

Safe, Child, Safe
By Alette de Bodard

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I knew something was wrong with the child as soon as his father brought him to me.

He was perhaps four, five years old, and everything about him was high-born Mexica: his tunic of cotton embroidered with leaping deer; his skin the colour of cacao bean; his hair as dark as congealed blood. He lay on the reed mat in my temple, shivering; his feverish eyes turned to me and yet did not see me.

That was not what made the hairs on my nape rise.

No, what made me pause was what I saw clinging to his hands and feet: a green, pulsing aura that brought with it the smell of rotting leaves and mouldy earth. The aura of Mictlan, the underworld.

Living things did not have the aura. Dead things, yes, but then they should have been in the underworld, not here among mortals. And with dead things the aura wrapped the whole body, not just the extremities.

I looked up at the father, who for the whole duration of my examination had stood in a corner, dwarfed by the frescoes of Tezcatlipoca, God of War and Fate. His face was pale. Yaotl of the Atempan *calpulli* clan, he had said his name was, when he marched into my temple with the arrogance of successful warriors. Now he looked more hesitant--perhaps he saw the very real worry in my face.

"We thought it...it might be a spell," Yaotl said. "That you'd help."

"I'm a priest for the Dead," I told him gently, smoothing the hair on the boy's forehead. "The only magic I have is to usher the souls of the dead into the underworld." And other things, too, most notably making sure that nothing of the underworld came back among us. "Why bring him here, rather than to the Great Temple?"

Yaotl shook his head. "The priests at the Great Temple are too obsessed with their sacrifices. They don't care about human lives."

Human lives, as I knew all too well from numerous funeral wakes, were worth nothing. Death was cheap, and caught us all, often giving little warning as to its coming. But this--the purplish, clenched lips, the pale face, the shaking fingers--this wasn't a death I'd have wished on anyone, much less a child. "How long has he been like this?" I asked.

"One week," Yaotl said. "Chimalli woke up one morning and refused to get up. He said that he was cold. We thought he'd caught a sickness at first. The doctor at the marketplace prescribed sweat baths, but they didn't help. He wouldn't eat, wouldn't leave his sleeping mat. He just...dwindled away."

The boy Chimalli's head came up, the eyes suddenly trained on me with a disturbing intensity. "Leave me alone," he whispered, and his voice echoed as though in a great room.

I shivered. Beside me, Yaotl had gone pale, his face showing a sickly fear unbecoming a warrior, but I didn't blame him. Even during my long career banishing underworld monsters I had seldom seen a gaze so...wrong. Living, and yet stripped of human feelings.

Chimalli's eyes had closed again. I moved cautiously away from him, not eager to repeat the experience. "I'll tell you what I see," I said to Yaotl. "He has the aura of the underworld, though he's still alive."

"Dying, then," Yaotl said curtly. Not a muscle in his face moved. A true warrior to the end.

"No," I said. "The dying don't have this aura. I think he's somehow cursed." I was about to say that I could do nothing to help, when my gaze rested on Chimalli. Four years old. He had outgrown most of the diseases that took their toll on babies and toddlers. His life should have been ahead of him, and yet... "Can you take me to where he sleeps?"

Yaotl nodded. His face still bore no expression, but there was something else, a glimmer in his eyes. I thought it might be hope.

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Unsure of what I would find, I armed myself before I left: two obsidian knives went into my belt. I also took a jade and turquoise pectoral of Quetzatcoatl, the Feathered Serpent god, He who had once descended into the underworld to save mankind. It was poor protection against a curse, but without living blood I would not be able to do more.

Yaotl did not speak as we left my temple and headed towards his house. He held Chimalli's hand: the boy followed where he was pulled, but appeared to have no will of his own, like a sacrificial victim drunk on *peyotl* and led towards the bloody altar.

This, if anything, was creepier than the rest--a wrongness that gave pause even to the passersby.

At this early hour in the afternoon, the streets of Coyoacan were full of people, from peasants in loincloths to priests in tunics and rich cloaks, their hair matted with dried blood.

As we walked, I tried to think on what or whom might have cursed Chimalli. He was young and vulnerable: a target for many monsters, whether supernatural or human.

Beasts of shadows, fierce hunters from the eighth level of the underworld, feasted on human hearts, and would have found Chimalli's lifeforce a rare delicacy. *Ciuapipiltin*, the Haunting Mothers, preyed on the children they could no longer have--for they were the spirits of mothers dead in childbirth, transformed after death into something darker.

But neither of them fitted. Anything from the underworld would have killed Chimalli outright, not bothering with this slow attrition.

Which left the living. Sorcerers, those who made magic, not with the living blood, but with corpses: the skin of drowned men, the hands of warriors fallen in battle, the finger-nails of strangled captives. Chimalli was too young to have incurred anyone's hatred. However, sorcerers had no scruples, and the child was the perfect vehicle to strike back at Yaotl.

"Do you have any enemies?" I asked Yaotl.

He had been walking in silence; now he turned to me, startled. I guess he had not thought of the possibility, but he did not look wholly surprised. "I'm a warrior, and honoured for my skill on the battlefield. But my father was a peasant, and so was his father before him. Some have no taste for this."

"I see," I said, and waited for something more. But Yaotl's eyes had moved back to his son, and he did not speak again.

Sorcerers needed to be close to their victims to cast their spells. Perhaps there would be some traces near Chimalli's sleeping mat, something to help me track the curse to its source.

I hoped so. For otherwise it was likely that we would never find the culprit. And then Chimalli would die, slowly leached of life until every part of him belonged to the underworld.

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Yaotl's house was in the richer districts, close to the governor's palace. It was a two-storey dwelling, decorated on the outside with numerous frescoes of gods battling our enemies and presiding over sacrifices--the vibrant colours bearing the telltale sheen of new paint.

Inside, a courtyard garden with pine trees and marigold flowers, tended to by slaves, told me that I had not been wrong in my assessment: Yaotl was wealthy, immensely so.

A woman was waiting for us on the doorstep of the private quarters. She was middle-aged, older than Yaotl, but still beautiful, an arresting, stern beauty that time had not yet altered.

Her eyes moved to Chimalli, eagerly searching the boy's blank face, but after a while she stared at Yaotl instead. He in turn shook his head, almost imperceptibly.

Her disappointment was palpable, though she obviously struggled to hide it. "Who is this, Yaotl?" she asked.

I bowed to her, low. "My Lady. I'm Acatl, a priest for the Dead."

Her lips twisted upwards, in what might have been a smile. But there was genuine tenderness in her eyes as she embraced Yaotl. And yet...and yet something was not quite right in their gestures or mumbled words of love; something lay between them, as dark as the blade of an obsidian knife.

"Acatl, meet Xoco, my wife," Yaotl said.

"I'm honoured," I said. Xoco bowed in turn, but said nothing.

"He says he can help if we show him Chimalli's room," Yaotl said.

The hope that spread over Xoco's face was almost too painful to contemplate. "I don't guarantee anything," I said.

"It doesn't matter," Xoco said. "You're willing to help, and it's enough for me. Come."

#

Chimalli's room was wide, with only one reed mat, and clay toys strewn on the floor. It was clear only he slept inside it: again, an indication of wealth.

As soon as we entered, Chimalli walked straight to his mat and sat on it, his torso propped against the wall. Throughout, he never spoke a word. His gaze, from time to time, moved to me, and I had to look away. I had the feeling he saw through me, through everything I was, and judged me lacking.

Yaotl left soon after we entered the room: the pretext he gave was some manoeuvres with his regiment. The real reason, I feared, was that he did not want to be with Xoco. I wondered if they still loved each other, and thought it was one-sided.

I was left alone with Xoco, who had started fussing around her son.

"He's your only child?" I asked, moving about the room, not sure what I was looking for.

Her face twisted. "Yes," she said. "Yaotl's a good man. He says one child's enough to succeed him."

"You'd have wanted more?" I asked, and realised what a foolish question it was. For there, no doubt, was the root of their marriage failure.

"Had it been possible, yes," Xoco said. "It's no longer the case."

"I'm sorry," I said. I did not wait for her response, but instead started rummaging around the room.

The clay toys, models of warriors with their clubs and priests with their sacrificial knives, were amazingly detailed. Yaotl had spared nothing for his only son.

In the wicker chest by the mat were more toys: spinning tops of turquoise, and rag dolls. But still no trace of magic, sorcerous or otherwise. I had expected Chimalli to protest at seeing a stranger search through his possessions, but the boy remained sitting on his reed mat, staring at me in eerie silence.

To avoid looking back at him, I raised my eyes to the walls, gazing at the intricate frescoes--obviously painted by someone with talent. The painted gaze of Xochiquetzal stared back at me: the goddess of joy and flowers wore her quetzal feather headdress, and her intricate gold necklace. Her eyes had the same disturbing intensity as Chimalli's.

What had I missed? I thought again about what Yaotl had told me. One morning at dawn, Chimalli had refused to get up. The spell, then, had likely been cast during the previous night.

With all the slaves within the house, no one could have entered without raising an outcry. But that meant little. There were spells of invisibility. Yaotl's house was warded against intruders, but not against magic. A sorcerer could have found an easy access.

I combed the room again, but could find nothing. It unnerved me. Surely something that powerful would have left traces.

However...a curse like this, slowly spreading over Chimalli, would need to be renewed regularly. The spell-caster would have to come back, most likely every night.

Xoco was sitting by Chimalli's side when I rose from my second search.

"So?" she asked. Anxiety shone in her eyes.

"I found nothing," I said at last, ashamed to admit defeat. "I thought one of your husband's enemies might have been responsible,--" I left Xoco an opening, hoping to have more details, but she looked away.

"Please don't give up," she said.

I sighed. I could think of only one thing left to do. I asked Xoco, "Will you object if I stay here tonight? I have a feeling whatever comes for him does so at night."

It was a foolish idea. I still had no idea of whom I might face, or of his powers. But I had no other plan.

Xoco's gaze was uncertain. "I don't mind if you stay," she said at last. "Though I'll have to ask Yaotl."

#

As I suspected, Yaotl agreed to let me stay. He was far too worried about his child, and trying very hard not to show it, not to appear weak.

As the sun set, I made my preparations. I slaughtered a hummingbird, symbol of Huitzilpochtli, the god who protected the Mexica Empire, and drew wards in the bird's blood. The heart I put at the centre of Chimalli's room, and I said the words that would seal the protection.

What surprised me was that Xoco wanted to stay with me. I told her that for this to be effective, I needed to be alone with the boy. That I could not protect Chimalli, her and myself at the same time. Still she refused to leave. Finally, I won out.

When night fell, I was alone in the room. Chimalli was not sleeping; he was sitting on the reed mat, propped up against the wall. His eyes were trained on me. After a while, it became unbearable. I turned my gaze away from him, staring only at the tiled floor.

For what seemed like an eternity I remained seated beside my wards, silently repeating the spells of protection, suspecting they would not be enough.

It grew darker, and colder. The stars rose in the sky: I saw them beyond the door, but they lit nothing. Still I did not move. I had endured worse during my novitiate.

When a shadow fell across the door, I was wide awake.

The wind blew to me the smell of corn, and rotting leaves. Looking up, I saw a woman in the doorway.

She wore a cloak as dark as night, the hood thrown back to reveal a face that had nothing human. Her face had skin, but it was sallow, stretched so thin over bones that I could see the skull beneath it. Her hands had long, slender fingers tapering a point, like claws. And the eyes...the eyes were the worse. Because they were still human, filled with a hunger so intense I recoiled.

She was not the sorcerer I had been expecting. She was not even a human.

She was a Haunting Mother.

That was not possible. Haunting Mothers, those who had died in childbirth, hated children. They did not play games or cast slow spells. They merely slaughtered those children they could reach.

"Priest," the Haunting Mother whispered. "Let me pass."

"No," I said. "I stand against you, Mother. You can't kill him."

She prowled around the edges of my wards, trying to see the weaknesses in them. "Fool," she hissed. "I'm not here to kill him. Let me pass."

"Then what do you want with him?" I asked.

Her mouth stretched in a sickening smile, a bitter, angry expression that had nothing of joy. "I'll take him with me."

"He's not yours," I whispered.

She threw back her head, and laughed. "Of course he's mine."

A soft patter of feet made me turn around: the child Chimalli had risen from his reed mat, and was going towards the doorway, a wide smile of joy on his face. Bile rose in my throat; I watched as he walked along the edge of the wards, desperately trying to find a way beyond them. But the wards still held.

I turned my attention to the more pressing danger: the Haunting Mother. "You can have no child," I said.

"Not any more," she hissed, lunging at me, claws extended to tear my heart out. My wards shook, but did not yield. "He's mine, priest. Do you think I'd say this lightly?"

"You are dead," I said. "Nothing is yours any more."

"I gave my life to bring him into the world," the Haunting Mother said. "I bled on the reed mat, and bled, until there was no blood left, but he lived. I won. Let me have him."

My heart missed a beat. "He's Xoco's child, and Yaotl's."

She laughed again. "Yaotl's, yes. But Xoco's barren. How they thought they could dupe me, begetting a child on me, and thinking to take him as their own."

I rose, came closer to her, until I could see her eyes. "What were you, when you were alive?" I whispered.

"I was a slave in this house," she said. She made no move towards me now, but I was not fooled. The inhuman hunger still filled her eyes. "Chimalli's mine."

"He's not yours, Nenetl," a voice said.

I turned, and saw Xoco in the doorway. Her face was ice.

"Did you think death would stop me?" the Mother asked.

Xoco's eyes were expressionless. "I'd hoped so. But it seems sluts like you can't have the grace to die."

"You killed me. Don't you think I knew what the potion was, that you fed me? Don't you think I wouldn't understand that?" she hissed, and lunged, not at Chimalli, but at Xoco. I had guessed this, and had started running; I took her full weight on myself. Her hands carved grooves into the skin of my arms, and a searing pain filled my body.

"You shouldn't be here," I said, still trying to comprehend what had happened. "You were poisoned. You didn't die in childbirth."

"Fool," she said. I could not see anything but her gaze: blue, bloodshot eyes still filled with that intense hunger, the one she had kept her returning to Chimalli, night after night. "Her poison didn't kill me. But it was enough--enough to weaken me during the birth. And so she won."

"You have no place here," I repeated.

"Let me pass."

I held on, grimly, feeling my muscles on the verge of yielding. Pain sang within me, demanding to be acknowledged, but I did not give in. "He's your child, but that doesn't mean you can take him into death."

"She killed me," the Mother hissed.

"I know," I said, still trying to come to terms with the enormity of what Xoco had done. "But do you truly think Chimalli can go where you are?"

"He's my child," she whispered. She was folding back on herself, almost sobbing. "They told him lies, that he was the son of a great warrior and of a noble lady. That both his parents were still alive. And he believes them. He'll grow up believing them. He knows nothing of me."

"Look," I said, gently. "Look at him, Nenetl."

Something in my voice could still reach her, wherever the woman Nenetl had retreated. She turned, staring at the hollow-eyed boy by my side, his arms reaching out towards her, beseeching. But there was no love on the face. There was nothing.

"Where you take him," I said, "he won't grow. He'll dwindle away until he's skin stretched over bones, and then bones, and then nothing. He won't play with his toys. He won't run in the courtyard."

"No," she whispered. "I am his mother. I know what is best for him. I won't be forgotten."

"He'll never be a warrior, never be a priest, never make you proud. He'll never kiss you or tell you how much he loves you. There's no love in the underworld."

"No," she said, weeping. "No. Please..."

"He won't grow up," I whispered. "Do you love him so little, that you'd inflict this on him?"

Nenetl did not answer. "They haven't paid," she said at last. "They paid nothing. They have their darling child and all's well. They have no remorse."

"Then it's not about love," I said. "It's about revenge, and hatred. Is that all you are?"

She turned her face towards me, her death's head with the skull beneath the translucent skin. "No," she said. "I'm not that. I'm not that. Am I?" And it was the plea of a lost, bewildered girl.

I did not answer. I laid my hand on her shoulder, ignoring the wave of nausea that spread through me as my fingers gripped her flesh. "I'm sorry," I said. "But this isn't the answer."

Nenetl gazed back at her son, and then at Xoco, who stood watching her, her face expressionless.

"If you want her to go," I said to Xoco, "you must make a promise. Tell the child who his mother was."

"And that I killed her?" Not a muscle of her face moved. They were well suited, she and Yaotl.

"No," I said. "But let Chimalli honour his true mother."

Xoco's face moved towards her child, and back to the Haunting Mother. "Yes," she said, tightly. "I'll tell him the truth when he is older."

Nenetl did not speak. She moved at last, passing through my decayed wards like a knife through human skin, and knelt beside Chimalli. She took both his hands in hers, gazing into his hollow eyes. Gently, she led her back to his reed mat, and helped him lay down on it. "I'm sorry," she said.

She was fading now, growing fainter and fainter, taking with her the darkness and the cold.

Soon there was nothing left but Chimalli on his mat, curling back to go to sleep. The aura of the underworld had not left: it still clung to his hands and feet. It would cling to him all his life. I wondered how he would fare, and decided I could not do anything about that.

About Xoco, though...

She watched me, with that same unbending attitude she had shown earlier. "And now what?" she said. "Do you think to arrest me? There's no proof. Nenetl was burnt four years ago."

"I'm no magistrate," I said.

"But still you judge. She was a slut, whose only dream was to become mistress of the house. As if a mere slave could rise high enough for that. I'm the only one in Yaotl's heart." There was hunger, too, in her eyes, but a different kind from Nenetl.

"But you used her," I said. "You'll pay the price."

"After death?" she said. "I don't care."

"No," I said. "You're paying it now. Do you love Yaotl, knowing what he did to conceive Chimalli?"

"I talked him into this. We have a child, and he's alive," she said. "Yaotl loves me."

"Do you truly think that he does, knowing what you did?" And, seeing her recoil, I knew I had been right. There was darkness between her and Yaotl now. He feared her for what she had imagined, for what she had accomplished. Only Chimalli kept them together.

"We're happy," she said, and her eyes told me she knew it was a lie.

I smiled. "Then enjoy your happiness," I said, and exited the room.

It was dark when I came out of the house and started back towards my temple: clouds had covered the stars and the moon had set. But that darkness held no fears for me, for it would be dispelled in the morning.

I walked away by myself, and left Yaotl's house behind, and the darkness that coiled at its heart, hopefully never to return.

END

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