

ISF FOURTH SHORT STORY

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The ISF is proud to present a short story by Aliette de Bodard. "Butterfly, Falling at Dawn" is a breathtaking story, first published in [Interzone](#) and reprinted in [Year's Best Science Fiction](#).

We are really happy to be able to publish this beautiful story and also to make it available for everybody for free.

Roberto Mendes

Editor in Chief



"BUTTERFLY, FALLING AT DAWN"

Aliette de Bodard

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Even seen from afar, the Mexica District in Fenliu was distinctive: tall, white-washed buildings clashing with the glass-and-metal architecture of the other skyscrapers. A banner featuring Huitzilpochtli, protector god of Greater Mexica, flapped in the wind as my aircar passed under the security gates. The god's face was painted as dark as blood.

A familiar sight, even though I'd turned my back on the religion of my forefathers a lifetime ago. I sighed, and tried to focus on the case ahead. Zhu Bao, the magistrate in charge of the district, had talked me into taking on this murder investigation because he thought I would handle the situation better than him, being Mexica-born.

I wasn't quite so sure.

The crime scene was a wide, well-lit dome room on the last floor of 3454 Hummingbird

avenue, with the highest ceiling I had ever seen. The floor was strewn with hologram pedestals, though the holograms were all turned off.

A helical stair led up to a mezzanine dazzlingly high, somewhere near the top of the dome. At the bottom of those stairs, an area had been cordoned off. Within lay the body of a woman, utterly naked. She was Mexica, and about thirty years old--she could have been my older sister. Morbidly fascinated, I let my eyes take in everything: the fine dust that covered the body, the yellow makeup she'd spread all over herself, the soft swell of her breasts, the unseeing eyes still staring upwards.

I looked up at the railing high above. I guessed she'd fallen down. Broken neck, probably--though I'd have to wait for the lab people to be sure.

A militia man in silk robes was standing guard near one of the hologram pedestals. "I'm Private Li Fai, m'am. I was the first man on the scene," he said, saluting as I approached. I couldn't help scrutinising him for signs of contempt. As the only Mexica-born magistrate in the Xuyan administration, I'd had my fair share of racism to deal with. But Li Fai appeared sincere, utterly unconcerned by the colour of my skin.

"I'm Magistrate Hue Ma of Yellow Dragon Falls District," I said, giving him my Xuyan name and title with scarcely a pause. "Magistrate Zhu Bao has transferred the case over to me. When did you get here?"

He shrugged. "We got a call near the Fourth Bi-Hour. A man named Tecolli, who said his lover had fallen down to her death."

I almost told him he was pronouncing "Tecolli" wrong, that a Mexica wouldn't have put the accent that way--and then I realised this was pointless. I was there as a Xuyan magistrate, not a Mexica refugee--those days were over, long passed. "They told me it was a crime, but this looks like an accident."

Li Fai shook his head. "There are markings on the railing above, m'am, and her nails are all ragged and bloody. Looks like she struggled, and hard."

"I see." It looked I wasn't going to get out of this so easily.

I wasn't trying to shirk my job. But any contacts with Mexica made me uneasy--reminded me of my childhood in Greater Mexica, cut short by the Civil War. Had Zhu Bao not insisted...

No. I was a magistrate. I had a job to do, a murderer to catch.

"Where is this--Tecolli?" I asked, finally.

"We're holding him," Li Fai said. "You want to talk to him?"

I shook my head. "Not right now." I pointed to the landing high above. "Have you been there?"

He nodded. "There's a bedroom, and a workshop. She was a hologram designer."

Holograms were the latest craze in Xuya. Like all works of art, they were expensive: one of them, with the artist's electronic signature, would be worth more than my annual stipend. "What was her name?"

"Papalotl," Li Fai said.

Papalotl. Butterfly, in Nahuatl. A graceful name given to beautiful Mexica girls. There had been one of them in my school, back in Tenochtitlan, before the Civil War.

The Civil War--

Abruptly, I was twelve again, jammed in the aircar against my brother Cuauhtemoc, hearing the sound of gunfire splitting the window--

No. No. I wasn't a child any more. I'd made my life in Xuya, passed the administrative exams and risen to magistrate--the only Mexica-born to do so in Fenliu.

"M'am?" Li Fai asked, staring at me.

"It's all right," I said. "I'll just have a look around, and then we'll see about Tecolli."

I moved towards the nearest hologram pedestal. A plaque showed its title: the Journey. It was engraved in Nahuatl, in English and in Xuyan, the three languages of our continent. I turned it on, and watched a cone of white light widen from the pedestal to the ceiling; a young Xuyan coalesced at its centre, wearing the grey silk robes of a eunuch.

"We did not think it would go that far," he said, even as his image faded, replaced by thirteen junks sailing over great waves. "To the East, Si-Jian Ma said as we departed China; to

the East, until we struck land--"

I turned the hologram off. Every child on the continent knew what was coming next: the first Chinese explorers landing on the West Coast of the Lands of Dawn, the first tentative contacts with the Mexica Empire, culminating in Hernán Cortés' aborted siege of Tenochtitlan--a siege cut short by Chinese gunpowder and cannon.

I moved to the next hologram, Spring among the Emerald Flowers: a Mexica woman recounting a doomed love story between her and a Xuyan businessman.

The other holograms were much the same: people telling their life's story--or, rather, I suspected, the script Papalotl had written for them.

I headed for the hologram nearest the body. Its plaque read Homewards. When turned on, it displayed the image of a swan--the flag-emblem Xuya had chosen after winning its independence from the Chinese motherland two centuries ago. The bird glided, serene, on a lake bordered by weeping willows. After a while, a hummingbird, Greater Mexica's national bird, came and hovered by the swan, its beak opening and closing as if it were speaking.

But there was no sound at all.

I turned it off, and on again, to no avail. I felt around in the pedestal, and confirmed my suspicions: the sound chip was missing. Which was not normal. All holograms came with one--an empty one if necessary, but there was always a sound chip.

I'd have to ask the lab people. Perhaps the missing chip was simply upstairs, in Papalotl's workshop.

I moved around the remaining holograms. Four of the pedestals, those furthest away from the centre, had no chips at all--neither visu nor sound. And yet the plaques all bore titles.

The most probable explanation was that Papalotl had changed the works on display; but given the missing sound-chip, there could have been another explanation. Had the murderer touched those holograms--and if so, why?

I sighed, cast a quick glance at the room for anything else. Nothing leapt to my eyes, so I had Li Fai bring me Tecolli, Papalotl's lover.

#

Tecolli stood watching me without fear--or indeed, without respect. He was a young, handsome Mexica man, but didn't quite have the arrogance or assurance I expected.

"You know why I'm here," I said.

Tecolli smiled. "Because the magistrate thinks I will confide in you."

I shook my head. "I'm the magistrate," I said. "The case has been transferred over to me." I took out a small pad and a pen, ready to take notes during the interview.

Tecolli watched me, no doubt seeing for the first time the unobtrusive jade-coloured belt I wore over my robes. "You are not--" he started, and then changed his posture radically, moving in one fluid gesture from a slouch to a salute. "Apologies, Your Excellency. I was not paying attention."

Something in his stance reminded me, sharply, of my lost childhood in Tenochtitlan, Greater Mexica's capital. "You are a Jaguar Knight?"

He smiled like a delighted boy. "Close," he said, switching from Xuyan to Nahuatl. "I'm an Eagle Knight in the Fifth Black Tezcatlipoca Regiment."

The Fifth Regiment--nicknamed "Black Tez" by the Xuyans--was the one guarding the Mexica embassy. I had not put Tecolli down as a soldier--but I could see now the slight callus under his mouth, where the turquoise lip-plug would usually chafe.

"You weren't born here," Tecolli said. His stance had relaxed. "Xuyan-born can't tell us apart from commoners."

I shook my head, trying to dislodge old, unwelcome memories--my parents' frozen faces after I told them I'd become a magistrate in Fenliu, and that I'd change my name to a Xuyan one. "I wasn't born in Xuya," I said, in Xuyan. "But that's not what we're here to talk about."

"No," Tecolli said, coming back to Xuyan. There was fear in his face now. "You want to know about her." His eyes flicked to the body, and back to me. For all his rigid stance, he looked as though he might be sick.

"Yes," I said. "What can you tell me about this?"

"I came early this morning. Papalotl said we would have a sitting."

"A sitting? I saw no hologram pieces with you."

"It was not done yet," Tecolli snapped, far too quickly for it to be the truth. "Anyway--I came and saw the security system was disengaged. I thought she was waiting for me--"

"Had she ever done this before? Disengaged the security system?"

Tecolli shrugged. "Sometimes. She was not very good at protecting herself." His voice shook a little, but it didn't sound like grief. Guilt?

Tecolli went on, "I came into the room, and I saw--her. As she is now." He paused, choking on his words. "I--I could not think--I checked to see if there was anything I could do--but she was dead. So I called the militia."

"Yes, I know. Near the Fourth Bi-Hour. A bit early to be about, isn't it?" In this season, on the West Coast, the sun wouldn't even have risen.

"She wanted me to be early," Tecolli said, but did not elaborate.

"I see," I said. "What can you tell me about the swan?"

Tecolli started. "The swan?"

I pointed to the hologram. "It has no sound chip. And several other pieces have no chips at all."

"Oh, the swan," Tecolli said. He was not looking at me--in fact, he was positively sweating guilt. "It is a commission. By the Fenliu Prefect's Office. They wanted something to symbolise the ties between Greater Mexica and Xuya. I suppose she never had time to complete the audio."

"Don't lie to me." I was annoyed he would play me for a fool. "What's the matter with that swan?"

"I do not see what you are talking about," Tecolli said.

"I think you do," I said, but did not press my point. At least, not yet. Tecolli's mere presence at the scene of the crime gave me the right to bring him back to the tribunal's cells to secure his testimony--and, should I judge it necessary, to ply him with drugs or pain to make him confess. Many Xuyan magistrates would have done that. I found the practice not only abhorrent,

but needless. I knew I would not get the truth out of Tecolli that way. "Do you have any idea why she's naked?" I asked.

Tecolli said, slowly, "She liked to work that way. At least with me," he amended. "She said it was liberating. I--" He paused, and waited for a reaction. I kept my face perfectly blank.

Tecolli went on, "It turned her on. And we both knew it."

I was surprised at his frankness. "So it isn't surprising." Well, that was one mystery solved--or perhaps not. Tecolli could still be lying to me. "How did you get along with her?"

Tecolli smiled--a smile that came too easily. "As well as lovers do."

"Lovers can kill each other," I said.

Tecolli stared at me, horrified. "Surely you do not think--"

"I'm just trying to determine what your relationship was."

"I loved her," Tecolli snapped. "I would never have harmed her. Are you satisfied?"

I wasn't. He seemed to waver between providing glib answers and avoiding my questions altogether.

"Did you know whether she had any enemies?" I asked.

"Papalotl?" Tecolli's voice faltered. He would not look at me. "Some among our people felt she had turned away from the proper customs--she did not have an altar to the gods in her workshop, she seldom prayed or offered blood sacrifices--"

"And they hated her enough to kill?"

"No," Tecolli said. He sounded horrified. "I do not see how anyone could have wanted to--"

"Someone did. Unless you believe it's an accident?" I dangled the question innocently enough, but there was only one possible answer, and he knew it.

"Do not toy with me," Tecolli said. "No one could have fallen over that railing by accident."

"No. Indeed not." I smiled, briefly, watching the fear creep across his face. What could he be hiding from me? If he'd committed the murder, he was a singularly fearful killer--but I had seen those too, those who would weep and profess regrets, but who still had blood on their hands.

"Does she have any family?"

"Her parents died in the Civil War," Tecolli said. "I know she came from Greater Mexica twelve years ago with her elder sister, Coaxoch, but I never met Coaxoch. Papalotl did not talk much about herself."

No. She would not have--not to another Mexica. I knew what one did, when one turned away from Mexica customs, as Papalotl had done, as I had done. One remained silent; one did not speak for fear one would be castigated--or worse, pitied.

"I'll bring her the news," I said. "You'll have to accompany the militiamen to the tribunal, to have your story checked--and some blood samples taken."

"And then?" He was too eager--far too much for an innocent, even an aggrieved one. "I'm free?"

"For the moment--and don't think you can leave Fenliu. I need you at hand, in case I have more questions," I said, darkly. I would catch him soon enough--and tear the truth from him if I had to.

As he turned to leave, he straightened his turtleneck, and I saw a glint of green around his neck. Jade. A necklace of jade, made of small beads--but I knew each of those beads would be worth a month's salary for an ordinary Xuyan worker. "They pay you well, in the army," I said, knowing that they did not.

Startled, Tecolli reached for his neck. "That? It is not what you think. It was an inheritance from a relative."

He said the words quickly, and his eyes flicked back and forth between me and the door.

"I see," I said, sweetly, knowing that he was lying. And that he knew I'd caught him. Good. Let him stew a bit; perhaps that would make him more co-operative.

After Tecolli had left, I gave orders to Li Fai to trail him, and to report to me through the militia radio channel. Our young lover had looked in a hurry, and I was curious to know why.

#

Back at the tribunal, I had a brief discussion with Doctor Li: the lab people had examined the body, and they had come up with nothing significant. They confirmed that Papalotl had been

thrown over the railing, plummeting from the high-perched mezzanine to her death.

"It's a crime of passion," Doctor Li said, darkly.

"What makes you say that?"

"Whoever did this pushed her over the railing, and she clung to it as she fell--we analysed the marks on the wood. And then the murderer kept on tearing at her until she let go. From the disorderly pattern of wounds on her hands, it's obvious that the perpetrator was not thinking clearly--nor being very efficient."

Passion. A lover's passion, perhaps? A lover who seemed to have rather too much money for his pay--I wondered where Tecolli had earned it, and how.

The lab people had not found the missing audio chip either, which confirmed to me that the swan was important--but I did not know in what way.

"What about fingerprints?" I asked.

"We didn't find any," Doctor Li said. "Not even hers. The railing was obviously wiped clean by the perpetrator."

Damn. The murderer had been thorough.

After that conversation, I made a brief stop by my office. There I lit a stick of incense over my small altar, pausing for a brief, perfunctory prayer to Guan Yin, Goddess of Compassion. Then I turned on my computer. Like almost every computer in the city of Fenliu, it had been manufactured in Greater Mexica, and the screen lit up with a stylised butterfly--symbol of Queztalcoatl, the Mexica god of knowledge and computers.

This never failed to send a twinge of guilt through me, usually because it reminded me I should call my parents--a thing I hadn't never had the courage to do since becoming a magistrate. This time, though, the image that I could not banish from my mind was Papalotl, stark naked, falling in slow motion over the railing.

I shook my head. It was not a time for morbid imaginings. I had work to do.

In my mail-box, I found the preliminary reports of the militia, who had questioned the neighbours.

I scanned the reports, briefly. Most of the neighbours had not approved of Papalotl's promiscuous attitude; apparently, Tecolli had only been the last in a series of men she brought home.

One thing Tecolli had not seen fit to mention to me was that he had quarrelled violently with Papalotl on the previous evening--shouts loud enough to be heard from the other flats. One neighbour had seen Tecolli leave, and Papalotl slam the door in his face.

So she had still been alive at that time.

I'd ask Tecolli about the quarrel. Later, though. I needed more evidence if I wanted to spring a trap, and so far I had little to go on.

In the meantime, I asked one of the clerks at the tribunal to look up the address of Papalotl's sister. I busied myself with administrative matters while he searched in the directory, and soon had my answer.

Papalotl had had only one sister, and no other living relative. Coaxoch lived on 23 Izcopan Square, just a few streets away from her younger sibling, on the edge of the Mexica District--my next destination.

#

The address turned out to be a Mexica restaurant: "The Quetzal's Rest". I parked my aircar a few streets away, and walked the rest of the way, mingling with the crowd on the sidewalks--elbowing Mexica businessmen in embroidered cotton suits, and women with yellow makeup and black-painted teeth, who wore knee-length skirts and swayed alluringly as they walked.

The restaurant's facade was painted with a life-sized Mexica woman in a skirt and matching blouse, standing before an electric stove. Over the woman crouched Chantico, Goddess of the Hearth, wearing her crown of maguey cactus thorns and her heavy bracelets of carnelian and amber.

The restaurant itself had two parts: a small shack which churned out food to the aircars of busy men, and a larger room for those who had more time.

I headed for the last of those, wondering where I would find Coaxoch. The room was not unlike a Xuyan restaurant: sitting mats around low circular tables, and on the tables an electric brazier which kept the food warm--in this case maize flatbreads, the staple of Mexica food. The air had that familiar smell of fried oil and spices which always hung in my mother's kitchen.

There were many customers, even though it was barely the Sixth Bi-Hour. Most of them were Mexica, but I caught a glimpse of Xuyans--and even of a paler face under red hair, which could only belong to an Irish-American.

I stopped the first waitress I could find, and asked, in Nahuatl, about Coaxoch.

"Our owner? She's upstairs, doing the accounts." The waitress was carrying bowls with various sauces, and it was clear that she had little time to chat with strangers.

"I need to see her," I said.

The waitress looked me up and down, frowning--trying, no doubt, to piece the Mexica face with the Xuyan robes of state. "Not for good news, I'd wager. It's the door on the left."

I found Coaxoch in a small office, entering numbers onto a computer. Next to her, a tall, lugubrious Mexica man with spectacles was checking printed sheets. "Looks like the accounts don't tally, Coaxoch."

"Curses." Coaxoch raised her head. She looked so much like her younger sister that I thought at first they might be twins; but then I saw the small differences: the slightly larger eyes, the fuller lips, and the rounder cheeks.

Coaxoch saw me standing in the doorway, and froze. "What do you want?" she asked.

"I--" Staring at her eyes, I found myself taken aback. "My name is Hue Ma. I'm the magistrate for the Yellow Dragon Falls district. Your sister is dead. I came to inform you, and to ask some questions." I looked at her companion. "Would you mind leaving us alone?"

The man looked at Coaxoch, who had slumped on her desk, her face haggard. "Coaxoch?"

"I'll be all right, Mahuizoh. Can you please go out?"

Mahuizoh threw me a worried glance, and went out, gently closing the door after him.

"So she is dead," Coaxoch said, after a while, staring at her hands. "How--?"

"She fell over a railing."

She looked up at me, a disturbing shrewdness in her eyes. "Fell? Or was pushed?"

"Was pushed," I admitted, at last, pulling a chair to me, and sitting face-to-face with her.

"And so you have come to find out who pushed her," Coaxoch said.

"Yes. It happened this morning, near the Fourth Bi-Hour. Where were you then?"

Coaxoch shrugged, as if it did not matter that I asked her for an alibi. "Here, sleeping. I have a room on this floor, and the restaurant does not open until the Fifth Bi-Hour. I am afraid there were no witnesses, though."

I would check with the staff, but suspected Coaxoch was right and no one could speak for her. I said, carefully, "Do you know of any enemies she might have had?"

Coaxoch looked at her hands again. "I cannot help you."

"She was your sister," I said. "Don't you want to know who killed her?"

"Want to know? Of course," Coaxoch said. "I am not heartless. But I did not know her well enough to know her enemies. Funny, isn't it, how far apart you can move? We came together from Tenochtitlan, each thinking the other's thoughts--and now, twelve years later, I hardly ever saw her."

I thought, uncomfortably, of the last time I'd talked to my parents--of the last time I'd spoken Nahuatl to anyone outside of my job. One, two years ago?

I couldn't. Whenever I visited my parents, I'd see the same thing: the small, dingy flat with the remnants of their lives in Greater Mexico, with photographs of executed friends like so many funeral shrines. I'd smell again the odour of charred flesh in the streets of Tenochtitlan, see my friend Yaotl fall with a bullet in his chest, crying out my name, and I unable to do anything but scream for help that would never come.

Coaxoch was staring at me. I tore myself from my memories, and said, "You knew about Papalotl's lovers." I couldn't pin Coaxoch down. One moment she seemed remote, heartless, and the next her voice would crack, and her words come as if with great difficulty.

"She was notorious for them," Coaxoch said. "It was my fault, all of this. I should have seen her more often. I should have asked--"

I said nothing. I had not known either of the two sisters, and my advice would have sounded false even to myself. I let Coaxoch's voice trail off, and asked, "When did you last see her?"

"Six days ago," Coaxoch said. "She had lunch with Mahuizoh and me."

Mahuizoh had looked to be about Coaxoch's age, or a little older. "Mahuizoh being--?"

"A friend of the family," Coaxoch said, her face closed.

Something told me I could ask about Mahuizoh, but would receive no true answer. I let the matter slide for the moment, and asked, "And she did not seem upset then?"

Coaxoch shook her head. She opened the drawer of her desk, and withdrew a beautiful slender pipe of tortoiseshell, which she filled with shaking hands. As she closed the drawer, I caught a glimpse of an old-fashioned photograph: a young Mexica wearing the cloak of noblemen. It was half-buried beneath papers.

Coaxoch had lit her pipe. She inhaled, deeply; the smell of flowers and tobacco filled the small office. "No, she did not seem upset at the time. She was working on a new piece, a commission by the Prefect Office. She was very proud of it."

"Did you see the commission?"

"No," Coaxoch said. "I knew it was going to be a swan and a hummingbird: the symbols of Xuya and Greater Mexica. But I did not know what text or what music she would choose."

"Does Mahuizoh know?"

"Mahuizoh?" Coaxoch started. "I do not think he would know that, but you can ask him. He was closer to Papalotl than me."

I'd already intended to interview Mahuizoh; I added that to the list of questions I'd have to ask him. "And so she just seemed excited?"

"Yes. But I could be wrong. I had not seen her in a year, almost." Her voice had gone emotionless again.

"Why?" I asked, although I already knew the answer.

Coaxoch shrugged. "We--drifted apart after settling in Fenliu, each of us going our own way, I suppose. Papalotl found her refuge in her holograms and in her lovers; I found mine in my restaurant."

"Refuge from what?" I asked.

Coaxoch looked at me. "You know," she said. "You fled the Civil War as well, did you not?"

I said, startled, "You can't know that."

"It is written on your face. And why else would a Mexica become a Xuyan magistrate?"

"There are other reasons," I said, keeping my face stern.

Coaxoch shrugged. "Perhaps. I will tell you what I remember: brother turning on brother, and the streets black with blood; the warriors of the Eagle Regiments fighting one another; snipers on the roof, felling people in the marketplace; priests of Tezcatlipoca entering every house to search for loyalists--"

Every word she spoke conjured confused, dreadful images in my mind, as if the twelve-year-old who had fled over the border was still within me. "Stop," I whispered. "Stop."

Coaxoch smiled, bitterly. "You remember as well."

"I've put it behind me," I said, behind clenched teeth.

Coaxoch's gaze moved up and down, taking in my Xuyan robes and jade-coloured belt. "So I see." Her voice was deeply ironic. But her eyes, brimming with tears, belied her. She was transferring her grief into aggressiveness. "Was there anything else you wanted to know?"

I could have told her that Papalotl had died naked, waiting for her lover. But I saw no point. Either she knew about her sister's eccentric habits, and it would come as no surprise; or she did not know everything, and I would wound her needlessly.

"No," I said, at last. "There wasn't anything else."

Coaxoch said, carefully, "When will you release the body? I have to make--funeral arrangements." And her voice broke then; she buried her face in her hands.

I waited until she looked up again. "We'll let it into your keeping as soon as we can."

"I see. As soon as it is presentable," Coaxoch said with a bitter smile.

There was no answer I could give to that. "Thank you for your time," I said, instead.

Coaxoch shrugged, but did not speak again. She'd turned back to the screen, staring at it with eyes that clearly did not see it. I wondered what memories she could be thinking of, but decided not to intrude any further.

#

As I exited the room, my radio beeped, signalling a private message had been transmitted to my handset. Mahuizoh was waiting outside. "I'd like to have a word with you in a minute," I said, lifting the handset out of my belt.

He nodded. "I'll be with Coaxoch."

In the corridor, I moved to a quiet corner to listen to the message. The frescoes on the walls were of gods: the Protector Huitzilpochtli with his face painted blue and his belt of obsidian knives; Tezcatlipoca, God of War and Fate, standing against a background of burning skyscrapers, and stroking the jaguar by his side.

They made me feel uncomfortable, reminding me of what I'd left behind. Clearly Coaxoch had held to the old ways--perhaps clinging too much to them, as she herself had admitted.

The message came from Unit 6 of the militia: after leaving the tribunal, Tecolli had gone to the Black Tez Barracks. The militia, of course, had had to stop there, for the Barracks were Mexica territory. But they had posted a watch on a nearby rooftop, and had seen Tecolli make a long, frantic phone call from the courtyard. He had then gone back to his rooms, and had not emerged.

I called Unit 6, and told them to notify me the moment Tecolli made a move.

Then I went back to Coaxoch's office, to interview Mahuizoh.

#

When I came in, Mahuizoh was sitting close to Coaxoch, talking in a low voice to her. Behind the spectacles, his eyes shone with an odd kind of fervour. I wondered what he was to

Coaxoch--what he had been to Papalotl.

Mahuizoh looked up, and saw me. "Your Excellency," he said. His Xuyan was much less accented than Coaxoch's.

"Is there a room where we could have a quiet word?" I asked.

"My office. Next door," Mahuizoh said. Coaxoch was still staring straight ahead, her eyes glassy, her face a blank mask. "Coaxoch--"

She did not answer. One of her hands was playing with the tortoiseshell pipe, twisting and turning it until I feared she would break it.

Mahuizoh's office was much smaller than Coaxoch's, and papered over with huge posters of ball-game players, proudly wearing their knee and elbow-pads, soaring over the court to put the ball through the vertical steel-hoop.

Mahuizoh did not sit; he leaned against the desk, and crossed his arms over his chest. "What do you want to know?" he said.

"You work here?"

"From time to time," Mahuizoh said. "I'm a computer programmer at Paoli Tech."

"You've known Coaxoch long?"

Mahuizoh shrugged. "I met her and Papalotl when they came here, twelve years ago. My capulli clan helped them settle into the district. They were so young, back then," he said, blithely unaware that he wasn't much older than Coaxoch. "So...different."

"How so?" I asked, at last.

"Like frightened birds flushed out of the forest," Mahuizoh said.

"The War does that to you," I said, falling back on platitudes. But part of me, the terrified child that had fled Tenochtitlan, knew that those weren't platitudes at all, but the only way to transcribe the unspeakable past into words.

"I suppose," Mahuizoh said. "I was born in Fenliu, so I wouldn't know that."

"They lost both their parents in the War?"

"Their parents were loyal to the old administration--the one that lost the Civil War,"

Mahuizoh said. "The priests of Tezcatlipoca found them one night, and killed them before Papalotl's eyes. She never recovered from that." His voice shook. "And now--"

I did not say the words he would have me say, all too aware of his grief. "You knew Papalotl well."

Mahuizoh shrugged again. "No more or no less than Coaxoch." I saw the faint flicker of his eyes. Liar.

"She had lovers," I said, carefully probing at a sore space.

"She was always--more promiscuous than Coaxoch," Mahuizoh said.

"Who has no fiancé?"

"Coaxoch had a fiancé. Izel was a nobleman in the old administration of Tenochtitlan. He was the one who bargained for Papalotl's and Coaxoch's release from jail, after the priests killed their parents. But he's dead now," Mahuizoh said.

"He's the man whose picture is in her drawer?"

Mahuizoh started. "You've seen that? Yes, that's him. She's never got over him. She still makes funeral offerings even though he's beyond all that nonsense. I hoped that with time she would forget, but she never did."

"How did Izel die?"

"A party of rebel warriors started chasing their aircar a few measures away from the border. Izel told Coaxoch to drive on, and then he leapt out with his gun out. He managed to stop the warriors' aircar, but they caught him. And executed him."

"A hero's death," I said.

Mahuizoh smiled without joy. "And a hero's life. Yes. I can certainly see why Coaxoch wouldn't forget him in a hurry." His voice was bitter, and I thought I knew why: he had hoped to gain a place in Coaxoch's heart, but had always found a dead man standing before him.

"Tell me about Papalotl," I said.

"Papalotl--could be difficult," Mahuizoh said. "She was wilful, and independent, and she left the clan to focus on her art, abandoning our customs."

"And you disapproved?"

His face twisted. "I didn't see what she saw. I didn't live through a war. I didn't have the right to judge--and neither had the clan."

"So you loved her, in your own way."

Mahuizoh started. "Yes," he said. "You could say that." But there was a deeper meaning to his words, one I could not catch.

"Do know Tecolli?"

Mahuizoh's face darkened, and for a moment I saw murder in his eyes. "Yes. He was Papalotl's lover."

"You did not like him?"

"I met him once. I know his kind."

"Know?"

He spat the words. "Tecolli is a parasite. He'll take everything you have to give, and return nothing."

"Not even love?" I asked, seemingly innocently.

"Mark my words," Mahuizoh said, looking up at me, and all of a sudden I was not staring at the face of a frail computer programmer, but into the black-streaked one of a warrior. "He'll suck everything out of you, drink your blood and feast on your pain, and when he leaves there'll be nothing left but a dry husk. He didn't love Papalotl; and I never understood what she saw in him."

And in that last sentence I heard more than hatred for Tecolli.

"You were jealous," I said. "Of both of them."

He recoiled at my words. "No. Never."

"Jealous enough to kill, even."

His face had grown blank, and he said nothing. At last he looked up again, and he had grown smaller, almost penitent. "She didn't understand," he said. "Didn't understand that she was wasting her time. I couldn't make her see."

"Where were you this morning?"

Mahuizoh smiled. "Checking alibis? I have very little to offer you. It was my day off, so I went for a walk near the Blue Crane Pagoda. And then I came here."

"I suppose no one saw you?"

"No one that would recognise me. There were a few passers-by, but I wasn't paying attention to them, and I doubt they were paying attention to me."

"I see," I said, but I could not forget his black rage--could not forget that he might have lost his calm once and for all, finding Papalotl naked in her workshop, waiting for her lover. "Thank you."

"If you don't need me, I'll go back," Mahuizoh said.

I shook my head. "No, I don't need you. I might have further questions."

He looked uncomfortable at that. "I'll do my best to answer them."

I left him, made my way through the crowded restaurant, listening to the hymns blaring out of the loudspeakers, inhaling the smell of maize and octli drink. I could not banish Coaxoch's words from my mind:

I will tell you what I remember: brother turning on brother, and the streets black with blood...

It was a nightmare I had left behind, a long time ago. It could neither touch me nor harm me. I was Xuyan, not Mexica. I was safe, ensconced in Xuya's bosom, worshipping the Taoist Immortals and the Buddha, and trusting the protection of the Imperial Family in Dongjing.

Safe.

But the War, it seemed, never truly went away.

#

I came back to the tribunal in a thoughtful mood, having found no one to confirm either Mahuizoh or Coaxoch's alibi. Since we were well into the Eighth Bi-Hour, I had a quick, belated lunch at my desk--noodle soup with coriander, and a coconut jelly as a dessert.

I checked my mails. A few reports from the militia were waiting for me. The timestamp

dated them earlier than my departure for "The Quetzal's Rest", but they had been caught in the network of the bureaucracy and slowed down on their way to the tribunal.

Cursing against weighty administrations, I read them, not expecting much.

How wrong I was.

Unit 7 of the Mexica District Militia had interviewed the left-door neighbour of Papalotl: an old merchant who had insomnia, and who had been awake at the Third Bi-Hour. He had seen Tecolli enter Papalotl's flat--a full half-hour before Tecolli actually called the militia.

Damn. There was still a possibility that Tecolli could have found the body earlier, but if so, why hadn't he called the militia at once? Why had he waited so much?

Disposing of evidence, I thought, my heart beating faster and faster.

I should have arrested Tecolli. But instead I had clung to my old ideals, that torture was abhorrent and that a magistrate should find the truth, not wring out of suspects. I had been weak.

Now...

I had him watched. He had been making phone calls. It was only a matter of time before he had to make some kind of move.

I sighed. Once a mistake had been made, you might as well drain the cup to the dregs. I'd wait.

It was a frustrating process. The afternoon passed and deepened into night. I attempted some Buddhist meditations, but I could not focus on my breath properly, and after a while I gave this up as a lost cause.

When the announcement came, I was so coiled up I knocked down the handset trying to pick it up.

"Your Excellency? This is Unit 6 of the militia. Target is on the move. Repeat: target is on the move."

I grabbed my coat, and rushed out, shouting for my aircar.

#

I met up with the aircar of Unit 6 in a fairly seedy neighbourhood of Fenliu: the Gardens of

Felicity, once a middle-class area, had sunk back to crowded tenements and derelict buildings, sometimes abandoned halfway through their construction.

I had a brief chat with Li Fai, who was heading the militia: Tecolli had left the Black Tez Barracks and taken the mag-lev train which criss-crossed Fenliu. One of the militiamen had followed Tecolli on the mag-lev, until he alighted at the Gardens of Felicity station, making his way on foot into a small, almost unremarkable shop on Lao Zi Avenue.

Both our aircars were parked at the corner of Lao Zi Avenue, about fifty paces from the shop--and Tecolli had not emerged from there.

I looked at the three militiamen, checking that they had their service weapons, and drew my own Yi Sen semi-automatic. "We're going in," I said, arming the weapon in one swift movement, and hearing the click as the bullet was released into the chamber.

#

I stood near the closed door of the shop, feeling the reassuring weight of my gun. At this late hour, the street was almost deserted, and any stray passers-by gave us a wide berth, not keen on interfering with Xuyan justice.

Li Fai was standing on tiptoe, trying to look through the window. After a while he came down, and raised three fingers. Three people, then. Or more. Li Fai had not seemed very certain.

Armed? I signed, and he shrugged.

Oh well. There came a time when you had to act.

I raised my hand, and gave the signal.

The first of the militiamen kicked open the door, yelling, "Militia!", and rushed inside. I followed, caught between two militiamen, fighting to raise my gun amidst memories of the War, of pressing myself in a doorway as loyalists and rebels shot at each other on Tenochtitlan's marketplace...

No.

Not now.

Inside, everything was dark, save for a dimly-lit door; I caught a glimpse of several figures

running through the frame.

I was about to run through the door in pursuit, but someone--Li Fai--laid a hand on my shoulder to restrain me.

I remembered then that I was a District Magistrate, and that they could not take risks with my life. It was frustrating, but I knew I had not been trained for this. I nodded to tell Li Fai I'd understood, and watched the militiamen rush through the door.

Gunshots echoed through the room. The first man who had entered fell, clutching his shoulder. A few more gunshots--I could not see the militiamen; they'd gone beyond the door.

A deathly silence settled over the place; I moved cautiously, stepping around the counter, and stepped through the door.

The light I had seen came from several hologram pedestals, which had their visuals on, but not their audios. On the floor were scattered chips--I almost stepped on one.

In the corner of the wood-panelled room was the body of a small, wizened Xuyan woman I did not know. Beside her was the gun she'd used. The militia's bullet had caught her in the chest and thrown her backwards, against the wall.

Tecolli was crouching next to her, in a position of surrender. Two militia men stood guard over him.

I smiled, grimly. "You're under arrest."

"I've done nothing wrong," Tecolli said, attempting to pull himself upright.

"Sedition will suffice," I said. "Resisting the militia is a serious crime." As I said this, my gaze, roaming the room, caught one of the images on a hologram pedestal--an image that was all too familiar: a Chinese man dressed in the grey silk robes of a eunuch, gradually fading and replaced by thirteen junks on the ocean.

Papalotl's holograms.

Things that should not have been copied, or sold elsewhere than in Papalotl's workshop.

I remembered the missing chips in Papalotl's pedestals, and suddenly understood where Tecolli's wealth had come from. He had been stealing her chips, copying them and selling the

copies on the black market. And Papalotl had found out--no doubt the reason for the quarrel.

But for him it was different: he was an Eagle Knight, and subject to harsher laws than commoners. For a crime such as this, he would be executed, his family disgraced. He'd had to silence Papalotl, once and for all.

He'll suck everything out of you.

Mahuizoh could not have known the truth behind his words, back when he had spoken them to me. There was no way he could have known.

Tecolli's eyes met mine, and must have seen the loathing I felt for him. All pretence fled from his face. "I did not kill her," he said. "I swear to you I did not kill her." He looked as though he might weep.

I spat, from between clenched teeth, "Take him away. We'll deal with him at the tribunal."

#

Yi Mei-Lin, one of the clerks, entered my office as I was typing the last of my preliminary report.

"How is he?" I asked.

"Still protesting his innocence. He says he found her already dead, and only used the extra half-hour to wipe off any proof that he might have tampered with the holograms--removing his fingerprints and wiping the pedestals clean." Yi Mei-Lin had a full cardboard box in her hands, with a piece of paper covering it. "Those are his things. I thought you might want a look."

I sighed. My eyes ached from looking at the computer. "Yes. I probably should." I already knew that although we'd found the missing chips in the black-market shop, the swan hologram's audio chip had been nowhere to be found. Tecolli denied taking it. Not that I was inclined to trust him currently.

"I'll bring you some jasmine tea," Yi Mei-Lin said, and slipped out the door.

I rifled through Tecolli's things, absent-mindedly. The usual: wallet, keys, copper yuans--not even enough to buy tobacco. A metal lip-plug, tarnished from long contact with the skin. A packet of honey-toasted gourd seeds, still wrapped in plastic.

A wad of papers, folded over and over. I reached for it, unwound it, and stared at the letters. It was part of a script--the swan's script, I realised, my heart beating faster. Tecolli had been the voice of the hummingbird, and Papalotl's script was forcefully underlined and annotated in the margins, in preparation for his role.

The swan--Papalotl's voice--merely recited a series of dates: the doomed charge of the Second Red Tezcatlipoca Regiment during Xuya's Independence War with China; the Tripartite War and the triumph of the Mexica-Xuyan alliance over the United States.

And, finally, the Mexica Civil War, twelve years ago: the Xuyan soldiers dispatched to help restore order; the thousands of Mexica fleeing their home cities and settling across the border.

The swan then fell silent, and the hummingbird appeared. It was there that Tecolli's role started.

Tonatiuh, the Fifth Sun, has just risen, and outside my cell I hear the priests of Huitzilpochtli chanting their hymns as they prepare the altar for my sacrifice.

I know that you are beyond the border now. The Xuyans will welcome you as they have welcomed so many of our people, and you will make a new life there. I regret only that I will not be there to walk with you--.

Puzzled, I turned the pages. It was a long, poignant monologue, but it did not feel like the other audio-chips I'd heard in Papalotl's workshop. It felt...

More real, I thought, chilled without knowing why. I scanned the bottom of the second-to-last page.

They will send this letter on to you, for although they are my enemies they are honourable men.

Weep not for me. I die a warrior's death on the altar, and my blood will make Tonatiuh strong. But my love is and always has been yours forever, whether in this world of fading flowers or in the god's heaven.

Izel.

Izel.

Coaxoch's fiancé.

#

It was the Third Bi-Hour when I arrived at "The Quetzal's Rest", and the restaurant was deserted, all the patrons since long gone back to their houses.

A light was still on upstairs, in the office. Gently, I pushed the door open, and saw her standing by the window, her back to me. She wore a robe with embroidered deer, and a shawl of maguey fibres--the traditional garb of women in Greater Mexica.

"I was waiting for you," she said, not turning around.

"Where's Mahuizoh?"

"I sent him away." Coaxoch's voice was utterly emotionless. On the desk stood the faded picture of Izel, and in front of the picture was a small bowl holding some grass--a funeral offering. "He would not have understood."

She turned, slowly, to face me. Two streaks of black makeup ran on either side of her cheeks: the markings put on the dead's faces before they were cremated.

Surprised, I recoiled, but she made no move towards me. Cautiously, I extended Tecolli's crumpled paper to her. "Papalotl stole the original letter from you, didn't she?"

Coaxoch shook her head. "I should have seen her more often, after we moved here," she said. "I should have seen what she was turning into." She laid both hands on the desk, as stately as an Empress. "When it went missing, I didn't think of Papalotl. Mahuizoh thought that maybe Tecolli--"

"Mahuizoh hates Tecolli," I said.

"It doesn't matter," Coaxoch said. "I went to Papalotl, to ask her whether she'd seen it. I didn't think." She took a deep breath to steady herself. Her skin had gone red under the makeup. "When I came in, she opened the door to me--utterly naked, and she didn't even offer to dress herself. She left me downstairs and headed for her workshop, to finish something, she said. I followed her."

Her voice quavered, but she steadied it. "I saw--the letter on her table--she'd taken it. And

when I asked her about it, she told me about the hologram--told me we were going to be famous when she sold this, and the Prefect's office would put it where everyone could see it--"

I said nothing. I remained where I was, listening to her voice grow more and more intense, until every word tore at me.

"She was going to--sell my pain. To sell my memories just for a piece of fame. She was going--" Coaxoch drew a deep breath. "I told her to stop. I told her it was not right, but she stood on the landing, shaking her head and smiling at me--as if she just had to ask for everything to be made right--"

"She didn't understand. She just didn't understand. She'd changed too much." Coaxoch stared at her hands, and then back at the picture of Izel. "I couldn't make her shut up, you understand? I pushed and beat at her, and she wouldn't stop smiling at me, selling my pain--"

She raised her gaze towards me, and I recognised the look in her eyes: it was the look of someone already dead, and who knows it. "I had to make her stop," she said, her voice lower now, almost spent. "But she never did. Even after she fell she was still smiling." There were tears in her eyes now. "Still laughing at me."

I said at last, finding my words with difficulty, "You know how it goes."

Coaxoch shrugged. "Do you think I care, Hue Ma? It ceased to matter a long time ago." She cast a last, longing glance towards Izel's picture, and straightened her shoulders. "It's not right either, what I've done. Do what you have to."

She did not bend, then, as the militia came into the room--did not bend as they closed the handcuffs over her wrists and led her away. I knew she would not bend on the day of her execution either, whatever the manner of it.

#

As we exited the restaurant, I caught a glimpse of Mahuizoh among the few passersby who had gathered to watch the militia aircar. His gaze met mine, and held it for a second--and there were such depths of grief behind the spectacles that my breath caught and could not be released.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "Justice has to be done." But I did not think he could hear me.

Back at the tribunal, I sat at my desk, staring at my computer's screensaver--one of Quetzalcoatl's butterflies, multiplying until it filled the screen. There was something mindlessly reassuring about it.

I had to deal with Tecolli--had to type a report--had to call Zhu Bao to let him know his trust had not been misplaced and that I had found the culprit. I had to--

I felt hollow, drained of everything. At last I moved, and knelt before my small altar. Slowly, with shaking hands, I lit a stick of incense and placed it upright before the lacquered tablets. Then I sat on my knees, trying to banish the memory of Coaxoch's voice.

I thought of her words to me: it ceased to matter a long time ago.

And my own, an eternity ago: The War does that to you.

I thought of Papalotl, turning away from Mexica customs to forget her exile and the death of her parents, of what she had made of her life. I saw her letting go of the railing, slowly falling towards the floor; and saw Coaxoch's eyes, those of someone already dead. I thought of my turning away from my inheritance, and thought of Xuya, who had taken me in but not healed me.

Who could never heal me, no matter how far away I ran from my fears.

I closed my eyes for a brief moment, and, before I could change my mind, got up and reached for the phone. My fingers dialed a number I hadn't called for years but still had not forgotten.

The phone rang in the emptiness. I waited, my throat dry.

"Hello? Who is this?"

My stomach felt hollow--but it wasn't fear, it was shame. I said in Nahuatl, every word coming with great difficulty, "Mother? It's me."

I waited for anger, for endless reproaches. But there was nothing of that. Only her voice, on the verge of breaking, speaking the name I'd been given in Tenochtitlan, "Oh, Nenetl, my child. I'm so glad."

And though I hadn't heard that name in years, still it felt right, in a way that nothing else could.

About the Author:

Aliette de Bodard was born in the US, but grew up in France (in the gorgeous city of Paris, to be precise). Although French is her mother tongue, her parents insisted early on that she learn to speak English.

She first discovered SF through the works of Isaac Asimov, and then moved to fantasy when she happened upon a copy of Ursula Le Guin's "The Earthsea Quartet", which today remains one of her favorite books in the genre. She decided to write when her family moved to London for a few years: she found a copy of Orson Scott Card's "How to Write Fantasy and Science Fiction", which first made her realise that she could try her hand at writing.

She studied in Paris in a [classe préparatoire](#), a prep course for the competitive exams which would enable her to enter an engineering school. After two years of intensive classes, Aliette was admitted into [Ecole Polytechnique](#), one of France's top engineering schools. During her class préparatoire, she started writing regularly, which enabled her to find a distraction from science. She completed two novels during her studies.

Halfway through Ecole Polytechnique, she started writing short stories instead of novels, in order to improve faster—and went on writing those after she graduated.

In June 2006, Aliette attended Orson Scott Card's Literary Bootcamp, which enabled her to sharpen her skills, as well as come back with a wealth of information about the craft and the business of writing.

Her writing took off after she won the *Writers of the Future* contest and got picked out of *Interzone's* slushpile by the inimitable Jetse de Vries; this marked the beginning of a growing number of sales, out of which several were made to semi-professional or professional markets. She was able to join SFWA as an Active Member in 2008, and became a finalist for the [John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer](#) in 2009, narrowly losing to David Anthony Durham.

Her first [novel](#), *Servant of the Underworld* sold to HarperCollins imprint [Angry Robot](#) following a lucky break involving an agent, an editor and a delayed flight (see full story [here](#) at the Angry Robot website).

Servant of the Underworld is a cross between a historical Aztec fantasy and a murder-mystery, featuring ghostly jaguars, bloodthirsty gods and fingernail-eating monsters. For more information, see the [novels webpage](#).

Aliette is currently working on an alt-SF thriller, *Foreign Ghosts*, which is set in the same universe as her Hugo and Nebula-nominated ["The Jaguar House, in Shadow"](#).