

# Against Nature

Lawrence Burton

Obverse Books  
info@obversebooks.co.uk  
www.obversebooks.co.uk  
Cover Art by Lawrence Burton  
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## 1.1 (east)

There is the world we see, and there is the world beyond, the realm of sacred forces. Each is different to the other, but there are points at which they meet, where crossings are made. Lakes, rivers, and caves - these are dangerous places at the periphery of common experience, regions where one may glimpse the mechanism of the cosmos.

Primo Acamapichtli Isleño de la Vega stood at the edge of the fountain gazing at coins that had been tossed into the water, willing himself to see something more meaningful than a few pesos scattered in vague hope of making the big one in the Lotería Nacional. The centre of the fountain was dominated by a monolith, a basalt replica of Chalchihuitlicue, the River Goddess. It was a copy of one now standing guard at the gates of INAH in the city centre and which had been found here in San Miguel Coatlinchan, a surrogate for that which had been taken.

Maybe *this* was a glimpse of the mechanism of the cosmos, here at the water's edge under the gaze of *She of the Jade Petticoat*. Everything came from water. It was one of those points upon which both science and religion were roughly agreed, loosely speaking. Maybe it didn't matter that this was only a replica. The image was the thing, the representation. One could not deny her sacred credentials any more than one could claim that a word repeated was not really a word.

Noon approached and the sun had begun to cook the flagstones of the Zocalo. Vehicles sounded their horns, raising dust and exhaust fumes. A group of school children were crossing, heading towards Avenida Insurgentes, a giggling crocodile of T-shirts and backpacks. Soon the Aztec street theatre would arrive with pheasant tailfeather headdresses to dance steps which they felt were almost certainly the sort of thing their ancestors would have appreciated, and sweating tourists in comical shorts would applaud and throw coins and try their best to avoid being kidnapped. It was good for business no doubt, although Primo couldn't help but wonder if a point hadn't been missed somewhere along the line.

There was another point that he had himself missed, he realised. Something large had set off this train of thought, something so vast that it remained, for the moment, invisible.

He had spent an hour or so at Rudolfo's place. They drank coffee and listened to music and talked about life. Primo needed to be at work at six, and it seemed wise to allow about an hour's travel time into the city. Once he was home he would have something to eat, sleep a while, and then get ready for the evening shift.

Caves and lakes: the idea that was too big to consider now returned to him. He'd been inside a cave, hiding out, and there was that damn pain at the base of his spine. He reached back and felt the skin as raw and sensitive as ever beneath his shirt, still with no idea what could have caused it. Rudolfo had told him to go see Ultima. She would know what was to be done.

He had been in a cave, hiding out here in Coatlinchan, and the rest of the memory jarred against common sense because on some level he knew with certainty that it had not been a dream. Acamapichtli, his namesake and founder of the Mexica dynasty, the first true Tlatoani to occupy the seat and mat of Tenochtitlan had hidden himself away in that cave; and he too had thought about the world he saw and the world beyond and the points at which they met. Taking the positive view, the cave was, so he had decided, a womb from which history would be born.

That would have been late fourteenth century, the 1370s or thereabouts, when the Valley of Mexico was ruled by Tecpanecs and the Mexica were still not much more than a tribe. Acamapichtli had been in hiding under the protection of Lord Acolmiztli of Coatlinchan.

Primo had all of this written down somewhere, and certainly it turned up in a few of the accounts, but his memory tended to retain the mythology better than the dubiously historical details his ancestors had described to Christian friars. Coatlinchan, the *Serpent House*, was on the eastern shore of the lake, the place where the sun was born from the underworld each day, and the place from which the first ruler emerged. If the history seemed doubtful, the symbols were at least rock solid.

Primo crossed the Zocalo, heading for Avenida Morelos and home, thoughts of lunch inspired by the smoky tang of beef and corn burning on the griddle of a food seller.

He could see it, clear as he could still see Rudolfo's front room in his mind's eye. Somehow, by *some* mean, he had looked to a circle of sunlit greenery framed by the mouth of the cave, the leaves and boughs of a woodland that kept the subterranean hollow hidden from the familiar world. A little way past those trees and down the mountain's incline, the town of Coatlinchan had gone about its daily affairs - hunters bringing fish, frogs, and birds up from the lake; merchants dealing precious feathers or stones in the market; mothers filling flat breads with peppers and michihuauhtli for the hungry mouths of their little ones.

A flurry of movement had unsettled the leaves of the trees, the bird he had much later identified as a screech owl. A man named Tzonatatetl had drawn closer, the jingle of ceremonial gold denoting his presence in the gloom, remarking *I see that you are troubled, Lord*.

*Of course I am troubled*, Primo had told the cleric without feeling he needed to state the reason. He still considered himself an ordinary citizen of Culhuacan. Now he had learned he was to become full Tlatoani for the Mexica, his father's people.

*You served as Cihuacoatl to the court*, Tzonatatl had told him, *which somewhat disqualifies this claim of having been an ordinary citizen. Furthermore, your mother is of Culhua blood. Her grandfathers were Toltecs. Fame and esteem is your birthright.*

It was not only that Primo recalled all this, but that he recalled it in such detail, and with such an overpowering sense of the familiar. He knew that certain poisons could produce visions, and thought again of the burning in his lower back.

A healer had arrived at the cave wearing robes of a material that was neither cotton nor maguey fibre, the cut and hue of which betrayed foreign heritage; and his face and hands had been the colour of woman's milk. Primo's retinue took this in their stride, concerned more by the possibility of his being a Tecpanec assassin than his ghastly appearance. The stranger spoke as though his tongue were better attuned to some rustic language, explaining that his name was either *Serpentine Fire* or *Fire in the Serpent* or something of that sort.

Primo had told him *sorcery has been visited upon me, as though I have walked over the hair of the Gods. I am unaccustomed to the ways of those who cause such things to happen, but I recognise an attack to the darkest third of my tripartite being. My affliction came from clouds and mist, and that part of my body which sits east bears an unhealing wound.*

The foreigner took a tool from the pouch upon his garment, something like a bolt of stone with four hollows carved into its length. Its face was inlaid with an equal number of silvered thorns stood in a row, each projecting outwards like the needles of a young mizquitl tree. Primo winced at the improbable memory of four needles piercing his flesh. It had been a dream by virtue of the fact that it could hardly have been anything else; but he had no idea where he'd experienced it, or when it had surged up from the depths of memory. He understood only that he knew it now, and knew it as though it had happened. It had been a dream because he read far too much, and his own second name was Acamapichtli thanks to an unusually patriotic father, and there was no such thing as reincarnation. Even Ultima would have agreed with him on that score.

*Why always Cleopatra or Elvis Presley*, she once asked him in rhetorical fashion, *why never the poor soul who has to clean the lavatory or wipe arses for a living?*

Minutes later, Primo was stood before the door shared with three other families, fumbling a key from his pocket, slotting it into a lock which rattled within the wood. He stepped into the sepulchral cool, savouring cold black and white tiles through the soles of his shoes; then flinching as those same black and white tiles moved, a rippling motion, something that stirred his gut adding to the pain in his back. It took him a second to recognise the swift motion of a snake making a break for a gap where the street door didn't quite meet with the step. It was one of those little rattlers, grey with the darker bands, and very shy - nothing worth getting upset about.

The sound of the television set buzzed somewhere at the top of the stairs. His mother was home from her cleaning. He found the second key on the fob and went into their apartment.

'Hello, my son. How are you this day?' His mother's voice sang over the television noise but her gaze remained fixed upon the screen, *TV Azteca* as usual. 'What do you have to tell me?'

'Rudolfo is fine.' He set his bag down upon the counter top and went over to the huge, old fridge, big as a safe and very noisy. The cool air hit him in a wave as he opened the door and briefly recalled the snake, wondering why it should have come inside rather than stay out there soaking up heat like every other reptile in the city. He took out a transparent plastic box in which his mother had saved a couple of tacos and went to the side for a plate.

María, his mother, sat upon a stool at the counter, still wearing the dull blue apron that came with her job. She sipped a glass of milk, her gaze loyal to *Los Peligros de Ivan* on the television but her mouth curling as though sucking a lemon. 'There he is, the perfect victim,' - her face creased in disgust - 'the poor, sainted Indian child with his heart of gold.'

It took Primo a moment to realise she had been referring to the telenovela in which a dashing and yet patently black-hearted Christian delivered a choreographed beating to a young boy in dazzling white campesino clothes.

María sucked at a tooth. 'Never do you see one of *ours* but he is in the news because he has shot someone, or he is dying in a novela so that others may have something to cry over.'

Primo allowed the moment to pass, then made his announcement. 'I will visit Ultima, I think.'

'That is a good idea. She will know what to do. Always you were her favourite.'

Long hikes through woodland back when he was a child, passing offerings to the old woman - cigarettes or liquor dangling from twine in the subterranean gloom - the memory went out as a commotion erupted from the other rooms, squawks of animal panic. His mother was already through the door. The handle slammed into the wall dislodging yet more plaster in the usual place. Primo set his plate to the counter and raced after her.

The front room was still in darkness. María knelt amongst the chaos, a chair and some newspapers which had been scattered by the collapse of bird cage and stand. She glared at the cat, at *Señor Mullido* as he was called.

'Primo, hold that beast - quickly!'

He scooped up the creature, so focused upon its prey that it barely noticed, muscles taut with fur arched all along its back. It wrestled, compelled to return to the scene of its crime by pure instinct. He tossed it out into the hall and slammed the door.

His mother wailed softly. 'Oh Francisco!'

Before her the lifeless bird lay surrounded by a tiny halo of torn and bloody feathers.

## 1.2 (north)

That morning, Todd Calavero stepped from his car and caught sight of the girl with her dog just as he was about to clock on. The girl was okay, she dressed nice like Selena used to dress nice, but it was the dog that stopped him in his tracks. *His name's Troy*, she told him. The little dog had licked his hand, tiny pink tongue and eyes twinkling with canine excitement.

*I can't believe this ain't him*, he told her as he petted the chihuahua, still looking for something that would prove this *wasn't* his own dog returned from the dead. *Mine was called Scarface*, he explained, knowing he'd blown it as soon as he heard himself speak the words aloud. The shutters went down and her smile became subject to visible effort.

Face, that is *Scarface*, showed up on his fifth birthday, a tiny, fluffy puppy with enough energy to power half the city. That dog had been his best friend for more than a decade. Neighbourhood kids thought it was funny, this yapping little powder puff and them with pit bulls and the sort of things you kept chained up at night. Face was small, but he had ten times the personality of those other mutts. Hector used to come over and they would play with the little guy, throwing sticks, getting him all hyped up. Lord, how Todd missed that dog.

Now he was thinking about Hector Alvarez, wondering what happened to *that* guy.

In an effort to focus, Todd crouched low and went slowly around the dresser, studying the grain to see if there was any part he'd missed. The lighting wasn't so good - neon strips mounted up near the roof, daylight from a row of frosted windows at the same level. The dresser was pine, and the pressure hose always messed up softwood - stray flakes and crap getting sluiced around making it difficult to see patches he missed. There was one now, a lime green map of South America holding out beneath the cornice. Snapping protective goggles back over his eyes, he took up the pressure hose and angled the neck towards this last rebel stronghold of encrusted paint. He squeezed the trigger, arms locking against the deafening force of the jet, water pummelling the wood and misting the air with vapour and chemical residue.

Minutes later he was in the locker room stowing away his apron and gloves. He went over to the sink, pulled off the goggles and made a weary self-assessment in the mirror: he looked like shit, more bleached patches curling up amongst the dark mass of his hairline. Wearing the cap never seemed to make much difference. Caustic soda splashed everywhere, got into everything.

The door creaked and Gordy came in. 'Knocking off early, huh?'

'Ten minutes ain't so early.' Todd heard keys rattle and a squeak of metal as protective gear was stashed away. He pawed at his face, feeling the dry, chemical texture of his skin. 'Why the hell didn't I stay in school?'

Gordy came to the next sink along. 'We're black men. We ain't *supposed* to stay in school.'

Todd laughed in spite of himself, twisting the faucet. 'Man, you *know* my moms is Mexican.'

'Then you *definitely* ain't supposed to stay in school.' Gordy chuckled into handfuls of soapy water. 'Church called in saying he got frostbite. You heard that shit?'

Todd sighed, knowing he'd be picking up Church's ticket. 'That would be some world class AC that fool got back at his place, you better ask somebody.'

'Says he got himself checked out, and the doctor told him *frostbite*.'

'Shit don't even make no sense.'

'Next time I wanna take off, I'mma tell Johnson I got a allergy to moon rock. If they gon' believe anything, I'mma get me a piece of *that* action, I tell you what.'

Still laughing, Todd went over to the lockers, fetched out his sneakers and pulled the work boots from his feet. He laced up then secured the door with a twist of his key.

'See you cracking a smile there.' Gordy dried himself. 'I figure you had stuff on your mind?'

'Personal shit is all.'

Johnson had screwed up his pay, but Todd was in no mood to speak on his private arrangement and so left it at that. To be fair, Johnson had only screwed up in so much as he'd hired Milton Taylor for wages guy, failing to pass on the detail of the one salary drawn on group expenses and paid out as cash each Friday. That was just the way it had to be.

He went out across the shop floor. Saint and others were unloading some truck that had shown up after time, hefting raggedy-ass tables and chairs to the rear of the bay with plenty of cussing. Most of it would take a good half day soaking in the vats, so tomorrow would be easy enough, at least more like a normal day without his having to cover Church's fat, frosty ass.

He went out to the lot, heading for his car, Hector and Scarface both coming back to his thoughts. Days gone, reminders of better times, and here he was, the man who couldn't get his own damn wife to return a call. The line of vehicles didn't say too much about the average salary at JMB Restoration, but Todd's heap of

crap was at least insured against theft by virtue of making the rest look classy. He pulled on the door and climbed in.

Five minutes later, he was back at the house; *house* not home.

'Hello, my son. How are you this day?' His mother's voice sang over the television noise but her gaze remained fixed upon the screen, *Azteca America* as usual. 'What do you have to tell me?'

'Same old deal.' He set his bag down upon the counter top and went over to the fridge, big as a safe and very noisy. He opened the door and rattled around the lower shelves, moving containers of milk and sweet tea in search of beer. Having found a can of Pabst, he swung the door shut and popped the top. 'How you been, mom?'

'Did you call on your wife?' María sat upon a stool at the counter, still wearing the dull blue apron that came with her job. She sipped a glass of milk, her gaze loyal to *Al Diablo con los Guapos* on the television, her mouth curling as though sucking a lemon. 'That girl—'

'No, I didn't speak to Selena. I'll do it tomorrow.' Todd took another pull on the can. The house looked good, he decided, somehow different. 'Church called in to tell us he's got frostbite.'

'Frostbite?' The woman stared at her son for a moment, then looked sadly into her glass of milk, dark thoughts ploughing a field on her brow.

'That's what *I* said.' Todd raised his beer, toasting the back of his mother's head. 'Plus, strangest damn thing, I seen the ghost of Face.'

'You saw the ghost of your Chihuahua. This is what you are now telling me?'

'No, but it looked just like him. I had myself a real moment there.'

His mother shook her head. 'What sort of fool calls a dog *Scarface*? That is a terrible name for a dog; and that is a dreadful movie.'

'Mom, I didn't name him after the damn movie. I named him after the guy from Houston.'

'Oh well that is different.' She sighed, then went over to the wall mounted AC to fiddle with the settings. 'Either we are being cooked alive or we risk frostbite like your friend.'

Todd watched her. She hadn't been well. She suffered some sickness and was always run down in the evening, although it seemed like she was okay right now. He thought better of asking after her health, like the question alone might bring on the daily slump.

She returned to her stool. 'The plants in your room are all dead.'

He'd been back three weeks - although hopefully this wouldn't be a permanent arrangement - and still she called it *his room*, a thing from childhood.

He finished his beer. 'I'll take them out back.'

Todd dumped the can in the recycle bin then went through the house to *his room*. He moved out two years before and his folks had used the space for storage: boxes stacked along the wall, ironing board up against the closet, crap from the dresser stuffed into bags, temporarily ousted by what few clothes he brought back. The houseplants were mostly those for which his mother hadn't found room elsewhere - cacti, some leafy things that might have flowered had they lived.

He pulled an empty cardboard box out from under the bed and loaded it with pots, taking care not to prick himself on any thorns. The cacti were pulpy and black, sunken like sad old balloons. He carried the box to the hall and out to the garden, to the wooden compost bin. It was made from broken packing crates, but was still pretty fancy for this neighbourhood. Most people just had yards, some place for the BBQ pit and the dog poop; but his mother had a *garden* with flowers and plants and things to eat - although the tomatoes were looking kind of funky.

He took the pots over to the compost and began upending them, squeezing each in turn to loosen the plug of soil knotted solid with dead roots.

'Hey, vato!'

Todd looked around. A young Mexican guy was leaning across the fence, wiry and wearing a black tee imprinted with text so gothic that it was anyone's guess as to what it said.

'You're María's son, right?'

'That's me.' He wiped soil covered fingers off on his jeans and went over to shake the offered hand. He realised he knew this guy. 'Todd. Glad to meet you.'

'Jorge. Your moms told me you were back here.'

'Shit ain't so good between me and my wife right now. We're cooling off some.'

'Bad news, man. Hope it works out.'

Todd's memory clawed back a detail from elementary: Jorge was the older kid who used to live across the way from Hector. Todd and Hector had been so tight back then that people thought they were brothers, although that all changed by the time they hit sixth grade.

'You remember Hector Alvarez?'

Jorge thought for a moment. 'That's going back some but yeah, he was over on Lakewood.'

'That was my buddy. You don't remember me, I guess.'

The neighbour laughed. 'Sorry to say I don't.'

Todd looked over at the box of dead plants. 'Anyway, man, I got shit to be getting on with and I been home from work but five minutes. Nice meeting you though.'

'For sure.' Jorge grinned and began to walk away. 'I'll see you around. You take care now.'

Todd watch the guy slip back into his house, then returned to the pots. The sun had gone in and a blanket of fat, grey clouds hung low in a hot, heavy sky. He turned his face to the heavens and wondered if it was going to rain.

He hadn't thought about Hector in a long time. The two of them had drifted apart, as small boys sometimes do when their friendship is founded on mutual love of Power Rangers and Batman. Together most weekends, they had built their own private universe, one in which the normal laws of adults and obligation held little currency.

*What the hell ever became of that kid?*

Todd had grown, but maybe not so much as he would have himself believe. He was still feeling his way here and there, still trying to settle on an idea of how the world worked. Moments like this still caught him out, names which had slipped from his life.

He picked a pot from the box and shook the desiccated plug of earth into the compost just as the first spots of rain began to tingle upon his face.

### 1.3 (west)

The blinkers were fashioned from the clothing of the deceased, specifically a pressure suit once belonging to Herrare, the material cut to form a collar of hide curving around the eyes in the manner of goggles. Emiouseddhoran vel-Xianthellipse adjusted the knotted strips of fabric which kept the blinkers in place and took a moment to inspect herself in the cheval glass. Her dark, shoulder length hair had become ragged and her complexion was more grey than its usual olive, but these details could not be helped. Taking a deep, fortifying breath, she slid the bolt back from the portcullis and stepped out into the Netherweald.

Panic numbed her gut. She took another deep breath, set a foot forward and forced the expectation of terror to the back of her mind. The realm in which House Meddhoran had embedded itself - the *Netherweald* as Gedarra had named it - was cold and grey, a private universe of freezing fog embracing a decreasing expanse of shale. Less innocuous were the environmental wraiths forever slithering along the edge of one's peripheral vision, nightmares inhered within the substance of the place. Emiousha was only a childe, loomed to full physicality but lacking the experience of an elder; but then they were all of them childrene, and she was their Kithriarch, and as such she bore a burden of responsibility. She would not concede to fear.

Reminding herself that these blinkers at least occluded the visual expression of the wraiths, she looked along the blur which served in lieu of a horizon until her eyes found the silhouette of Rhodenet's hogan. He had sewn it together himself, cannibalising various garments once worn by Amonis, the first casualty of the blight.

Now *there* was initiative.

The hogan had been established at fifty-two of Emiousha's paces from the entrance vault of their chapterhouse, the location of a flaw as divined by amaranth, but the space had begun to reduce. She counted out her steps as she made the crossing, crunching across wet stones before concluding with forty-seven, one down from the forty-eight of the previous houseday. The Netherweald was dying, local spacetime - or whatever it was - coiling like leaves in Harvestide.

Hunkering down, she drew back what had once been Amonis' favourite dhoti. A male childe worked within, close cut brown hair and a curiously defiant forehead, handsome in a way. He was poised, supported by elbows, behind in the air and nose to the ground. In his left hand, the brush by which he painted tiny characters and archemathic symbols upon the stones. The pigment had been drawn from his own vein. He had already covered a large area by this means, moving the hogan along as required.

Despite her better judgement, some aspect of this endeavour struck Emiousha as improbable. They hadn't been here so long as to account for such a body of work; *and* the notion of an entire volume of code transcribed across enough pebbles for a respectable beach was clearly ridiculous. Nevertheless, this was apparently how it worked in the Netherweald.

'Well met, Rhodenet.' She stood waiting for an indication that she should enter.

The male did not react. His concentration remained with a thick book laid open on the shale comprising uneven sheets of grubby paper, the source of the archemathic symbols he was transcribing upon the environment. Then his head turned, small sullen eyes acknowledging the inevitability of intrusions such as this.

'Well met, Kithriarch. We really can't keep on meeting like this.' As ever, the greeting sounded like a challenge. 'The other childrene will talk. *Rhodenet and Emiousha*, they'll say.'

Momentarily discomfited by the innuendo, Emiousha nodded to indicate that the point was taken: her visits were a nuisance. She knew there would be nothing he could tell her which was not already known, and if there were it would almost certainly constitute unwelcome tidings. She should not have come here.

She turned, looking back to the pale silhouette of House Meddhoran. It seemed so thin, like some desiccated old soil tower you would see out on the salt flats, and she found herself wondering how its distended upper tiers had not yet succumbed to gravity, but of course *that* would be down to the nature of the Netherweald. It always was.

This bubble universe *behaved* as though it appreciated gravity as a concept; yet there was neither gravity nor electrical force nor even anything resembling the noosphere promised by the terrible, overbearing sense of death of which the wraiths were only the most vivid expression. The archemathic information of the realm had been unreadable even when House Meddhoran was in possession of instruments by which such material could be read. Despite all that had happened and all they had lost, the childrene were yet to learn anything from this situation.

Still very much absorbed in his work, Rhodenet spoke without looking up. 'Either go away or come in, but please decide soon.'

The Kithriarch ducked down and went into the hogan, absently shifting the blinkers up onto her brow. 'Laethynrisa has found another bellum notitia.'

'That's nice.'

'Would you like us to blank out your windows?'

He shrugged, evidently not caring one way or the other.

A silver sphere sat aglow upon the ground immediately behind him, an amaranth, a mechanism designed to locate and repair causal discontinuity. It was a miracle that the three such devices bequeathed to House Meddhoran had remained inviolate whilst everything else slid backwards down the path of its own architextural evolution, conceivably something to do with the self-correcting nature of the amaranth itself; or maybe not.

Back on the Homeworld, amaranth technology had been considered unreliable by some. Conversely, Ordnance-Tetrarch Goralschai had taken the position that such devices were effectively useless in the hands of those lacking the ability or imagination. This had most likely been a veiled reference to the archons of the Jallama Reed initiative, just one of his innumerable grievances.

Unreliable or otherwise, Rhodenet's amaranth presently served as monitor to a diffuse area in the substance of the realm, a flaw which had been taken to represent proximity with another, much larger universe. Whilst the Netherweald lacked discontinuity in the conventional sense, its bubble structure might itself represent discontinuity in the context of an adjacent body of history, which *could* have triggered the amaranth at this point of least resistance.

It was as good a theory as any.

Having reached the terminator of his current skein of archemathic code, Rhodenet returned his brush to its carafe of water and sat up. He met Emiousha's gaze with silence, then a glance back towards the amaranth and a sigh. 'If anything kicks off, you'll be the first to know, all right?'

She took a moment to decode the colloquialism, the result of something unorthodox in his biodata, then nodded to show that she understood. As anticipated, it had been a waste of time coming out here. She tugged her blinkers back into place and made to leave, but stalled as Rhodenet muttered to himself.

*Sometimes I wish we'd never left the Homeworld*, he had said, his tone low and seditious.

Flushing, the Kithriarch forced herself out of the hogan before she could say anything she would regret. Meddhoran was born from the Newblood program. Seeded by House Xianthellipse as an exercise in diversity, it had conspicuously failed to deliver anything useful in terms of the War effort, and the era of Homeworld society humouring its mistakes for the sake of an aesthetic was long past. Even their present distinctly finite future was preferable to reprocessing as crude regen-inf biomass. It sometimes occurred to Emiousha that Rhodenet's dysfunction was severe even by House Meddhoran's standards.

Irritated, she forced herself out onto the Netherweald. Pebbles ground underfoot, over and over, a countdown in crunched numbers, *still* forty-seven paces as she set her hand upon the metal bar and drew back the entrance vault portcullis.

Once inside, she removed the blinkers and stowed them within an inner pocket of her peignoir before taking the steps leading up into the rest of the chapterhouse - up one tier, then another, then a third. At the thirteenth landing she came to the ingress of the nosocomion, now a chamber just like any other. All that high end technology had devolved along with everything else, remora and gietesphere regressing to scratchy, near useless code. The original aesculapian mechanism had reduced to crude, wooden catafalques with Ecclesiast Thraenrellis fussing around, trying hard to make the remaining housedays of her charges as bearable as practical with what resources she could muster. These resources amounted to waxy soap, water, and optimism.

Emiousha hesitated, wondering whether she should look in. Lavell had been unconscious last she saw, and Insoleanis had entered the secondary phase of the blight, sweating and rambling about animals and great water courses. It seemed unlikely that either of them would be in any sense improved, and her presence would not alter this unfortunate fact.

She continued, increasingly shorter breaths and muscles protesting, up another thirteen gloomy tiers of dirt, dust and wood formerly comprising the vertex of an apeirotope intersection connecting all parts of the House. At length she came to the air gallery which she entered from below, rising up through the floor. The chamber occupied the apex of the chapterhouse, a whole tier walled in with mullioned glass, great rafters brooding in the roof space. It had been the last chamber to regress, excepting possibly the breeding catacomb, but no-one had seen *that* for a while.

'Well met, Emiousha.' Laethynrisa allowed the Kithriarch to fully emerge from the sack trap before addressing the Drudges - one at each end of the air gallery holding up a tapestry, blank clay faces and heavy brows but nothing resembling eyes.

She raised her palms, miming elevation. 'Higher. We need to secure the material to the eaves. It's really not that complicated.'

The Drudges straightened their limbs, further hoisting the bellum notitia without quite grasping what was required. This tapestry told of the anchoring in terms framed so as to appeal to a newly loomed childe. The threads writhed, changing colour as woven timeships swam after swarming Yssgaroth, fabric monstrosities sewn back inside a black circle representing the caldera, the singularity at the heart of established history.

Laethynrisa appeared suddenly exhausted. Unable to offer further direction, she slumped into a cathedra, letting the Drudges continue to find difficulty with this most basic of tasks. She had always been small and pale, but she now seemed entirely drained of colour.

Emiousha went over, keeping her gaze to the floor, clear of the glass and the illusory Netherweald horrors which the bellum notitia would eclipse once hung. The question she needed to ask was lodged in her throat, kept hidden in fear of the reality it might summon into being.

Bad enough that the male line had withered upon the bough, but that a female childe should now fall to this killing blight...

#### 1.4 (south)

It was the day Ome Ozmatli of the trecena Ce Izcuintli as reckoned by the Tonalpohualli calendar of the Mexica - *Two Monkey*, presiding Deities being Xochipilli, Xipe Totec and Quetzalcoatl. This was hardly an auspicious combination by which to embark upon travel, but there being only nine days left before the occasion of the impending New Fire Ceremony, Momacani was left with little choice. The capital, that is to say the great city of Tenochtitlan, was then stricken with matters of a nature requiring the attention of either himself or his colleagues. Lord Achicatzin, son of Axayacatl and as reliable a witness as one could wish to meet, had testified to having seen that unfortunate avatar of the Night Wind known as the Towering Man in the woodlands of Chapultepeatl, and a certain Tlamacazqui had suffered a vision of fires in the temple of Chantico during some restless period of darkness, but these mysteries would simply have to wait. Momacani was presently bound to keep an appointment in the city of Xochimilco in the southern extent of the lakes, a commitment which pressed greatly upon his thoughts as he made his ascent of the hill.

Pausing his stride, he turned to consider Tenochtitlan, a city glowing white as a jewel beneath a punishing morning sun, enthroned at the heart of its lake in the fashion of a ruler upon his seat and mat. Beyond the waters, at the extremes of visibility he could see Ehecatepetl and the other hills of the north, and to the distant east a metropolitan sprawl skirting the slopes of the Rain God's mountain marking the municipalities of Coatlinchan and Texcoco. On the west bank an outcrop of forest denoted the woodlands of Chapultepeatl, with the cities of Tlacopan and Azcapotzalco a little further away.

There was a great power inherent to this land, a quality of vigour which eluded easy definition. Momacani so often found himself set him against sorcery and trickery, and was hardly prone to flights of fancy, but he knew that no sane person could behold this vision and doubt that it had been wrought by Gods in times past. The priest Ocotochtli had described the world of materials as a shadow cast from the philosophical realm, and sights such as this revealed truth in the old man's words.

Momacani wondered what vision would reveal the truth of one other pronouncement delivered by his former patron.

*You will make war with the beast of the city, and the people will be grateful, and in this way will your fame be fortified.*

He still had scant idea what it might portend, and this remained a source of frustration. Perhaps the beast would be revealed as Tenochtitlan itself, although Ocotochtli had not ordinarily been given towards such overwrought metaphors; *or* perhaps the beast would be its ruler.

Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin was a conceited and superstitious man, unpredictable and too fond of his own sovereignty. Four short years of his reign had set alarming new standards for regal eccentricity. With each new decree it became ever easier to see how one might desire war against such a person, with the prospect of success in such opposition looking all the more hopeless. Commoners were now obliged to observe the custom of setting eyes to the ground in Xocoyotzin's presence. Such vanity was reminiscent of the ill-fated Huemac, last ruler of the Toltecs, a man led into decadence by the sorcerer Tezcatlipoca, and who had thus brought about the destruction of his people; *and* Huemac had been the ninth to rule in Tollan just as this Motecuhzoma was ninth to take the seat and mat founded by Acamapichtli many years before.

Momacani now dedicated himself to his task, setting troubled thoughts from his head and feet to the path, resuming his ascent of the hill of Huixachtepetl. The acacia woodland gave way near the summit to rockier ground strewn with yellowing crab grass and leathery flourishes of maguey and nopal cacti. The clack of wood and calls of labour carried upon the breeze as workers went back and forth wearing only loin cloths for protection, some bearing timber or matting, others with rope coiled over a shoulder. Beyond this activity, the temple platform lay untouched and incomplete beneath a clutter of fresh carved stone.

'What business has a man of the Ixtilque here?'

The speaker stood at a little distance watching the work from the shade of a huexotl tree, a slight figure arrayed with the full quota of gold and jadeite ornamentation through ears, nose, and lower lip. He was with a group of palace officials, mountain wind making billowing flags of their cotton cloaks.

'If this work remains incomplete in but nine days it will be the business of *all the world*, if only for a lamentably short period of time.' Momacani did not know the official and made no concession to his rank. 'Our Lord overreaches himself as always, as did Huemac before him.'

'This Ixtilli is known to me.' The senior Lord Atlazol emerged from the huddle, speaking like jovial thunder. 'Momacani, do you now hunt improbable creatures upon these slopes?'

Wrath subsiding, Momacani ducked down to render the traditional greeting of an imaginary clod of soil picked from the ground and tossed back across one shoulder. 'I travel to Xochimilco and was keen to observe the progress of the temple. Sadly my fears are not set at ease.'

'Then you must polish your eye, my friend. The mountain itself will be our temple.' Atlazol smiled and indicated eagle vessels set upon sandy ground around the altar stone, just as they would be within a ceremonial courtyard. 'The years will be bound as planned. There has been no delay and you must dismiss this worry from whatever tally you maintain.'

Momacani watched as workers assembled a corral for those who would give sustenance, some cutting wood, others securing the logs with rope to form a stockade. 'There is talk that Lord Motecuhzoma presumes to delay the renewal of time by an entire solar year.'

'Chaff and straw.' The younger official barbed his words with thorns. 'Our time is beset with rumour and mystery. People should know better, not least those in the employ of the court.'

Atlazol laughed. 'Oh Tenquauhui, do not chastise a man for having eyes and ears, or for understanding very well how much is at stake during the last days of the xiuhmolpilli.'

'Then it is now acceptable to make a meal of such distasteful chatter?'

Biting his tongue, Momacani spoke slowly and without anger. 'This is Ce Tochtli, a year fated to famine and ruin just as our fathers will tell you. Fifty-two years past, it was a Ce Tochtli year which brought our nation close to its end. This recent harvest has been so poor as to suggest history repeating, and I do not think that this idea is so very hard to understand.'

Tenquauhui refused to budge. 'The granaries are not full this year, although it is hardly the catastrophe of Ihuilcamina's reign; but the work of an Ixtilli is ever borne by water and carried by wind, so your lack of faith is not surprising to me.'

Atlazol smiled sweetly at his colleague. 'You are young, Tenquauhui, so shut up.'

Momacani bowed his head to show that no defence of his views were necessary, and no insult taken. He was accustomed to this sort of talk. The Ixtilque had been established during Ahuizotl's tenure, and it was no secret that the current administration regarded them as an extravagance.

'Besides,' - Atlazol's gaze remained fixed upon the younger official - 'we are at the dawn of a new xiuhmolpilli, Gods willing. Our entire way of life might end in but nine days if it does not go well for us, and only a fool could fail to appreciate the gravity of the situation.'

Tenquauhui gave no response, wandering away as though having lost interest.

'Forgive him. He is young and lacking in perspective.' Atlazol set a hand to Momacani's shoulder. 'Now really, I must ask what brings a man of the Ixtilque to Huixachtepetl?'

'As I have said, I wished only to see what progress has been made with the temple.'

'Nothing more?'

'Nothing more.'

Atlazol's gaze went to the heavens in a silent prayer of thanks. 'I confess that when I saw you here, I anticipated the worst. We are all of us made fearful by the days ahead, I would say.'

'These are troubling times.'

'So I presume something of that which makes them troubling is to be found in Xochimilco?'

Momacani shook his head, amused by the suggestion. 'I am to meet with a minor relative of Macuilmalinaltzin. I do not yet know his story.'

'Perhaps one who has encountered sacred forces?'

'Or more likely one who has encountered *intoxicating* forces. If it were not for this person having friends in high places, I doubt I would be obliged to make this journey.'

Atlazol stared at the ground, disconsolate. 'I could not enjoy your line of work, my friend.'

'Some days I see the dung gatherers as they go past in their boats and I suffer great envy,' - Momacani's face fell to a contemplative frown - 'although of course there is the matter of my neighbour with his large family and great enthusiasm for chilli peppers...'

An argument had broken out amongst a couple of labourers, one shouting and cursing at another who stood holding a wooden pole, a look of disdain upon his face.

Atlazol pulled himself up to full height. 'It appears I am required to supply counsel.'

'I too must be on my way.' Momacani offered a cursory farewell and made for the path by which he had arrived as squabbling voices fell to sullen accusation and testy defence.

At a song's length of footsteps he came to the bank of the lake whereupon he took up his oar, went in amongst the reeds, and walked the canoe out from the shallows towards clear water. Once the waves were at waist height, he climbed in and paddled, setting the prow to the south, towards the dark green line of chinampas flourishing along the distant shoreline. As his body settled into the mundane rhythm of paddling, his thoughts returned to their earlier state of unease, a bothersome sense of something new and unfamiliar upon the face of the world. The thought cycled upon itself, fading to background detail and leading nowhere, yet *still* he could not entirely let it go. It was this same tenacity which had once decided his vocation, this

reluctance to accept a comforting answer. He had no love for nebulous mysticism, or that tendency to dispense with a mystery as purely metaphysical in lieu of efforts to reach understanding.

— *So this is where it will end.*

He ceased paddling and set the oar across himself, looking from one side to the other, then behind. The closest vessel lay at some distance, a hunter spearing water birds, so far that their quacking protests were barely felt. No person was near and yet he had heard the phrase clearly.

Except he had not truly *heard* it, for it had not been carried to his ear, but neither had it seemed entirely like a stray thought. Its origin was as elusive as its means of conduct, and around him was only water and mountains and sky. He closed his eyes and became aware of a familiar sensation, like that of waking and knowing that one is not alone in a room even before any other person has spoken.

Resigned to no greater understanding than this, Momacani took up his paddle and resumed his progress towards Xochimilco. If there was an answer to be had, doubtless it would present itself when the time was ready.

## 1.5

*There is mud splattered across his visor obstructing his vision. He clears it with a gloved hand and sees Palatine Sendax, but it's already too late inside her blot of accelerated time, internal organs extruded out into vacuum like a fast shred, blood on the inside of the glass. She died months ago.*

*Some way beyond the evolving sculptural causality, the body of Palatine Enten ossifies into the work of centuries.*

*Receptors in Palatine Goralschai's array notify him of a vacuole about to close fourteen femtoclicks to his left. He dives, hitting the control for the static regulator as he does so, hoping the numbers will even out. The femtoclick expires and he draws his first breath since Sendax caught the spiral, leaning back against the inner shell.*

*The recording has failed, most likely fallout from the spiral impact. He can recall a unit of five but there were almost certainly more when the timeship dropped them here. He is trying to decide whether fourteen was the standard, or whether the enemy could have retrovised that too - which would of course rule out the hope of comparing records maintained on the Homeworld. In any case, the one factor of which he can be reasonably certain is that he has survived.*

*This would be a secured world, but now they will have to wait for another twist of the history books unwinding the atrocity back and hoping the pieces fall into place. The noosphere has been converted to noble state, effectively impervious to prior cause; an infallible idea until the enemy noticed they could write their own assault clusters into the fuel material of the conversion process.*

*He had signalled this possibility to Vicereine Iseult at conception, to no avail. You are not suitably prepared to deploy narrative etherware, she informed him, and in any case I hardly think it will be necessary. The unit will carry static regulators and these will be sufficient.*

*They were not, and he considers this now: staying in one place, lacking the impetus to move forward much like the Vicereine who apparently believed the war would be won by drowning everyone in a sea of protocol.*

*The vacuole tears and he is dragged out by a clawed fist the size of his head. The exterior has been pushed forward in his absence, subject to evolution, volcanic crowns tearing the landscape apart like some angry geological Academician who has just discovered an insulting article about himself.*

*The enemy are recognisably human, absurd armour spawned from some pre-industrial fetish, brass and rivet machismo, cultural infantilism. If only they could truly see themselves they would surely understand just why there could be no place for them in this or indeed any history; but pathetic or otherwise, there are three of them and they have the upper hand.*

*They speak, apparently too stupid to realise the redundancy of such an action so soon after the detonation of their own syntactic device. The concepts leak through in a vague sense, at least enough to convince the Palatine that he must find a means to kill them in as short a time as possible.*

*They want to understand him, it would seem. There follows further supposedly empathic detritus, but he feigns ignorance, using it to mask his repulsion.*

*A fourth creature unifies the group, a biomorph with huge eyes, psychologically coercive but missing the point that it appears meaningless to anyone from a non-parturitive magisteria. It is crying in an expectation of cutting to his compassionate core, succeeding only in supplementing injury with the insulting supposition that he might respond to such animal crudity.*