

Laztec
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When the children in the car in front of him turned around in their seats and screamed, Mimilticatl realized he'd left his face at home.

It was too late to go back for it. He was committed to going through the light when it turned green, and that would put him on 91 going west; he would lose at least fifteen minutes even if he tried turning around at the next exit, and he didn't think he had fifteen minutes to spare. The old woman, Maria Gonzales, was close to death, and he had many miles yet to drive if they were to reach the altar in time.

She sat beside him, oblivious, the seatbelt holding her upright. Her face looked little better than his; waxy, pale, the face of an old woman whose heart was about to give out. Her maize-yellow ceremonial cloak with its royal turquoise trim--wrapped under her left armpit and tied over her right shoulder in the way of her ancestors--only accentuated her sallow color.

"Hold on, Maria," he said to her, not knowing if she could hear him anymore or not.

The children were pointing now, their fingers quivering as they tried to explain to the driver--their mother?--what had startled them so. Mimilticatl felt a brief surge of stamina at their terror, and he let his foot off the brake so his car, a red '87 Firebird, rolled closer.

The drivers and passengers in the other cars around him at the stoplight stared straight ahead, oblivious. Most of them were talking on car phones, and some were tapping at the keyboards of laptop computers wedged into the spaces between dashboard and windshield. Faceless drivers were nothing new to them; they hadn't seen anyone else on the road for years.

Even so, Mimilticatl supposed he should try to disguise his condition somehow, if only to keep the driver of the car in front of him from reporting him on her car phone. He could probably form an illusory face if he exerted the last of his power, but he couldn't afford to do that. He hadn't been able to for weeks, which was why he had resorted to wearing a mask. Any strength he drew would have to come from Maria, and she couldn't spare any more. So he leaned over her lap and flipped open the glove box, rummaged through the napkins and the L.A. city maps for a felt pen, and sat back up in the seat just as the light changed. Dividing his attention between the road and his rearview mirror, he followed the traffic onto the freeway and began drawing eyes and nose and mouth onto his blank visage.

It would only fool people from a distance. He would have to think of something else when he got to the museum, but for now this would have to do.

This wouldn't be necessary if I had more worshippers, he thought, but Maria was the only one left, and she was so far gone her belief was no longer enough to define his being. She had never been very visual in her imagination anyway, which had made it doubly hard. He loved her even so, and it hurt to think of cutting her heart out with an obsidian dagger, but he could see no other option. The concept of blood sacrifice disgusted him, but the practice of it nonetheless revitalized him, and had done so for centuries. He only hoped her frail heart wouldn't stop before he could taste its life-giving arterial blood, and thus give himself a few more years to seek out another following.

It had probably been a mistake, coming north to the United States, but like most mistakes, it had seemed like a good idea at the time. Mexico was lagging

behind its northerly neighbor in practically every way, and the Aztec gods appreciated a high standard of living as much as anyone. Southern California offered everything they lacked in Mexico: a technical civilization, hordes of people looking for something to believe in, and enough violent death to support a whole pantheon. When Huitzilopochtli had offered to lead the gods and what was left of their worshippers northward, just as he had led the first Aztecs to power in Tenochtitlan so many centuries ago, they had followed him without question.

The trouble was, the few dozen gods who survived the trip soon learned that gang violence gave them sustenance, but not nourishment. They needed the voluntary deaths of their own worshippers in order to thrive, and the few of the faithful who remained couldn't support them both physically and psychically. The bigger, more extravagant gods like Huitzilopochtli and Quetzalcoatl were the first to starve, losing their forms and gradually dissipating into the ether from which they'd been born, but the rest of them followed soon enough. Now only Mimilticatl remained.

He had been one of the minor deities, part of the pantheon laughingly called the "Four hundred rabbits" even by the faithful. God of the Wheel in a society where the only wheels were on children's pull-toys, he had been the least of them all. Now he was in a society that practically worshipped the wheel, but not him. Most of them--even his own people!--worshipped a dead carpenter even older than Mimilticatl.

And the meek shall inherit the Earth, he thought sourly. Much good will it do us.

The rumble of lane markers beneath his tires warned him he was drifting. He jerked the car back into the middle of the lane, checked to be sure he wasn't about to rear-end the station wagon full of kids, then turned his attention back to his drawing. The nose was giving him trouble. He'd drawn a triangle just below his eyes, but it hadn't looked right so he'd tried coloring it in, but that had only made him look like a jack-o'-lantern.

Great. How was he going to get into the museum looking like that? He wished they could have just done the sacrifice on the dining table at home, but of course that wouldn't work. The altar had to be sacred to the worshippers, not the god, and nothing would do for Maria but the altar her ancestors had used, now on display at the museum in Exposition Park.

The tires rumbled over the lane markers again, and this time the driver beside him honked her horn. Maria started at the noise, a good sign, but when Mimilticatl turned his makeshift face toward her, the purple-haired teenage girl driving the low-rider Volkswagen he had nearly hit veered suddenly into the next lane, narrowly missing a bread truck. Obviously the face needed work. Mimilticatl continued to draw, but less than a mile later the mirror filled with flashing blue and red light.

The cop was right on his tail. No way could Mimilticatl lose him. In better times, he could have incinerated him with a blast of divine fire, or stopped his heart with a glance, but now he would have to try talking his way out of trouble. He pulled across the now-empty lanes to his right, stopping in the emergency parking lane, and hurriedly smudged out the nose and tried again while he waited for the cop to get out of his car.

He was white, not a good sign. Mimilticatl would have preferred a Chicano, but his luck was running out along with Maria's life. The cop stepped up to the side of the car, staying well back of the window, and said, "Your license,

please."

Mimilticat1 dug his wallet out of his pants pocket and handed over his driver's license. That had a face on it--his real one, too, taken before he had degenerated so badly--but even so the feathers and serpent scales made him look like an octogenarian on a bad hair day.

The cop noticed the obvious difference between that and his present appearance. "Going to a party, Mr...."

"Mimilticat1," Mimilticat1 said. "You may call me Milt if the name is difficult for you. And I'm taking one of my subjects to the sacrificial altar at the Museum of Natural History."

"Subjects? You a professor?" The cop laughed at his own joke.

"I'm an Aztec religious leader," Mimilticat1 said, letting his voice take on a sincere note of wounded dignity.

The cop considered that a moment, then said, "I guess that'd explain the getup. Well, Mister Miltackle, I'm afraid I'm going to have to write you up for reckless driving anyway. You just about took out two cars back there, and that's a mandatory citation."

"Yes, yes, do what you must," Mimilticat1 told him, "but be quick about it. I must get to the altar before she--before the museum closes."

The cop narrowed his eyes--a trick long past Mimilticat1's abilities--and looked in through the window at Maria. "You okay, ma'am?" he asked.

"She has taken a vow of silence," Mimilticat1 said quickly.

"Has she now? Ma'am, is that right?"

At the questioning tone to his loud voice, Maria turned her head slightly toward the cop, and Mimilticat1 exerted his will in an effort to make her nod. His mental command accomplished nothing save sapping her strength, but that alone made her head dip. The cop frowned, but he finally muttered, "Whatever," and went back to his car to write out the ticket.

When the cop came back, Mimilticat1 took the flimsy yellow paper from him without even looking at it. By the end of the day, he would be way beyond caring about traffic tickets...one way or the other.

He pulled out onto the freeway again before the cop got back to his car, and accelerated on toward downtown L.A. The traffic got heavier when he made the interchange to 110 going north, and by the time he drew near Exposition Park it had slowed to a crawl. The freeway was packed with cars, and changing lanes was nearly impossible. Fortunately, Mimilticat1 had chosen the right lane to begin with, so he crept off the freeway toward the museum, only to find himself directed along with all the other cars to the coliseum next door instead.

The gangly blond high-school kid on roller blades who was directing traffic widened his eyes at Mimilticat1's free-hand face and glided closer to his window. "Way cool head job, dude! You part of the half time show?"

"No," Mimilticat1 said irritably. "I'm trying to reach the museum!"

The kid looked over his shoulder past the sea of cars converging on the parking lot. Turning back to Mimilticat1, he said, "No way, man. There's only one direction here, and that's in. Besides, the parking lot over there is probably already packed."

The driver in the car behind them honked his horn, and the kid said, "Come on, you're holding up traffic. You'll have to park over here and walk."

The kid was right. Mimilticat1 snarled an ancient curse that in better days would have called forth a wall of flame to encircle an enemy, and he was more surprised than the kid when the air actually shimmered between them and a few sparks leaped from the radio antenna.

"Hey, you really should be in the half time show," the kid said, rolling back a few feet on his skates.

Mimilticat1 was too stunned to reply. Where had the power come from to do that, he wondered as he followed the other cars toward the stadium, but the answer became obvious the closer he approached. An aura of sacrificial energy welled up around the amphitheater, bathing him in its rejuvenating spell, lifting years of age from the ailing god. Just like the spectators at the Toltec games in centuries long past, the crowds had come to watch someone die.

Linked as they were, even Maria felt the effect. She sat up in the seat and blinked her eyes, seeing her surroundings for the first time in days. "Where are we?" she asked, her voice a whisper. "What's happening?"

"We have found a ceremonial battle," Mimilticat1 told her, hardly daring to believe it, but recognizing the crowd's aura of excitement from years long past. "If we can get close enough, we might be able to draw life from it." And maybe more, he thought. Maybe they could coax rebirth itself from the event. In the old days, at the end of the game, the losing team was sacrificed to feed the gods; if something like that could be made to happen here....

He drove straight to the coliseum, and his aspect was so much improved by the time he got there that the attendant guarding the handicapped spaces didn't even blink when Mimilticat1 told him he was part of the half time show. The attendant even went around to the passenger door and helped Maria out.

The ticket-takers were less hospitable, but by now Mimilticat1 had power enough to conjure the illusion of two passes from the air. Handing them to the guards, he and Maria walked together through the turnstiles and into the enormous bowl-shaped arena, Maria leaning heavily on her god's shoulder, but even so moving better than she had in months.

"I feel light," she said as Mimilticat1 summoned enough of an aspect to scare a couple of skinheads from their seats near the 50-yard line.

"You should," he told her, helping her get comfortable. "We have won a reprieve."

The arena was filled to capacity. Mimilticat1 had no idea who was playing, nor did he care. He had only one concern: to channel the crowd's bloodlust into an actual sacrifice. It would be difficult; the American game was a mockery of the one the Aztecs played, but with thousands of people still yearning in their hearts for a violent death, it might be possible. And if the players actually lived for mayhem the way they so often said they did on television interviews, then their sacrifice might even be a willing one. If that happened, then Mimilticat1 could live for months on the psychic energy from

it.

The game took forever to start, but the crowd's simmering expectation nourished the god and his subject until the opening coin toss, and after that it felt as if the floodgates had been opened. Mimilticatl actually felt his omniscience beginning to stir again, enough so that he could eavesdrop on the inner thoughts of the players. He felt their emotions as they ran the first few plays, listened to them worry about their field positions, or about their standings in the league, or about their multi-million-dollar contracts; but one of them, a tackle for the team in blue, was different. His attention seemed almost entirely focused on the opposing team's quarterback, and the only thought in his brain was the dim, almost reptile-like imperative to bring him down at any cost.

At any cost, Mimilticatl thought at him, attempting to reinforce his attitude.

Sure enough, the next play, the tackle leaped straight through the line, or tried to anyway, but the center knocked him off balance and he never got close to the quarterback before the play was over.

Again and again, Mimilticatl's chosen victim leaped heedlessly into the fray, but each time the play ended before he could complete his mission. The quarterback's teammates had become aware that the tackle was out to get him, and now they were banding together to prevent it. Every time the tackle got close, someone on the opposing team would knee him in the groin or stomp him with their cleated shoes, until he was nearly berserk with the pain and the need to commit mayhem in return.

The crowd noticed it, too, and the bloodlust washing over the Aztec god felt like life-force itself. It was a false high, like a drug-induced euphoria, but with a little luck and skillful use of his temporarily enhanced powers, Mimilticatl thought he might be able to make a permanent gain. Pity he couldn't convert the monomaniacal tackle into a believer, so his sacrifice could be dedicated directly to Mimilticatl, but a willing sacrifice to the game would be good enough.

The teams lined up again. The center snapped the ball to the quarterback, and Mimilticatl focused all his power on the tackle. Go, he thought to him, then, caught up in the action, he shouted aloud, "Kill him! Rip his heart out!"

The people around him in the bleachers cheered the notion, and even Maria croaked, "Yes, give us his heart!"

The tackle tried to do just that. When the quarterback threw a pass into the end zone, the tackle collided with him, knocking him to the ground and ripping furiously at his shirt. More of his teammates piled on top of the two, concealing them beneath a crush of blue and white uniformed gorillas.

The crowd went wild, and Mimilticatl jumped up and down excitedly, awaiting the moment of release when either the tackle's or the quarterback's soul was ripped from his body...but the moment never came. The referees blew their whistles and the players slowly disentangled themselves from the heap, finally exposing the two flattened warriors. The quarterback wasn't moving, but he still breathed, the tackle still struggling feebly to tear a hole in his chest.

The referees pulled them apart. "Meddling cowards!" hissed Mimilticatl. "Let them finish it!" The people around him laughed nervously and edged away.

Medics carried away the quarterback on a stretcher, and the referees took the tackle out of the game for unnecessary roughness, but that was the extent of it. The tackle's team was penalized fifteen yards, and the game started again with a first down.

Disappointment drove Mimilticatl once again toward oblivion. He turned to Maria and said, "These people have no spirit. There is nothing more here for us. We must go now, while we still can."

Nodding, Maria tried to stand, but Mimilticatl had to help her to her feet. They hobbled to the exit, leaning on one another, barely better off than they had been when they entered.

The parking lot was nearly deserted now. Clots of people here and there marked tailgate parties, but most of the fans were inside the stadium, watching the ritual violence. Mimilticatl found his car and helped Maria into the passenger seat, then staggered around to the driver's side and fumbled to unlock the door.

He had just managed to fit the key in the slot when he heard footsteps behind him, and a young male voice with the accent of home said, "Hey, old timer, what you doing with my car?"

Mimilticatl turned around. There were five of them, all Hispanic, all boys within a few years of puberty. They slouched casually against the car beside Mimilticatl's, no weapons in evidence, but they all had hands in their pockets and he knew they carried knives.

"This is my car," he told them.

They whitened a bit at his once again nebulous face, and the youngest of them radiated fear that Mimilticatl could pick up even in his drained state. The boy had heard of the old gods; his parents or an uncle or someone had scared him with tales about them when he was a child. The leader showed no fear, though. He wore his shirt unbuttoned, and sticking out his hairless chest, he said, "Not any more it ain't. Gimme the keys, old man. Now."

Mimilticatl nodded, though he knew it wasn't the car the boys wanted. Not entirely, at least. The car was their ultimate goal, but first they wanted him to resist, and if he didn't then they would pretend he had. They would make up some excuse for attacking him, no matter what he did.

He laughed as he held up the keys, letting them dangle from the bright blue nylon pouch that kept them from tearing holes in his pockets. Fitting that it should end this way. The last Aztec god should die in violence. Pity it would have to be an un-dedicated death, and so far from his homeland. At least it would be at the hands of his own people. His own people. He laughed again.

"What you laughing at?" the leader demanded.

So that would be their excuse. Very well, Mimilticatl thought. He would give them their reason to fight. Slapping the keys into his palm to emphasize his words, he said, "I am laughing at you, little boy. You and your pitiful excuse for a gang. Stealing money from the crippled; is that what has become of our once-proud nation?"

"Oooo, big talk," the boy said. He took his hand out of his pocket, and with a snick of unfolding metal his blade sprang out to point at Mimilticatl.

A wave of power swept out of the stadium. Someone had tackled someone else, and the spectators were drinking in their sublimated blood rush. Drawing off their energy, Mimilticatl flung the keys at the gang leader, heating them and their pouch to incandescence in mid-air. The burning nylon struck the boy in the chest and stuck there, sputtering flame and oily black smoke.

"Yeow!" he screamed, batting at the flames with both hands. In his panic, he caught his opposite wrist with his own knife, and blood began pouring out over his hand.

"Get him!" the others shouted, drawing their own knives and lunging toward Mimilticatl. Desperately, he cast more flame at them, but the play inside the stadium was over now, and the ephemeral power the crowd provided had faded again. Only the wounded boy's individual pain fueled his spell, and that barely gave him enough power to singe the other kids' already-curly hair, but it bought him enough time to leap to the hood, then to the top of the car.

The gang leader had succeeded in slapping out the flames. His chest was bright red, where it wasn't charred black, and his hands were covered with melted nylon and blood. "You shouldn't have done that, old man," he snarled, circling around the car to cut off Mimilticatl's escape.

He swung his knife at Mimilticatl's ankles, but the god danced out of his reach. He stretched forward for another try, but just as he extended himself, Maria flung open the door. Its edge caught him in a line from crotch to chin and sent him sprawling onto the pavement, howling in pain. One of the other gang members said mockingly, "Whoa, look out for his mama!"

"Look out for yourselves," the leader said, standing up again and wrenching the door out of Maria's grasp. He reached into the car to pull her out, but she had been waiting for him; a stream of hot pepper mace struck him right in the eyes, and he staggered back, dropping his knife and screaming even louder than before. Maria stepped out, holding onto the door frame for support, and aimed the mace can menacingly toward the others.

"Be careful," Mimilticatl said. He leaped down from the roof of the car and grabbed the fallen knife, but while his head was down he heard a scuffle and a startled "Oh!" and when he stood, the youngest boy, the one who most feared him, held Maria's arms pinned to her sides and his knife to her throat. Another boy writhed in pepper-spray agony, but that still left three.

"Don't move, mestizo," said the boy holding Maria.

Mimilticatl stood slowly, fingering the knife in his hand. The pain from the two downed gang boys was a tantalizing echo of nourishment, but not enough to power divine flame. He would have to fight them on their level. He gathered his strength for the attempt, but Maria shook her head. A thin line of blood formed where the knife point dragged across her neck.

"The heart," she whispered.

The boy's brows narrowed. "What you talking about, bitch?"

"The heart," she said again. "If you're going to kill me, cut out my heart."

"No!" Mimilticatl cried, leaping forward. Maria meant well, but even so, if the boy did that her death would be pointless. The sacrifice had to be done on a sacred altar for it to do any good. Mimilticatl lunged for the boy's knife hand, but the boy panicked and with a swift slash, opened Maria's neck.

Mimilticatl's knife drew a long gash down the boy's arm, and he fell back, letting Maria topple over onto the car hood. Mimilticatl felt himself fading as her life blood flowed out over the red paint. When she, his last worshipper, died, so would he.

Unless he could drink from her beating heart. Even without the proper altar, that might sustain him for a few days more.

In desperation, he whirled and slammed his knife into her chest, again and again, slicing just below the breastbone the way the priests always did so they could reach up beneath the ribs to the heart. He wasn't in practice, though, and the knife struck bone and snapped, the blade clattering off the hood to the pavement.

He rose up, hands bloodied to the elbows, to face the three remaining gang members. They were white as ghosts, and one of them had wet his pants.

"Give me your knife," he demanded, knowing he wouldn't have the strength to take one from them. He expected to die in that moment, but the boy who had cut Maria's throat held out his flick knife in a shaking hand.

With his last ounce of strength, Mimilticatl finished the incision, lifted the squirming heart out of Maria's chest, and holding the ragged end of the aorta to his lips, he drank.

He felt the fire of her life flowing into him, felt the energy of her belief sustaining him. It was far more powerful than he'd expected; almost like the sacrifices in centuries past, before the Spaniards had come and defiled the temples. His aspect reassembled until he was once again his old self, the flaming wheel god, eight feet tall with a billowing nimbus of ethereal fire surrounding him.

But how could that be? He hadn't used the obsidian dagger, or the sacred altar. Evidently that hadn't mattered after all. Or...another possibility occurred to him. The altar and knife had to be sacred to the worshippers, but not necessarily to the sacrificial victim....

He turned away from the bloody corpse on the car hood to confront the gang. The two Maria had maced were blinking and weeping on the ground, and two of the other three were frozen like deer in a car's headlights. But the third, the one who'd given Mimilticatl his knife, was staring at him in awe. Blood dripped from the gash Mimilticatl had cut in his arm, but the boy hardly seemed to notice.

"You know me," Mimilticatl said, his voice booming out over the parking lot.

The boy nodded. He had to swallow twice before he could speak. "You're Quetzalcoatl. You've finally come back."

Mimilticatl snorted a two-foot tongue of flame. "Quetzalcoatl is dead. I am Mimilticatl, Lord of the Wheel. And this--" he gestured with a glowing hand toward the Firebird "--this object of your desire, is my car."

The boy looked to his companions, and Mimilticatl knew his thoughts as easily as if he'd spoken them aloud. He was wondering if Mimilticatl would kill them all, or if he could bargain his way out of trouble.

A wave of cheap excitement washed out of the stadium. Mimilticatl paused for a

moment to blow the scoreboard into a shower of flaming debris, then turned his attention back to the boy, who kneeled and said, "Spare me and I will serve you."

Mimilticatl had no need to ask if the boy meant it; he could feel the sincerity radiating like bright sunlight from him. And from the others, filtered dimly through their terror, he sensed awe at what he had done and what he had become.

He smiled at his new worshippers. "Of course I will spare you," he said. "And your families and friends as well. For now."