

## Night Axe (David Bowles)



Young Cihltli rose at 3 am to sweep the temple portico while priests descended to a spring to mortify their flesh. She watched them leave as one and then return alone with ragged, bloody ears, with wounded tongues and arms—thus consecrated to their rites were they as she to hers, sealed in a mountain cloister above the city of Tetzcohcó.

That morning, though, two came rushing up the path, long hair disheveled, eyes wide with fright, no mutilation. “Inside!” they shouted, pushing Cihltli and their other charges, children of nobles, a measure of families’ devotion to the gods. “We have heard a thudding sound, like the thwack of arrows in sturdy pines, again and again. The Night Axe is upon us!”

But Cihltli knew of that ghoul: her older brothers had told her the tale. Now both were dead, led into frivolous battle by the new king, Cacamatzin, mere puppet of the Mexica, of their self-styled emperor, Motecuhzoma. Lips curled with hate, the girl cast aside her broom, and slipping past the startled priests, she dashed away into the darkness of the haunted woods

The blows echoed hard and loud, like axes biting into snowy firs, and Cihltli grimaced, eager to wield the dreadful portent herself. She left the well-worn trail, stood stock still in a clearing, waited. Before too long, the apparition lumbered into view, lit silver by the meager moon. Like a man it seemed, though headless, its torso sliced from belly to neck, rib cage pulled apart like doors.

Those slabs of flesh swung open and shut with a horrid thud every time the Night Axe took a shambling step, like a maw flapping in ravenous oblivion. When its chest gaped wide,

the girl could glimpse its black and silent heart, dangling there. Blood ringing in her ears, she waited till it was upon her at last, then Cihltli reached in and seized that rotted lump, ripping it free.

As quick as she could, she rushed away, never looking back. In the temple garden, she dropped to her knees, wrapped it tightly in her sash and buried the heart deep in the fertile soil. The girl would not explain her actions. She was punished. But in the morning, she dug up her boon, finding white feathers in its place. Propitious sign. The gods approved. Cihltli smiled.

A few days later came the news: huge mansions, floating on the sea; armored deer that bore pale, bearded men; spear-throwers that launched stones and fire and smoke. The girl would have her revenge. She would see them fall, those former mercenaries, usurpers of the Toltec Way. She imagined her fingers, curling 'round the handle of an axe.