

An Old Friend

By C. Jade Wyton

Zaltec, the Maztikan god of death, sees an opportunity to manipulate one of his most venerable followers, and isn't about to miss it.

Contains descriptions of grief, death, and manipulation.

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Zaltec felt the disruption in the celebration immediately, and his interest was so piqued he nearly abandoned the sacrifice he had been accepting— Nearly. He realised halfway through walking away that he had been distracted, and quickly scooped up the soul, magically encasing it in a his magic and sending it through the realms to his own.

Much more interesting than an animal killed in his name and eaten in a feast to celebrate the springtime and its role in creating new souls to take part in the endless cycle of life and death....

Genevieve was grieving.

So he strayed from the path he had been walking along the plane adjacent to the mortal one, and in only a few minutes, he found himself melting out of the shadows tucked away between the courtyard trees and the wall of the castle.

The people around all gasped and stepped back, muttering anxiously between themselves as they laid eyes on the strange new man. But he simply ignored them as he strode confidently over to Genevieve, who didn't look up at him as she cradled her dead....

Now, hold on!

That wasn't her daughter, was it?

That was someone else entirely, coated in shape-changing magic.

He had to hold back a smirk.

*Someone was playing a nasty little trick, weren't they?*

He looked around, now, catching sight of a trail of blood through the courtyard that started at an invisible puddle of faulty magic and lead to the door, presumably towards the infirmary. It was the wrong kind of magic, for this kind of polymorph.... And so was the disgusting, fungal healing magic that dribbled after the blood trail, returning the life that would have otherwise been lost back into the soul that was set to expire....

Though there was another magic. Familiar to Zaltec, but not enough that he recognised it. Some kind of mystic spell....

*He'd worry about that one, later.*

For now, he had more pressing matters. And he was sure that the magic was Fourteen's, anyway; Mori had said that she had been disrupting his research whenever she could.... It seemed like her, to do this sort of thing.

The people in the courtyard continued to whisper, and Genevieve slowly looked up from the corpse that wasn't her daughter as Zaltec took another step closer.

‘Hello, my old friend,’ he greeted. ‘May I speak with you? Alone?’

Genevieve just stared, her eyes vacant and tired and sore. She was still clearly in too much shock to process the question....

*Perfect!*

Zaltec stood up straighter, and turned to address the followers of the miserable lich; feeling a small joy when they flinched at his presence.

‘I’m an old friend of your God,’ he reassured. ‘May I be alone with her? Please.’

They all glanced to Genevieve, who, after a moment of hesitation, gave a slow nod of confirmation. With the order from their “god,” the people all began to shuffle towards the castle, retreating inside and leaving the lich and the true god alone.

‘Hello, my old friend,’ Zaltec tried again, crouching beside the woman. ‘I’d ask how you are, but I think this here—’ he motioned to the body she cradled, ‘—is a sign that all is not well, hm?’

‘What... are you doing here?’ she croaked. ‘I thought.... I thought that....’

‘That I’d abandoned you? No, never,’ he brushed a strand of her wig’s hair aside, carefully, so he could see her eyes. ‘I’ve been searching for you, since you were stolen from me. And I’ve only recently managed to find you again... though you seemed to know what you were doing, so I thought I’d leave you to yourself, unless I thought it necessary to intervene.’

It was only half the truth; but half the truth wasn’t *technically* a lie, and so he could say it.

‘Would you like me to find your daughter, for you?’ he worded it carefully, so to not let on that this corpse wasn’t her daughter.

He expected her to agree immediately— His experiences with her, when she was little, made him sure she would want to bring her daughter back... but instead, she hesitated, and looked to the small crumpled note that sat at her side.

‘I... can’t bring her back,’ Genevieve said, softy. ‘We have a rule....’

‘A rule?’ Zaltec twitched an ear, curiously.

‘We’ve never... actually... had to... before,’ the lich was clearly holding back more sobs, as her laboured breathing made her speech slow. ‘But... if someone... k.... If someone k... kill....’

‘If someone kills themselves, you respect their wishes?’ Zaltec guessed, feeling a bubble of humour well up within him as Genevieve nodded. *Oh, she was just slapping the targets on her own back, wasn’t she? Just like when she was mortal....* ‘Well. Perhaps I could simply pass on a message? I mean. Even if I *tried* to bring her back, unicorns.... I can’t touch them, you understand? Not without their permission. It’s the horn... you know how it burns you, yes? That’s because of your connection to me. It’s how they ward off us death-gods.... If she doesn’t want to come back home, I cannot make her. But I can find her. And I can give her a message from you.’

‘T... tell her... I’m sorry?’ Genevieve asked. ‘I know I was never the best mother. But I thought... she’d at least come to me if she.... If she.... *I don’t know why she didn’t come to me....*’

‘Mhm,’ Zaltec bit back his smile, instead putting on a sympathetic look. ‘Perhaps something was stopping her.’

Genevieve just sniffled, and buried her face into the thing she thought was her dead daughter.

‘Oh... everything will be alright,’ Zaltec comforted. ‘You’ve done so well, all these years without me. Even through the mistakes.... Even with that horrible Scavenger’s curse on you.... I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to find you, Genevieve.’

‘D...’ Genevieve lifted her head, again. ‘Don’t call me that.’

Zaltec’s tail twitched curiously. ‘It’s your name?’

‘No...’ she breathed. ‘No. Genevieve was... someone else. A good person. I don’t.... I’m not a good person anymore. Not anymore. I haven’t been for a long time. I can’t possibly be Genevieve, when I’m this horrid.’

Zaltec bit his tongue, fighting back the urge to snap at her to not be so dramatic. He knew it would just make her withdraw from him. So, instead, he spoke softly, ‘*Then what is your name?*’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think I deserve one,’ she sniffed, her face falling back against the corpse. ‘Monsters don’t deserve names. Only people do.’

Knowing Genevieve couldn’t see him with her face pressed into the corpse, Zaltec rolled his eyes and scrunched up his snout in annoyance. But he quickly pushed it away to turn his tone empathetic. ‘Well. When you take your new body, perhaps you’ll feel comfortable enough to take a new name.’

‘I’m not sure I should,’ she replied.

‘My dear, you need a name—’

‘No. I mean... I don’t think I should take the body.’

Zaltec’s lip twitched, and he had to push down his frustration. Without a new body, she would remain bound to that Scavenger. And if she was bound to the Scavenger, he would never have full control of her... meaning he couldn’t *trade* her.... And if he couldn’t trade her, he couldn’t use her to bargain with Kordulf—And his sister would have that stupid fungal protection spell keeping her from death *forever*.

‘What do you mean?’ though his voice was soft, it was spoken through grit teeth. ‘You *need* a new body, Ge... my friend.’

‘I’ve had my doubts for a while,’ she admitted. ‘Ever since Fungus eased my pains, and I’ve been thinking clearer, I’ve felt... guilty. Selfish.’

‘After all that’s been done to you, you’re allowed to be selfish,’ Zaltec reassured.

‘But all *this*?’ Genevieve asked, mournfully. ‘My.... I’ve lost another child, Zaltec. She wanted to escape the life of blood I was living, and was so scared of me that she chose to face death instead of me. *What’s the point?*’

‘You have two more daughters to live for,’ he reminded her, choosing his words carefully so that they were *technically* all true. ‘And they’ll need you now, more than ever— I’ve seen poor, lonely Fourteen. She’s just lost the only real friend she’s ever had. You can’t possibly tell her she’s losing her mother, now, too, can you? Because, unless you have another way of breaking free from the Scavenger, stopping now means she *will* lose you.’

It was clear he was saying the right things, as he saw Genevieve shiver, so he kept pushing:

‘If you don’t break free from this horrible creature, he will either demand

more death from you, or come back for your own soul,' Zaltec pushed. 'It's just *one* more sacrifice, carefully chosen, to stop the need for the harvest quota and keep you and your remaining daughters together as a family. Otherwise you have to go back to him.'

*'I don't want to go back,' she whispered. 'Please. Anything but that.... I can't bare the thought of him taking me back.... Can't you take me, instead? Please?'*

'I can't,' Zaltec answered, his frustration coming out as a huff; he really wished he *could*, after all. Even if just for his own reasons.... 'Though he's stolen you from me, that deal you made with him keeps you bound to his realm, and if I took you back to mine, all it would do is give him a foot in the door.... And who knows what he might do with that power. How much of my world he might destroy....'

Genevieve was crying, again. And though Zaltec didn't actually care; he still put a hand on her and rubbed her back. 'You know what you have to do, my dear.... And it's not all bad, is it? After all.... It might take a few years for your new body to mature, but... don't you want to be beautiful, for when you reunite with Kordulf?'

*That got her attention.*

He gaze snapped to his own, her eyes wide with surprise.

*'Kordulf?' she whimpered. 'But... his soul was... destroyed.'*

Zaltec shook his head. 'No. Only banished from this realm. I've met with him, a few times.... We talked about you.'

*'You did?'*

*'Yes. He loves you dearly.... He's been searching for you. And Samara.'*

*'S-Samara?' it was more of a squeak, than a word. 'Samara's soul survived?! Grandfather didn't— He didn't manage to—'*

Slowly, Zaltec nodded, and Genevieve covered her mouth as he elaborated; 'That useless oaf never managed to *actually* kill her. He just thought he did.... A few hundred years after she was buried she simply woke up, and crawled through a crack in the dimensions to escape her grave.'

*'Oh... oh my...'* her eyes welled with tears, and her lip trembled, and she buried her face into the corpse that resembled her daughter, again. *'She'll never get to meet Wonda... they would have gotten along so well....'*

Zaltec waved a hand, dismissively. 'Good news amongst the bad, I suppose.... For now, though, I suggest that you get that new body prepared. Fix its heart and make sure it's ready for you to inhabit.... You don't want your little Samara to see her mother in such a state, I'm sure!'

Shaking her head, Genevieve quietly agreed; she didn't want *anyone* to see her in this cursed body, let alone the family who had adored her so much in life....

Then, Zaltec spied a raven-black feather on the ground and had another thought. 'And... perhaps it would be wise for you to focus some of your energy on your remaining daughters,' he offered, motioning to the fake body. 'That Maggie of yours seems well, with that handsome man of hers at her side, but you wouldn't want *this* to happen to Fourteen, too, would you?'

Genevieve shook her head again. 'What should I do?'

'Keep her busy,' Zaltec told her, softly. *And out of Mori's way....* 'There'll be a void, where Wonda used to be. Perhaps it would be wise to try and fill it with

something.'

'With... what?'

'I'm not sure,' Zaltec shrugged. *Anything, as long as it keeps her distracted.* 'You know her better than I do, and what will keep her occupied.... Now— I'm sorry to cut this short, but I have things to do. Today is a very busy day for me; *lots of responsibilities.*'

Genevieve stared at him, vaguely, as he rose to his feet and backed towards the shadows.

'I'll be back,' he promised, as he began to melt away. 'Remember: your family needs you to be strong. This is the final stretch... don't give up now.'

—END—

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