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A Visit from the Jaguar

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Quicemitqui in yollotl – The heart rules all.
Nahuatl Proverb

“Flee, you say? Chalchihutolin must have nested in your head!” exclaimed Quetzalli, in a shrill tone that departed from her usual demeanor.

“Not so” replied Cacalotl, ignoring the disrespect in his wife’s words. “Afraid, yes. Desperate, yes. But crazy, no. I wish it were otherwise, but escaping is the only path that will deliver us and little Axochitl from a terrible death. Even as we speak, enemy forces are massing on the far shore of Lake Texcoco, getting ready to sail across the lake and launch a final assault on our city. Soon Azcapotzalco will be in ruins and all of us will be slain or taken into captivity and delivered to Tenochtitlan, where King Itzcoatl will surely ordain a massive human sacrifice to Huitzilopochtli. If we are taken, our chests will be sliced open and our still beating hearts will be offered to the God, and our blood will be spilled on the floor of the temple. Do you want that for us?”

“Of course not!” shuddered Quetzalli. “But surely Maxtla will defend us from the Aztecs!”

“Our Lord is fierce and wise” replied Cacalotl reverently. “But our forces are no match for the alliance that Itzcoatl has made with the Tlacopan traitors. No matter how valiantly we fight, we are sure to be defeated and captured.”

“Holy Tonantzin, protect us!” implored Quetzalli, assuming her earlier shrill tone. Then, more soberly: “But how are we going to escape, and where are we going to go, and what are we going to do once we get there?”

“As to where, we must go west, towards the land of the Purépecha. Their empire is powerful and not likely to be overrun by our enemies. We would be safe there. I will work in the fields or become a fisherman as many of their folks are.”

“And how do we get there?”

Cacalotl’s voice became subdued. “We will have to travel on foot across the forests. It will be a long and difficult trip. There will be dangers.”

“And you want to expose me and Axochitl to those dangers?”

“We have no choice. But I have a plan to get us some silver and maybe hire a warrior or two to accompany and defend us.”

“What is your plan?”

“It may not work, but I’ll try to get help from our gods. I’ll just be gone a couple of days. Do you have enough food to last until I return?”

“For a couple of days, yes. I don’t know what you mean by seeking help from the gods, but if you must go, please return as soon as you can.”

The woods that massed behind Azcapotzalco were dense and had never been developed for human use, since the city’s business was mainly with Lake Texcoco and the lands across

from it. Cacolotl entered the forest after sunset and, as he stepped further onto the dirt path, he found himself surrounded by nothingness. There were no moon or stars showing in the cloudy night sky and the pine torch Cacolotl carried barely illuminated the ground ahead of his feet. The only noises he could hear were the calls of night birds and the chirps of insects.

A feeling of impending doom seized his soul and he began to head out of the woods, but then the unnatural silence was broken by a sudden crash, like the sound of a tree falling to the ground. As the reverberations from the crash subsided, a pair of huge gleaming eyes appeared a few paces ahead of where Cacolotl stood.

“What brings a human into this sacred forest when the rest of the world rests?” asked a roaring voice that was like the growl of a beast.

Cacolotl’s terror was such that he was unable at first to utter a word. Then, regaining his courage, he responded: “Oh, Great Lord, I come in search of the Yoaltepuztli, who is said to dwell in this wilderness. I am sorry if I am trespassing!”

The same voice returned, now in a less frightening tone: “I am Tecuani, the Jaguar. I am sometimes Yoaltepuztli's animal counterpart, his *nahual*, so that he can shape-shift into me when he so desires. But I also serve to house other beings besides the Lord of the Night Sky. What is your business with the Yoaltepuztli?”

“My family and I must flee this land before our soil is desecrated by an impending invasion by the Mexica. I am hoping to ask the Yoaltepuztli to assist us.”

“Assist how?”

“Provide us with material means to carry out our escape.”

“What makes you think he will do that?”

“It is said that if you are lucky enough to find the Yoalteputzli and brave enough to approach him, he might be willing to grant your wishes.”

“The Gods don’t meddle in the affairs of men. Why would the Yoalteputzli want to help you?”

“Because the Mexica, or the Aztecs as they call themselves, are a heathen race that knows only carnage and destruction. They will leave Azcapotzalco in ruins and annihilate its inhabitants, leaving no one to worship the Gods.”

There was another thundering crash and a bright light filled the sky for a few seconds. The light vanished and with it went the glimmer of Tecuani’s eyes, to be replaced by a phosphorescent human figure.

Yoalteputzli was less terrifying than a jaguar would have been, yet its appearance was more awe-inspiring than that of any animal. It was humanoid in shape and somewhat taller than Cacolotl. That is, it would have been taller but for the fact that its body ended at its neck; a head was held in the left hand of the creature, hanging by a mass of greenish hairs that writhed like snakes. The most prominent feature in the head was a pair of gleaming eyes, identical to those displayed by Tecuani.

“You say you are seeking my help. Why do you deserve it?”

“I am a righteous man, who worships and reveres the Gods and will ensure wherever I go that the proper rituals and sacrifices are offered to honor them. If you help me escape, I will bring knowledge of our Gods to the land of the Purépecha, a vast empire many of whose citizens now live in sheer ignorance.”

“Does your heart harbor any fear or malice, or any other weakness that would spoil its purity or diminish its quality?”

“No, Sire, my heart is strong and free of corruption. I am worthy of receiving your gifts.”

“Very well, then” replied the Yoalteputzli. There was a momentary silence, followed by the same crashing sound as before. This time, however, Cacolotl witnessed the origin of the sound: The creature had placed its head on the ground and, seizing its chest with both hands, was tearing it open to display its beating heart.

“Gods have a need to periodically replenish their essence. Some, like Huitzilopochtli, require human sacrifices to maintain their powers. I purify myself by releasing my heart to a worthy human. Are you such a human, without fault or blame?”

“I am, O Lord” declared Cacolotl with as much conviction as he could muster.

“Well, then. You may approach and tear my heart out and carry it away with you.”

“Do WHAT?”

“You must seize my heart with your hands, twist it until it breaks, and hold it so you can carry it away.”

“But... wouldn't that bring about your death?”

“Do not fear. A new heart will be in place tomorrow evening.”

“Still, I don't dare touch your holy body.”

Yoalteputzli's response came out of its head, which remained on the ground. The creature's voice was laden with sarcasm: “I thought you were a warrior, a brave man. Are you so craven as to be unable to pluck a heart that is proffered to you freely, like a ripe zapote hanging from a tree?”

Cacolotl became concerned he would be giving offense to Yoaltepuztli by refusing its offered heart and, with halting steps, approached the glowing figure, whose chest was now wide open with a pulsating heart very much in evidence. He brought his arms up and, with some reluctance, inserted them in the cavity. He took hold of the organ and began twisting it, gently at first and then more forcefully. No blood or other fluids were shed, and the heart itself was warm and heavy, unresisting to his efforts.

After a few moments there was a snap and the heart dislodged itself from the cavity and came into Cacolotl's hands, who almost fell from the sudden release. He took a couple of steps back and asked: "Now what?"

The head replied: "Take off your cloak and wrap the heart inside it. You must take it back to your home and hold it out of sight for twenty-four hours without opening it while it assesses you and your claims. At the time an owl hoots tomorrow night, you will open the cloak and look inside. The heart will be gone, but inside will be my reward for your taking of my heart. If you have been truthful and steadfast, there will be treasures in place of the heart. If you have been proven weak or your account has been false, there will be only a collection of worthless pebbles. It will be best if you are alone when you look inside the cloak. Now, go!"

With that, Yoaltepuztli vanished into the air, leaving behind only a puff of acrid smoke.

The following night, Cacolotl sternly directed his wife to spend the night with her mother, for he needed to be alone to perform a special ritual to the Gods. Quetzalli was puzzled by the order, but knew better than to disobey her husband when he used that commanding tone of voice with her.

Alone, Cacolotl went to the family shrine where the images of the Gods were kept and retrieved the cloak he had hidden there. He sat on the floor by the door of his home waiting for the characteristic trill of an owl's hoot. Just as that signal arrived, there was a growl outside and a moment later Tecuani materialized inside the house.

Cacolotl had not been able to make out Tecuani's shape in the previous night's darkness. This time, however, the light of the torches inside the dwelling revealed an imposing sight. Tecuani was easily twice the size of a grown man and had a muscled body, tan/orange in color with hollow black markings in the form of rosettes on its back and solid black markings on the white underside. It had large yellow eyes that squinted giving it a cruel, pitiless appearance. Its sharp large teeth gleamed as in expectation of its next meal. Cacolotl reckoned that Tecuani could finish him in just a couple of bites.

"Yoaltepuztli cannot come because it is still waiting for his new heart, so it sent me instead to greet you and watch you open the cloak," explained the jaguar.

"I was about to do that" noted Cacolotl.

"You may proceed, then."

Cacolotl placed the cloak on the ground and opened it carefully. Its contents were puzzling: there were some ornaments made of gold and silver, pieces of jade and turquoise stones, and a few colorful feathers of quetzals and hummingbirds. However, the rest of the contents of the cloak were black pebbles, obviously worthless.

"What is this?" questioned Cacolotl.

"That is your reward, the result of your evaluation by Yoaltepuztli's old heart. It found that you were brave in seeking Yoaltepuztli's assistance and were not deterred by its nonhuman appearance. You are also loving to your family and loyal to your human lord. Yet you lied

repeatedly: you falsely accused the Mexica of impiety, falsely claimed that you are wanting to go away in order to propagate the faith in the Gods in a place where such faith is lacking, and hid your fear that you may become a sacrificial offering. There are also other hidden flaws that you did not mention, such as your unfaithfulness to your wife and your dishonesty towards others with whom you do business. In sum, your heart holds a mixture of good and evil, but such is the case with the hearts of all humans. That mixture is reflected in the bounty you have received – the worth of a heart like yours.”

The jaguar then approached Cacolotl threateningly. “But now it is time to go. The Yoaltepuztli waits for your heart.”

A chill ran down Cacolotl’s spine. “What do you mean?”

“Your heart is to replace the one you took away last night. Yours is far from perfect, but will serve until the next one comes around to replace it.”

The jaguar leapt and, in three bites, extracted Cacolotl’s heart and bit it off the vessels to which it was connected.

Cacolotl had only time for one thought as the jaguar’s jaws closed on his chest:

“I hope the reward for my heart will be enough to pay for my family’s escape!” Then, all his cares abruptly ended. END