit in with them?”

“It. . . .” was done a long time ago. Far away. “An old tradition my forefathers continued.” I’d been too young to protest the removal of my eye folds.

A tiger-striped cat tiptoes out from behind the building and sits down. It starts to lick its tail, working hard at ignoring the five people on the grass before it.

“What you name?”

“Kiyoshi,” I say.

“Well, Kiyoshi, let we get on with this so-call invasion, eh?”

My Tai wasn’t being quiet, I realize, it was gone. And looking around at the panicked faces of the three other soldiers with whom I fell out of the sky, I realize theirs are dead too. We’re on our own. That was sudden. The Tais must have sensed an attack and bailed.

We might be just one step away from getting slaughtered.

The panicked feeling that follows that thought comes and goes swiftly. Old training takes over. Yes, the Tais make the decisions, but we have training. We’re still mobile representatives of The League. We’re still soldiers. We can still do something.

I grab the man’s shoulder with one hand, aim the tangle gun right dead in the middle of his forehead with the other. At this range, the tangle gun is lethal.

“What’s going on?” I hiss. “Tell me what is going on!”

He snaps loose of me, shrugging my armored arm aside as if it were only a nuisance. The motion is quick enough I have trouble following it. There is, surprisingly enough, a small knife now shoved up between the joints in my armor.

Smith aims his tangle gun at us, but it's an empty gesture. He's too far away. We no longer have superior weaponry to a barefoot man with a knife.

“You conquest failing.”

“There is no fucking conquest,” Steve snaps from behind me. “We’re here to save you from the Azteca.”

“Yeah man, so I hear. But first thing: seeing that we been making do for a few hundred years already, you might wonder what we know that you ain’t figure out yet. Second thing: you here to tell us what to do, right? Because you assume we don’t know what we doing. You want tell us what to do, how to think. That is mental conquest, friend. Mental.”

A boom shakes the air. Paige looks up at the sky. None of us can see anything, but I shiver anyway.

“Any of you able to contact anyone?” Paige asks us.

We all try. Shake our heads. We’re cut off.

“Come inside with me now,” our new host says. “Drop you weapon to the ground. You don’t need them.”

For some reason, without the Tais, the three soldiers are looking at me. Command structure has returned to our small unit. Ironic how we fall into the old patterns. This is what it would have been like in The League before the Xenowars. Only then it wasn’t The League, just scattered groups of space-faring humans spreading throughout the wormhole systems.

I have a decision to make.

“Do you have any way that we can communicate to our superiors?” I ask.

The man nods.

“That we do,” he says.

Into the rabbit hole, I decide, and nod. I give the order and we drop our tangle guns and the blade near my ribs disappears just as abruptly as it had appeared. I still want to know how it got under my armor.

“I name Jami,” the man in the cream suit says, shaking my hand. “Jami ‘Manicou’ Derrick.”

Jami turns around, and we follow the barefoot, dapper man into the concrete-block house. We troop past the cat, which is now working on cleaning an extended furry back leg.

Jami asks us if we read much. He wants to know about some old book none of us have ever read, or heard of, or care about right now. He tells us it has an interesting moral to it.

He laughs gently at our ignorance, our focus on what is going on right now. He takes off his tie and suit jacket and hangs them off the back of a canvas chair.

“You going wish you know these things,” he laughs at us. “You should have wait and talk with everyone longer. So now, it a mess. The League trying to come in and reshape everything to be just the way it wants, and it ain’t that easy.”

The door creaks open and we look straight into the face of the enemy.

The Azteca reclines in a leather chair while an elderly black woman in a bright red and yellow patterned shawl carefully snips at his flat hair. Much to my amazement, her skin is even darker than Smith’s, who still stands behind me, clearing his throat slightly to let me know he’s there. It is an adjustment, I remind myself. Almost everyone on this planet is some shade darker than myself. I am the stranger.

A red cape drapes around the Azteca’s knees where his hands rest, gently crossed over each other. The gold plug in his nose glints in the light streaming through a large opened window, and his jade earrings gleam as he slightly turns his head to regard us.

Blue eye shadow swirls around the crinkled edges of his eyes. His black-smeared lips twitch.

“The League has arrived,” he pronounces, looking at our uniforms. “What do you think of our conquerors, Jami?”

Jami is leaning against the concrete wall, arms folded, looking at the small ensemble in the room. “Centuries ago the first conquerors of Tenochtitlan arrive in small numbers,” Jami smiles sadly at us. “They had armor and superior technology. The League only got the small number and the armor.”

“But this is not a group of Spaniards with gold lust and domination in their hearts,” the Azteca says. “The League is here to save us. Is it not?” His eyes are piercing. Something has wounded him. He hates us. “The first

conquistadors thought they were saving the savages back then too," he adds. "As you mistakenly think now."

I have nothing to say, but stand straight and return his restrained fury with a calm gaze of my own. I am a professional.

"You done then, Frederick?" Jami asks.

"I miss my true name," the Azteca man says.

Jami sighs.

"Acolmiztli, Frederick . . . I guess it don't make no difference what you call yourself now," he says.

"Done," the woman with the scissors says.

Acolmiztli stands up and takes the cherry bowl with his hair clippings in it from her.

"I'm not much of a believer," he says, "but the old ways are specific. You must have your hair cut in a way that does not lose *tonalli*. Or you risk losing the strength of your spirit." He takes a deep breath. "In times like these, I need all the strength I can get."

The door slams behind him as he leaves the room.

"He's bitter," Paige whispers to me. They've been taking my lead. I'm in charge. I'm their Tai.

"Acolmiztli *very* bitter. But the League shouldn't assume," Jami says, looking at the door with us, "that all Azteca go be your enemy. Some go be your friend."

"How would I know?" I snap. "We know nothing right now. All we *do* know is that the Azteca didn't exist on this planet when it last had contact with other worlds. We know you're in danger from the Azteca. That's it." I want to ask if the Azteca are ruled by aliens, who've bred them, but that's a rumour, and I keep quiet as Jami explains that there are what he calls Tolteca, reformed Azteca who have spurned human sacrifice and made great changes to Azteca society in the last hundred years.

My stomach flip-flops.

"Human sacrifice?"

Jami unfolds his arms.

"Acolmiztli tells me he only sacrificed snake, bird, and butterfly. He say," and Jami imitates Acolmiztli's voice perfectly, "because he so loved man, Quetzalcoatl allowed only the sacrifice of snakes, birds, and butterflies. As he was opposed to the sacrifice of human flesh, the three sorcerers of Tula drove him out of the city. The people of Tenochtitlan did not follow Quetzalcoatl.

Instead, they followed the war-god Huitzilopochtli or Xipe-Totec: the flayed god. Then the fifth sun was destroyed and we lived in the sixth and it became a time of change.”

It sends shivers down my spine.

“You said you had communications equipment.” I fold my arms. The shivering continues. “We’d like to use it now.”

I shiver again, my knees weak. Jami catches me under my arms as I drop to my knees.

“What’s happening?” I’m disoriented; the walls of the room seem to bend in on themselves.

“Remember how I tell you you should have read Wells?” Jami says. “Come on.” He helps me over to a wooden bench in the corner of the room and opens a cupboard. I vaguely recognize the device behind the wooden doors. It looks like a museum piece. But it responds to a wave of my hand and my voice.

Static is my only reply. There is accusation in my angry stare, but Jami gestures at the device.

“Try again. You feeling rough.”

Sweat drips from my forehead, the shivers continue to wrack my body. This time I find a carrier signal and send a voice request up. Archaic. But they reply.

“Who is this? Identify.”

I do, giving personal ID codes and answering questions until the voice on the other side is satisfied.

“We give nothing away by saying we’re doing a retreat,” it says. “All ground assaults have been infected with some sort of virus. We’re losing this battle. We have your touchdown coordinates. Be outside in five minutes for a starhook. You’ll be in quarantine upon return.”

Then it’s gone.

My three companions are sprawled on the floor, sweating.

Infected. Quarantine.

“When we saw you,” I say, “you walked over to us, touched me.” My hand goes up to my face.

“Acolmiztli gave it to me, and I passed it to you,” Jami says.

“Is it fatal?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Better get back up to orbit and find out, right? I look alright, but I could have take an antidote.” He smiles.

I purse my lips.

“Get up,” I order everyone. It’s been interesting being in charge, but I’m glad to see the end of it coming. Paige, Smith, and Steve struggle up. Smith leans heavily on Steve. “Get outside, now.” Smith nods. He must still be able to understand me, which is a small comfort in the middle of this mess.

We’re a pathetic group that pushes through the door with Jami following us. My knees wobble, but I manage a convincing stride through what looks like a bar.

Dim lights cast shadows, and from those shadows loom wooden tables where several men in khaki camouflage toast us with their glasses and sly grins. I see no weapons, but my stomach churns with the weapon they’ve already used to defeat us.

My gut spasms. The pain almost blinds me.

“Come on.” I push my three soldiers on in front of me, shoving my hand against their hard armor, ignoring an unidentifiable chuckle from somewhere in the room.

I trip over a chair, grab the table to steady myself, and when I blink everything is blurry. I have no soldier-sharp senses, no wired edge for combat. The armor I wear to assist me do all that is failing as well as my body.

Right before me is an aquarium taller than I am and stretching half the nearest wall’s length. Something moves sinuously through the tank and presses against the glass. I stumble closer and a woman stares back at me through the refracted water and solid glass with wide brown eyes. Sheets of her oak-coloured hair twirl behind her head. Her ultra-pale skin has an almost greenish tint.

The eyes hold me until my face presses right against the glass.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” Acolmiztli grabs my shoulder. “She was a present I inherited from one of my brothers. A gift from the Emperor Moctezuma the Ninth. One of the *teotl* created her for him.”

Her smooth stomach fades into the singular muscle and pilot fins of her tail’s trunk. The wide fins are splayed out. They’re delicate, yet powerful enough to drive all six feet of her through the water with a flick.

Which she does. Out away from the glass.

“Created?” I ask. And then, “*Teotl?*”

She turns back, looks at me, and her hands flutter.

“Created just like we were,” Acolmiztli whispers. “But unlike my countrymen, there is only one of her, and many, many of us.”

We have to keep moving, he’s just toying with me. I walk away from the

tank.

“Keep moving, dammit,” I say. Smith looks at me and frowns. He shakes his head, points to his ears. He doesn’t understand a word. His hearing implants must have failed. Could a virus do that?

We keep walking, and pass out of the door into the sunlight. I lean back and look at the sky. Nothing yet.

“Why are you doing this to us?” I ask Jami, who is still right behind us.

“The Azteca doing it to you, not me.”

“But you knew about it,” I snap.

“Yes.”

“And yet you did nothing. You collaborate with them.”

“You the one that drop out the sky and land. We didn’t force you.”

Overhead I hear a roar, then a rumble.

“But all those deaths. . . .”

“All because of you. Consider: before you came we were changing the Azteca from the bottom up, and inside out. The Azteca a hornet’s nest, and we blow some sweet smoke their way. Now you throwing rocks.”

Thunder rolls and a small oval speck drops out of the sky. The long carbon filament trailing behind it is strong enough to reel us all up from the ground we’re standing on into orbit and then into the hold of a waiting mothership.

“Snap in when it drops,” I order everyone, voice husky. “Paige, make sure to help Smith, he can’t hear what we’re saying.”

I turn and look at Jami, dizziness threatening to drop me at any second.

The pod slows to a halt and falls into our midst. Paige struggles over and snaps on, pulling Smith with her and making sure he got hooked in. Steve looks at me and follows suit. Three soldiers, ready to get lifted, the cable rising up into the heavens from between them.

“We have a minute, maybe two,” Steve says to me.

I’m still staring at Jami.

He stares right back. “We study you. When faced with the other, when the hard times had hit, you choose to cleanse the aliens from all the human worlds. And right now you all still working on ‘purifying’ The League. Making it only human.”

“There was no other choice,” I say. “There were wars. Humanity was endangered. Dammit, I was four. You can’t hold me responsible. It’s different now anyway.”

“You had start with war. Then deporting the rest from any human territory.

But The League ain't stopping there, right? Now The League tries to manage the entire human bloodline, disqualifying humans with altered DNA."

"Like the Azteca," I say. That is why Alcolmiztli has no love for us. He knows The League doesn't recognize him as human.

"Yes. Listen, during all these years we been cut off here all of you all almost wipe yourselves out. Yet you come here to tell us what to do now? That's hypocritical."

"Drastic things were done," I admit. "But we never would have survived the alien attacks if we didn't do these things. We could never have matched their superior military skills and constant encroachment." And, despite the fever, I have a trump. "You talk hypocritical. Hypocritical is the mermaid," I hiss. "You let that Azteca keep his slave in a tank. How dirty does that make you?"

I might as well have struck Jami.

"The line is tightening," Steve yells at me.

"Maybe you right. Maybe them thing had to be done. But that don't mean you have to force it on all of us here," Jami said. "And think of this: your League only concerned about 'pure' humans, right? Then that girl back in the tank there, she ain't even considered human by them."

He's right.

I stumble towards the pod. In a second I'll be yanked out of here into the stratosphere, my suit bubbling out to enclose and protect me. Back to the warrens inside the depths of a troop ship.

But his words are resonating with me. I don't clip in.

"We ain't ignorant," Jami said. "When the wormhole had close, we was all left with each other. We made plenty mistake, but we have a history of adaptation. The alien *Teotl* who create the Azteca, and the Azteca, we all shared just this world uneasy at first. The Azteca had been create to destroy all of we, because during the first war we had almost destroy the *Teotl*.

"And that ain't what The League wants, right?" Jami spreads his hands. "The League want keep fighting, and fighting. It coming at all of we here, threatening things and too blind to see that we already figuring out how to make it work, balancing Azteca and *Teotl*, changing things. We ain't done yet, but we was well on the way before you came. So you a superior force, with bigger guns. And we had to go and use something you all didn't expect. The only way you can find out how to deal with the infection is to talk with all of us all down here. That's why we work with the Azteca on this, and get the antidote from them. Now we all go have to work together."

Jami is speaking mostly to me, but the message is general. Let's work together.

The people on this planet want to figure out how best to handle the new situation that just opened up in their backyard. The League will somehow need to help liaise between this tripartite mess it's found itself in, and certainly not in the dominant position it thought it would have.

I remember a small biological part of what being human is. The reason we fear the alien, death, and why The League fights so hard and maniacally against *everything*.

Survival.

I can see a way out of my infected situation that doesn't involve quarantine.

Smith signs something at me. A hand flutter, like that of the woman in the tank.

I turn to Jami.

"I would like to stay and help you talk to the League," I tell him. "But I want the same antidote you have, okay?"

Jami nods. "The very same. I promise you."

Paige recognizes what is happening.

"You can't desert," she shouts. "They'll deactivate you."

The rest of the objection is lost. The starhook goes taut and all three of them lift off the ground and accelerate towards space.

I drop to my hands and knees and puke. Tiny pieces of machinery I didn't even know were in me litter the grass along with the remains of pasty meals from the last day of eating.

With a deep breath, I stand up again.

Jami helps steady me.

"I have a condition," he says. "You have to help me free her." He's talking about the lady in the aquarium.

She's been in the bar for weeks, he tells me as he helps me back across the lawn. Ever since The League began its bombardment and invasion. Acolmiztli brought her here with him. He won't let her go, despite Jami's arguing for it. Acolmiztli's brother died a long time ago, and this is all he has left to remember him by.

Jami can't free her. If he were to set her free Acolmiztli would blame him, it would create a diplomatic stir in the middle of a delicate time. But a rogue League soldier with a soft heart, a human heart, could do it.

"Just give me the antidote, please," I beg. "I'll help you."

Acolmiztli regards me with suspicion.

“He is still here?”

“He a smart man,” Jami says, his voice soft and guarded. “He know when a battle turn.”

The Azteca laughs, then folds his arms and glares at the men around him.

“The battle *is* turning. Soon I’ll get to be going home, as things settle down.”

“Lucky us.”

“The antidote?” I ask Jami. “Where is it?” I’m scared of another attack, of puking something really important out.

“The antidote?” Acolmiztli asks. “Come on, Jami. Can’t you give this poor man the antidote? Doesn’t he know what the antidote is?” Acolmiztli laughs at me and the sound makes me clench my hands. “All those nasty little metal bits inside of you that talk to each other and to your ships, all those little ghosts running around inside your heads, those intelligent machines, they’re all dead now. There is no antidote. You’ll live. Oh yes, you’re just fine. You just don’t have any metal inside of you. You’re just like Jami, or me, here. That’s what he meant when he said we all have the antidote.”

I’ll live. But I know what the result in space will be. All those battle formations of space ships swarming back through the wormhole in retreat, their bows milliseconds away from each other, will collide and destroy each other.

There will be mass confusion. Systems failures. Anyone up in orbit was a sitting duck. Anyone whose life depended on advanced machinery was dead.

“There is a story I tell, that my father told, and his father before him,” Acolmiztli says. Reflections from the wall of water behind me dapple the wall in front of me. “Horse and Stag came into quarreling once, long ago, and Horse went to a Hunter for help in taking his revenge against Stag. Hunter said yes, but only if you let me put this piece of iron in your mouth that I may guide you with these pieces of rope. And only if you let me put this saddle on your back that I may sit on you while I help you hunt Stag. The horse agreed and together they hunted down the Stag. After this, the horse thanked the Hunter, and asked him to remove those things from him. But Hunter laughed and tied him to a tree, then sat down and had himself a very good meal of Stag. You see what I am saying?” Acolmiztli looks at me.

“No, what are saying?”

The half-grin on his lips flitters away.

“Who’s really riding whom here?” Acolmiztli asked.

Jami has sat near me, but at an angle so he can look at both of us.

“You drunk,” Jami says.

“Do either of you realize how many people are going to die today?” I yell. I’m shaking, angry with everyone. I had been convinced I was here to land and perform a duty under the Tai’s direction, stripped of that leadership, then told I was infected. I had thought I would die, but now I’m alive.

I’m a mess.

“Yes,” Acolmiztli says. “I’m going to go outside and watch.” He stands up and leaves the room.

Jami leans forward and grabs my forearm.

“Please,” he hisses. “Tell me you still go help me.”

I turn and look at the lady in the tank, who is staring back at me.

“Who is Acolmiztli, really?” I ask.

“He the brother to the Azteca Emperor,” Jami says. “Here in case the Emperor get attack by you League. Now that The League falling, he go leave soon as he can.”

I swallow.

“Okay. Where are we moving her?”

“She lives in sea water,” Jami says. The ocean is not too far from here. “She knows that if we can get her out, that I have told people around the coast to help her out with whatever she needs.”

He’ll have a cart filled with seawater waiting for me outside. I just have to get her out and to the sea.

◎

I know no sign language. I stand in front of the tank and wonder what will happen when I try to take her out.

“And,” I whisper to myself, “how do I make you understand that I’m going to help you out? Set you free?” There is an ocean and a small beach nearby that Jami tells me is easy to get to. There is a dirt road that leads from this place straight to it.

“Will you even want to be free?” She has been in a watery cage like this for all her life. She might only be able to conceive of that being her world. Would it be right to set her free?

And if I do, am I not making enemies with the most powerful Azteca? I’ve

seen what they can do. Can Jami's people do anything to protect me? I doubt it, but they've survived with Azteca so far.

Sound shakes me free. The pane of glass in front of her is covered in mud and silt and she writes something with her index finger.

I don't understand what it says.

She frantically scribbles another line.

It is meaningless to me. But she looks at me, clasping her hands together, pleading. That I can understand.

This is the right thing to do.

Through a gap in the silt on the glass I tap to get her attention.

"Get back." I mime the motion, waving her back. She disappears in the gloom of the tank.

I'm still wearing exoskeleton armor, and the helmet section slides up with a quick slap of my palm. The glass shards that hit me when I fire the tangle gun at point blank range don't slice me to shreds.

The lukewarm water and silt, however, drench me. She slides towards me.

She weighs more than I thought, or I'm weak. Her mossy hair drapes over my shoulder. The smell of seaweed fills the room. I stumble over broken glass with her in my arms and gently lay her into the cart filled with water that Jami has outside as he promised.

Then comes the pushing run towards the beach, water slopping out over the sides.

Occasionally she pokes her head out to look at me.

Palm trees rustle and shake. My feet crunch on dirt. A dog barks.

The trail turns down. The beach isn't far. I can hear the rhythmic surf, and the wind starts to lift sand into the air and into my eyes.

At the end of the trail I pick her up again, lift her out of the cart and run over the sand, almost tripping, until I'm wading into the salty water. She wriggles free of me.

For a second we stare at each other, then she's gone, a shadow beneath the waves. Was there gratitude? I don't know. It isn't important. I did what I did.

I strip off the exoskeleton, piece by piece, and throw the useless carcass out into the waves.

Overhead the rumble of engines makes me look up and see a machine climbing from the house into the sky. It is brightly painted with geometric shapes, much like I would expect an Azteca flyer to be. It speeds off into the distance like an angry mosquito.

66

Jami hands me a towel and a drink when I walk through the door. He sits down at a wooden table and looks at me.

“She leave?” he asks.

“Yes.” I nod slowly.

“You’d hope she would stay?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. It’s done. Acolmiztli?”

Jami smiles. “He gone back to his brother.”

I take a deep breath and put my hands on the table. “What am I going to do now?” I ask Jami.

He grabs my hands.

“That one small act of liberation,” he tells me, “that little bit of freedom you got her, will have more of an impact than all you ship, you missile, and all you soldier. Understand?”

No, I didn’t.

“That lady, her name Necahual. It mean ‘survivor.’ All this time she been surviving, but that ain’t good enough. Now she can have a whole coast, where fishermen will know to feed her. Because surviving not enough. You can’t just survive, Kiyoshi. You must do better than that. And right now The League just surviving. Like you.

“So you just the beginning. The League, we have a lot to offer them too. Along with the Azteca. How to accommodate and incorporate. We been learning how to do this since Mother Earth when we were all islanders.” He slaps the table. “And we get better and better. Most places, always they get caught up in ruling, dominating, becoming greater, and then falling apart.” Jami leans forward. “We learn how to stay outside that, man. It ain’t easy,” he says. “Always a struggle. But for a much greater good.”

I pull my hands free.

“So what do I do right now?” I ask. “How do we start all this?”

Jami leans back in his chair. “For now, just to talk to me, man. Don’t look for information, or try to resolve anything, or figure it all out. Just talk.”

I relax a bit. “And tomorrow?”

Jami smiles. “There’s going to be a lot of work tomorrow. A whole lot of it. We go be very busy.”

“Jami?” I remember something from earlier. “That old book you’d asked me if I’d read, what was the name of it again?”

“*War of the Worlds*,” he said. “By H.G. Wells.”

I roll the name around. “Yes, that was it. You think it’s important I should I read it?”

Jami looks up at the sky. “Maybe. You might appreciate it more now, I think.”

There is one last thing I want to ask about. “And what of these aliens on this planet, the *Teotl*?”

“There aliens, yeah. But they belong here. The only real alien right now is you,” Jami laughs. “And soon we go teach you how to belong.”

I freeze my face. I’m nervous about this. All my life I’ve been scared of the other, fighting them, forcing them out of The League.

“Tomorrow,” Jami says. “One step at a time, we show you how.”

I breathe again, slowly, savouring the air.

It’s more than just surviving.