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Necahual by Tobias Buckell

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

We're liberators.

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

I know from past experience that sunsets here on New Anegada won't be the same for a long while. As I a child I'd sat on porches near the coast to watch the magnificent sunsets of my own world for many months after The League came to liberate us.

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

A single bead of sweat floats loose from his bulbous nose and hangs in the air between us.

"You know much about the target?"

Everyone wants to know juicy details about them.

"Historical info only," I say."The Azteca of Mother Earth never even called themselves that. They were the Mexica."

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

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

The woman caddy cornered on my left asks, "What is going to be like when we hit?"

"I got the same report you did."

The large island continent of New Anegada on the planet is also the name of the planet. This is confusing for conversation, but no one had consulted with the original colonists, mainly Caribbean refugees from Mother Earth after some minor alien attack a long time ago. Half the continent is New Anegada, the other half is Azteca. Large mountains split them down the middle.

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

We're ordered out, to make sure The League gets here first to offer these humans membership and the Azteca contingent attacks. Now things are messy.

This is all I know.

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

The virtual panorama on the floor screen flickers off.

The buffeting ceases. We're still alive.

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

Which is why it is just now downloading itself into my armor.

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

All the information we need comes to us from the Tais. Tactical artificial intelligences. Little cybernetic ghosts. They give us the real orders, the real info, so that if we got into trouble they can scramble, leave, and we won't be the wiser for the big picture.

These are tactics learned from many strange, alien encounters. Ones where they could just suck shit right out of your brain and figure out what the enemy's plans were. Humanity adapted. It adopted alien tactics wholesale right back at them.

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

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

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

There are no explosions, no shots fired at me, just a calm, blue sky and lush green forest below my feet, the rippling blue ocean up ahead. The chute canopy overhead is invisible, and not just on the visible spectrum either.

A minute later my feet hit turf.

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

#

I'm expecting shots. But I only hear wind rustling through palm fronds and the distant foaming sound of waves breaking over reef. I'm expecting Aztec priest-warriors wearing gaudy colored feathers to fan out and attack us. Instead, I'm facing a large three story concrete building painted bright yellow and pink.

It's got terracotta shingling.

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

"Is this a friendly?" I ask.

"Okay," the Tai says. "Your regular weaponry is locked under my command. You have a tanglegun in your left pocket, if you need to use that. This is a police action, we're not here to kill anyone. There are no hostiles. We're just here to talk and gather information from the locals."

"So this is a friendly?"

"Yes."

I look down. The extendable canon I have aimed at the man is primed, but useless. I let go of the trigger.

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

The canon swings back up under my arm to fasten itself to the back of my exoskeleton armor. It's a smooth lubricated slide. A whisper.

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

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

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

"You speak English?" The man asks. He has a deep tan that almost blends into the color of oak and short tightly curled hair. His brown eyes twinkle with a sort of Huckleberry Finn look, but he's wearing a cream

colored suit. With no shoes on.

I nod.

"You looking for Bouschulte, right?" He says, the words so quick they blend into each and I stumble over the accent. He ambles over to us.

I spoke my first word.

"What?"

"You. Looking. For. Bouschulte." The man from the mango tree repeats himself as if I'm slow. He looks frustrated for a second. "He up in he house."

"What is…" I swallow, "a bouschulte?"

"It a name. Frederick Bouschulte. If you have a Aztec name like 'Acolmiztli' or some stupidness like that, and you hiding with us, you don't keep calling you-self 'Acolmiztli.' Seen?"

"Seen." I agree out of sheer panic. The Tai in my head is still silent. I wouldn't mind some assistance. The man's accent is hard and I still haven't been given any damn orders.

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

"You eye them, chineeman, you do that to fit in with them?"

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

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

"What you name?"

"Kiyoshi," I say.

"Well, Kiyoshi, let we get on with this so call invasion, eh?"

My Tai must be gone for good, I realize. And looking around at the panicked faces of the three other soldiers I fell out of the sky with, I realize theirs are dead too. We're on our own. Somehow these people can jam the Tais, though I have no idea how.

The panic attack comes and goes swiftly. Old training takes over. Yes the Tais make the decisions, but we have training. We're still soldiers. We're still mobile representatives of The League.

I grab the man's shoulders, tangle gun aimed right dead in the middle of his forehead. At this range the tangle gun is lethal.

"What's going on?" I hiss. "Tell me what is going on!"

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

joints in my armor.

Smith aims his tangle gun at us, but it's an empty gesture. Our tais hamstrung us, took away our lethal force. Orders…

"You conquest failing."

"There is no fucking conquest," Steve snaps. "We're here to save you from the Azteca."

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

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

"Any of you able to contact anyone?" Paige asks.

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

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

For some reason, without the tais, the three soldiers are looking at me. Command structure has returned to our small unit. Ironic how we fall into the old patterns. This is what it would have been like in The League before the Xenowars. Only then it wasn't The League, just spacefaring humans associated with their old national origins on the mother planet.

I have a decision to make.

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

Jami nods.

"That we do," he says.

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

"The name Jami," the man in the cream suit says, shaking my hand. "Jami 'Manicou' Derrick."

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

#

Jami asks us if we read much. He wants to know about 'War of the Worlds,' an ancient text, he tells us, but with an interesting moral to it.

None of us have read it.

He laughs gently, takes off his tie and suit jacket and hangs them off the back of a canvas chair. "You'll wish," he laughs at us. "You should have wait and talk with everyone longer. So now, it a mess. The League trying to

come in and reshape everything to be just like it wants it, and it ain't that easy."

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

#

The Azteca reclines in a leather chair while an elderly black lady in a bright red and yellow patterned shawl carefully snips at his flat hair. A red cape drapes around his knees where his hands rest, gently crossed over each other. The gold plug in his nose glints in the light streaming through a large opened window, and his jade earrings dangle as he slightly turns his head to regard us.

Blue eye shadow swirls around the crow's feet that crinkle the edges of his eyes. His black smeared lips twitch.

"The League has arrived," he pronounces, looking at our uniforms. "What do you think of our conquerors, Jami?" Jami is leaning against the concrete wall, arms folded, looking at the small ensemble in the room.

"The first conqueror of Tenochtitlan arrive in small numbers," Jami said. "They had armor and superior technology. The League only got the large number and the armor."

Jami smiles sadly at us.

"But this is not a group of Spaniards with gold lust and domination in their hearts," The Azteca says. "The League is here to save us. Is it not?"

His eyes are piercing. Something has wounded him. He hates us.

"The first conquistadors thought they were saving the savages back then too," he adds.

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

"You done, then, Frederick?"

"I miss my true name."

Jami sighs.

"I guess it don't make no difference what you call yourself now."

Acolmiztli stands up and gathers up the cherry bowl with his hair clippings in it.

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

The door slams behind him.

"He's bitter," Paige notes. They've been taking my lead, remaining quiet. I'm in charge. I'm their tai.

"The League should look very very carefully into assuming," Jami says, looking at the door with us, "that all Azteca same."

There are, he tells us, Tolteca. Reformed Azteca who have spurned human sacrifice and made great changes to Azteca society in the last hundred years.

My stomach flip flops.

"Human sacrifice?"

Jami unfolds his arms.

"Acolmiztli tells me he only sacrificed snake, bird, and butterfly. He say," and Jami imitates Acolmiztli's voice perfectly… "Because he so loved man Quetzalcoatl allowed only the sacrifice of snakes, birds, and butterflies. As he was opposed to the sacrifice of human flesh the three sorcerers of Tula drove him out of the city. The people of Tenochtitlan did not follow Quetzalcoatl. Instead, they followed the war-god Huitzilopochtli or Xipe-Totec: the flayed god. Then the fifth sun was destroyed and we lived in the sixth and it became a time of change."

It sends shivers down the back of my spine.

"You said you had communications equipment," I fold my arms. The shivering continues. "We'd like to use it now."

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

"What's happening?" I'm disoriented; the walls of the room seem to bend in on themselves.

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

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

"Try again. You feeling rough."

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

"Who is this? Identify."

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

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

Then it's gone.

My three companions are sweating and sprawled on the floor.

Infected. Quarantine.

"When we saw you," I say. "You walked over to us, touched me," my hands go up to my face.

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

"Is it fatal?" I ask Jami.

He shrugs.

"Better get back up to orbit and find out, right? I look alright, but I could have antidote." He smiles.

I purse my lips.

"Get up," I order everyone. It has been an interesting being in charge. I'm glad to see the end of it coming. Paige, Smith, and Steve struggle up. Smith leans heavily on Steve. "Get outside, now."

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

Dim lights cast shadows, and from those shadows loom wooden tables where several men in khaki camouflage toast us with their glasses and sly grins. I see no weapons, but now I wonder if their weapon isn't the fever raging inside of me.

My gut spasms. The pain almost blinds me.

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

But halfway through the room text scrolls over my vision. My own implants are failing, no longer able to heal my body or regulate it. I'm nothing more than flesh right now. I have no soldier-sharp senses, no wired edge for combat.

I trip over a chair, grab the table to steady myself, and when I blink everything is clear.

Right before me is a large aquarium. Something sinuously moves through the tank and presses against the glass. I stumble closer and a woman stares right back at me through the refracted water and solid glass with wide brown eyes. Sheets of her oak-colored hair twirl behind her head. Her super pale skin has an almost greenish tint.

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

"Beautiful, isn't she."

Acolmiztli grabs my shoulder.

"She was a present. From one of my brothers. A gift from the Emporer Moctezuma the Ninth."

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

Which she does. Out away from the glass.

Then she turns back, looks at me, and her hands flutter.

It's too hallucinogenic. I walk away from the tank.

"Keep moving damnit." Smith looks at me, face blank. He doesn't understand a word.

His hearing implants have all failed.

But we're moving, and out the door into the sunlight. I lean back and look into the sky. Nothing yet.

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

"The Azteca doing it to you."

"But you knew about it," I snap.

"Yes."

"And yet you did nothing. You collaborate with them."

"You the one that drop out the sky and land. We didn't force you."

Overhead I hear a roar, then a rumble.

"But all those deaths…"

"All because of you. Consider: before you came we were changing the Azteca from the bottom up, and inside out. The Azteca a hornet's nest, and we blow some sweet smoke their way. Now you throwing rocks."   Thunder rolls and a small oval speck drops down out of the sky. The long carbon filament trailing behind it is strong enough to reel us all up from the ground we're standing on into orbit and then into hold of a waiting mothership.

"Snap in when it drops," I order everyone. But I turn and look at Jami.

The pod slows to a halt and falls into our midst. Smith walks over and snaps on. Paige does the same, and Steve looks at me follows suit. Three soldiers, ready to get lifted, the cable rising up from between them to rise into the heavens.

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

I'm still staring at Jami.

"Just because you can't spot the power we wield don't mean we defenseless." He stares right back. "We study you. You machines run everything, solider-man. When the conflict came you choose to wipe out the alien threat you faced. And now you all still working on purifying The League. Only human."

"There was no other choice," I say. "When the killing started, we realized it was us or them. Damnit, I was four. You can't hold me responsible. It's different now."

"You kill millions of aliens, we hear. Deport the rest. Cleanse any human not pure human, that tamper with they DNA. You almost wipe yourselves out. Yet you come here to tell us what to do? That's hypocritical."

"We'd never survived if it wasn't for adopting the tais, like they did. We could never have matched their superior military skill." And, despite the fever, I have a trump. "You talk hypocritical. Hypocritical is the mermaid," I hiss. "You let that Azteca keep his slave in his tank. How dirty does that make you?"

I might as well have struck Jami.

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

"You do not give natural rights to any clone in The League?" Jami says. "Any robot? The tais? Artificial people? Because even you wouldn't grant the person in that tank her life. Why the high ground now?"

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

"We ain't ignorant," Jami said. "We couldn't make do with metal tech. When the wormhole closed, it was just us and the alien who stayed behind used a different kind of tech. If there is one thing we're good at, it's taking things and adapting them. All my ancestors got handed the trash of the more advanced. Technological hand me downs. Less than perfect trade agreements. Yeah, physical domination gone, but economic and political domination follow. So when we came from the islands to here, we say, never again.

"But then came the aliens, and they created the Azteca to destroy us. We had to make do, take these things and mash them up and sent back up as something unique to us. But now you here. You League would destroy either of us for figuring out how to work with the alien. We need to be cleanse, right? You a superior force, with bigger guns. So we have something you didn't expect. The only way you can find out how to deal with this is talk to us. That's why the Azteca give us the antidote."

They want to 'mash me up,' take me and make me their own and spit me back out to see what changes. They want to figure out how best to handle the new situation that just opened up in their backyard. And I'm a key to a puzzle for them.

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

Survival.

Smith's ears are broken, I realize as he signs something at me. A hand flutter, like that of the woman in the tank.

I turn to Jami.

"Okay," I tell him. "I want the same antidote you have, okay?"

Jami nods.

"The very same. I promise you."

Paige recognizes what is happening.

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

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

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

With a deep breath I stand back up.

Jami helps steady me.

"But I have a condition," he says. "You have to help me free her." He's talking about the lady in the aquarium. She's been in the bar for weeks, he tells me, as he helps me back across the lawn. Ever since The League began its bombardment and invasion. Acolmiztli took her here with him, and he won't let her go.

Jami can't free her. His people are helping the Azteca change themselves, but if he were to set the modified woman free, Acolmiztli would blame him. But a rogue League solider with a soft heart, a human heart, could do it.

The Nanagadan's are setting the Azteca against The League. But some Azteca are actually Tolteca, good reformed Azteca. And they are here, but not too reformed. And Jami needs me for a sort of cultural remix experiment, and all I can think of are those almond eyes that plead with me, and the fluttering hands.

"Oh shit," I say, looking up at the sky. The lady in the tank is using sign language. Her hands had moved like Smith's.

And Smith is gone.

I at least want to talk to her.

"Just give me the antidote, please," I tell Jami.

#

Acolmiztli regards me with suspicion.

"He is back?"

"He a smart man," Jami says, his voice soft and guarded. "He know if a battle turn."

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

"Then soon I'll be going home."

"Lucky us."

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

"The antidote," Acolmiztli says. "Come on Jami. Can't you give this poor man the antidote? Doesn't he know the antidote is?" Acolmiztli laughs at me and the sound makes me clench my hands. "All those nasty little metal bits inside that talk to each other and to your ships, all those little ghosts running around inside your heads, those intelligent machines, they're all dead. But you'll live. Oh yes, you're just fine. Just like Jami here."

I'll live. Here. But despite Acolmiztli's light tone I know what the result in space will be. All those battle formations, swarming back through the wormhole in retreat, their bows milliseconds away from each other.

Collided and destroyed.

Mass confusions. Systems failures. Those people up there were sitting ducks. No doubt the Azteca's own ships would savage them.

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

"No, what are saying?"

The half grin on his lips flitters away.

"Who's riding whom here?"

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

"You drunk," Jami says.

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

"Yes," Acolmiztli says. "Can I go watch?" He stands up and totters out of the room.

Jami leans forward and grabs my forearm.

"Please," he hisses.

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

Jami is a man who stared at us when we dropped from space and aimed weapons at him. He slid the machete under my armor and moved quicker than my own machine-aided senses could adjust for. Why was he not doing this?

"Who is Acolmiztli really?" I ask.

"The Emperor of the Azteca brother," Jami says. "Here in case the Emperor get attack by you League. Now that the League falling, I imagine he go leave soon."

I swallow.

"Okay."

#

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

"And," I whisper to myself, "how do I make you understand that I'm going to help you out. Set you free."

There is an ocean nearby, and a small beach that Jami tells me is easy to get to. There is a dirt road that leads from this place straight to it.

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

And if I do, am I not making enemies with the most powerful Azteca? I've seen what they can do. Can the Nanagadan's do anything to protect me? I doubt it, but they've survived so far.

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

READ LIPS.

And on the next line.

TAKE ME AWAY.

This is the right thing to do.

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

"Get back."

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

The lukewarm water and silt, however, drench me.

#

She weighs more than I thought, or I'm weak. Her mossy hair drapes over my shoulder. The smell of seaweed fills the room. I stumble over broken glass with her in my arms and get her into a cart filled with water that Jami left outside for me.

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

Occasionally she pokes her head out of the draining water and stares at me.

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

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

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

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

It isn't important. I did what I did.

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

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

#

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

"She leave?" he asks.

"Yes." I nod slowly.

"You'd hope she would stay?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. It's done. Acolmiztli?"

Jami smiles.

"He's gone back to his brother."

I take a deep breath and put my hands on the table.

"What am I going to do now?" I ask Jami.

He grabs my hands.

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

No, I didn't.

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

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

I pull my hands free.

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

Jami leans back in his chair.

"For now, just to talk to me, man. Don't look for information, or try to resolve anything, or figure it all out.

Just talk."

I relax a bit.

"And tomorrow?"

Jami smiles.

"There's going to be a lot of work tomorrow. A whole lot of it. We go be very busy."

There is one last thing.

"And the aliens you talked about?"

"I'm looking right at you," Jami laughs.

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

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

I breathe again. Slowly, savoring the air.

It's more than just surviving. It's living. And I like it.

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Four Eyes 2004 Caribbean Science Fiction and Caribbean identity and technology, originally published in So Long Been Dreaming by Arsenal Pulp Press Tobias S. Buckell 2 RTEXTR*ch

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