

The Well-Behaved Daughter

By C. Jade Wyton

Xochitli speaks with her father, Kordulf, about the goings-on in Weltaron. She had intended to comfort him, knowing his beloved Genevieve had died again; but by the end of it she feels a hot and unpleasant flame of jealousy forming in her stomach.

Contains depictions of grief, animal death, controlling parents, and mentions of injury, death, medical malpractice, and implied torture.

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Xochitli awoke to the sounds of her father's sobs; broken breaths that he struggled to suppress as he lay in Qotal's bed... or, perhaps *bed* was a strong word for the pile of pillows and blankets that scattered the floor.

She shifted, listening as her father sniffled, and then sat up.

'Papa?' her whisper was quiet, meek, as she rose from her bed and crept over. 'Are you alright.'

He composed himself almost immediately; all signs of weakness gone as soon as he was aware he was being observed.

'I'm fine, my little one,' he told her.

She didn't believe it, and sat down beside him. 'Papa?'

He didn't respond, and instead leaning towards her and taking her arm. He rubbed along the sore on her shoulder, examining it for further injury before seeming satisfied with her recovery.

Then he looked away, down to his lap as he placed his now-clasped hands gently down in it.

'Papa?' Xochitli asked again.

'Genevieve is returning to the Scavenger.'

'Oh... that's *today*...?'

Kordulf nodded. 'She's just given a speech. As has Wonda— Beautiful, both of them.'

'I'm sorry, Papa,' Xochitli mumbled, flicking her tail. 'You don't have to wait for me to get better. You can go get her....'

'If only I could,' he sighed, his ears pressing back in grief. 'The Scavenger's hidden his door from me again. I've been searching for it since she decided to stop her tributes to him, but can't find any trace of the entrance...' a lone tear escaped his eye. 'He's going to hurt her again, and I can't save her.'

'We'll find her, Papa,' Xochitli promised. 'As soon as I'm healed up, I'll—'

'No,' it was so firm, it was almost angry. 'We've been over this, Xo. You stay here. Where it's *safe*.'

'But— Papa—'

'No. I won't put you at risk.'

'Papa it's the first time I've *ever* been hurt, in all my thousand years!'

‘And it may happen again. I should have known better, and kept you here from the start....’

‘Papa—’

‘I said *no!*’ this time, it was definitely angry. Though Kordulf caught himself, as Xochitli flinched in surprise, and she watched with wide eyes as he clenched a fist tight and pressed it to the front of his snout. He took a deep, calming breath. ‘I’m sorry, Xochitli. I don’t mean to snap. I’m just... sad. And scared. For all of you.’

‘I.... I know, Papa,’ Xochitli comforted, edging closer. And closer.... Until her head was resting on his shoulder. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I need you to be my good girl, right now,’ he breathed, lifting an arm to wrap around her. ‘I need you to behave—to listen to me— more than I *ever* have needed you to be before. You understand?’

Slowly, reluctantly, Xochitli nodded. She understood; though she didn’t *like* it.

‘You have always been my good girl,’ he said. ‘The well-behaved daughter I can rely on. And I need you to keep being that.’

Xochitli shifted, rubbing her feet together.

Sometimes, she wished she *wasn’t* such a well-behaved daughter.

She always missed out, because of it. When the others—like Samara— got to do whatever they wanted, it was like they were being *rewarded* for being so poorly behaved....

Seeming to sense the girl was bothered, Kordulf held her closer. A moment passed, quietly, before he pressed a kiss to her cheek and whispered to her: ‘*I have something to show you.*’

Xochitli giggled at the kiss, almost instinctively, and then flicked out her tongue playfully as her father leant forward to a small sprouting of fungi that grew at his feet.

He plucked a mushroom from nearby; small and round, and it shifted with a blue-tinted image of a small room. Decorated with a glowing blue mushroom garden along every surface, it was like a strange, small cave with a door and a....

‘Papa, what is that?’

‘Do you remember when I told you of that man, Mori?’ Kordulf asked, softly. ‘And what he’d done to your mother?’

Xochitli nodded her head, feeling a stone sink in her gut as she stared at the tall tube that sat in the centre of the room; roof to floor, an oozing green embryonic fluid bubbled within it. As did two small little forms. ‘That’s them?’

‘Yes,’ Kordulf touched image on the mushroom, pulling it out as if yanking the vision straight from its surface, and Xochitli’s frill closed over her mouth as the image grew around them and she found herself in the room.... Well, a projection of the room. ‘She hasn’t named them, yet. But she’s only met them today, and they’re not yet born....’

‘They’re so small,’ Xochitli breathed. ‘Are they demigods like me?’

‘Mortal, but we can fix that.’

‘Now?’

‘When they’re older; for now we must let them grow,’ Kordulf corrected. ‘Otherwise, they will be stuck as Samara is. And I know she finds her young age frustrating.’

Xochitli didn't understand why, but she didn't argue as she stared at the twins in the tube. 'I can't wait to meet them. Especially the boy— I haven't had a little brother before.'

Kordulf chuckled, and placed the mushroom in his daughter's hand. 'Your mother has entrusted me to watch over them. Make their new home peaceful, and safe.'

A cockroach, small and brown, skittered across the floor, crawling on the glass that held the tabaxi twins, and Xochitli felt an anxious swell in her belly as it examined her unborn siblings.

But Kordulf remained calm, and with a wave of his hand, a nearby fungus spored; sending small blue specs throughout the room. One floated to the cockroach, brushing it gently.... And then it took hold; digging its roots through the exoskeleton and into the creatures's fragile nervous system.

'We will keep them safe,' Kordulf said, softly. And as he swiped his hand, the cockroach jerked and fell to the ground; a small glowing mushroom taking its place. 'And free from unwanted guests.'

As he said it, the door of the room opened, and Xochitli tensed; her hand moving to brush a nearby mushroom... but Kordulf took her wrist to stop her from sending out its spores.

'I know her timing was ironic, but she is welcome. She's one of our family,' Kordulf reassured, and Xochitli let out her breath. 'Genevieve saved her, a long time ago. She's a healer. She's been keeping the little ones safe, until they are strong enough to be taken out of the lab.'

'Can't we grow the garden further, Papa?' Xochitli asked, her eyes narrowing in disgust. 'Destroy all of that horrible tainted place for them, and turn it into something more beautiful?'

'No, my little one. They need their closure,' Kordulf explained. 'Fungus knows the family, and has shared them with me. And if the laboratory was destroyed without them being able to see the horrors that took place, they would always wonder what they allowed to happen. This way, they can see clearly what was done, and make peace with it.'

'Oh,' Xochitli lay her head back against her father, and let him nuzzle her affectionately. After a second to think, she asked: 'Do you think they'll like me, when they meet me?'

'Of course they will,' Kordulf chuckled. 'They're your family.'

'Mhm!' Xochitli lit up. 'What did Genevieve say about me? I know she's having a hard day, but is she as excited to meet me as you are to meet her daughters?'

A pause, then. Before Kordulf answered slowly. 'Your mother... didn't mention you.'

'What?' Xochitli's heart sunk, and her frill flopped limply against her neck. 'She didn't.... Did she decide not to tell her she's Wonda's other mother like she'd planned?'

Another pause.

'She told Genevieve she was *Wonda's* other mother, but didn't mention *me*?' the hurt squeaked out of her, and she squeezed the mushroom in her hands tight; squishing it to mush as the vision around them disappeared. 'But— But— I'm her baby!'

‘I know. And she knows, too,’ Kordulf comforted, giving her a firm squeeze; though he avoided squishing her. ‘She didn’t mean any harm, my dear. She’s been so busy, and distracted. She must have simply forgot to bring it up.’

‘Me up,’ Xochitli corrected, her lip twitching, just ever-so-slightly. ‘She forgot to bring *me* up...!’

‘No, Xochitli, it’s much more complicated than—’

Xochitli pulled herself from her father’s arms, and crawled toward the comfortable ring of mushrooms she called a bed. ‘I’m going back to sleep.’

‘Xochitli, you know your mother adores y—’

*‘I’m. Going. Back. To. Sleep!’*

—END—

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