Flower Wars
by Zachary Ross

"Pass me by, Chahuapapalotlacatl, begetter of my brethren, herald of our seed, and count your servant Butterfly Milkweed worthy to prevail against his foes."

He kissed his camphor charm again, leaving its cooling balm upon his lips. Every twitch of his pink button nose renewed its scent, washing out the damp of mushrooms, loam, and rhododendron trees. It had just rained; the meadow below would be damp, her flowers drooping, her soil full of purchase for his matted chestnut feet.

"Grant glory to Painted Mound. Grant glory to the tochcalpolli. We will bring flowers to you, Chahuapapalotlacatl. Grant the increase of our house."

Reaching into the tanned pouch dangling from his waist, Butterfly Milkweed retrieved a pinch of yellow pollen and threw it over his shoulder. His movements were abrupt, jerky despite his desire for pious serenity. Untrimmed claws gripped again and again the handle of his oaken sword, seeking a satisfying hold that fled as soon as he found it. The flint that formed its edges gleamed pale across his knees, thirsting for its share of the god's libation. The signal fire was not yet lit. Unable to keep still, Butterfly Milkweed gripped his camphor charm again, intending to repeat the prayer.

A white paw clapped his shoulder, and for a moment he thought that the god had chosen him early. His hiccup broke the reverent silence; within the treeline, four hundred scandalized eyes turned toward him, rabbitfolk brightly woaded beneath their woven cotton armor. The priests would be among them, watching from the god's houses. His ears burned at the thought, then burned all the more when he looked to find Blazing Star kneeling beside him, buck teeth betraying his battle's-eve glee.

The paw was his: snow white like the rest of him, and like Butterfly Milkweed streaked with manifold dyes in imitation of the flowers which would one day cover them. No buck of Painted Mound was more beautiful in his woading, though the god had so far passed him by. His red eyes were never more striking than before a battle, his size never more imposing. That size was a solace to Butterfly Milkweed now: for though he was smaller by half an ear, to fight stitched to the Blazing Star's back made him feel like a god himself.

"Why let yourself be shaken?" asked Blazing Star, rattling the beads and feathers at the neck of his long flint spear. "Shake your foes, rather."

"I would prevail, dear bald eagle," said Butterfly Milkweed, sweeping with his paw the great bird's pinions which hung from the fringes of Blazing Star's thick-spun tunic. "I am shaken by Death, who would claim me before I could win for Painted Mound the glories you yourself have won."

"Fight without fear, red-tailed hawk, if you would win glory," said Blazing Star, assuming the censuring tone that Butterfly Milkweed remembered from his youth. "But if it is merely trophies you would win, am I not your slave? All that I have is yours."

Butterfly Milkweed flinched. "Say that to Painted Mound, not to me. It is my wish that you walk the wood without fear of being slain, not that you serve me. I am no less yours in brotherhood."

"An awl through the ear is a small price to pay for your brotherhood!" Blazing Star laughed. "But as for Death, did our fathers shrink from him when they left the marshes as the peregrine? When they drove the Macacalitic from these mounds at the point of the flint?"

Here Blazing Star kissed his palm and caressed the bleached and painted giant's skull upon his head, whose blunt teeth seemed to gnaw his scalp. His ears were free of it, flags ringed in gold and eagle feathers, erect in the bold knowledge that marred ears were sacrilege in a Flower War.

"Perhaps you will win one of their trophies, as I have," he said in a more confidential voice, "or perhaps the god will choose you. Both will bring increase to Painted Mound. Is there such a thing as defeat, therefore?"

Red-eared shame gave way to new boldness. Butterfly Milkweed's paw made peace with his sword's grip. The blood began to thrum in his ears. "Your words are the nectar of Chahuapapalotlacatl's flowers, my brother," he said.

"We will bring offerings to him together, if we may," declared Blazing Star. "Did I not vow the same when you rescued me from the camp of Hollow Mound?"

"Let it be as you have said," Butterfly Milkweed nodded, pulling down at his friend his own feathered ear.

A fire kindled in the meadow below, between the distant temples of Painted Mound and Hollow Mound. The signal fire was burning, a great pile of dry leaves and pine pitch sending up a plume of fragrant smoke. Its light was said to summon the god, Butterfly Milkweed remembered, and the westerly wind which drove the smoke toward Painted Mound was an auspicious sign. It would hide the atlatl throwers in the treeline.

The hillside came alive then with the whispering advance of rabbitfolk, Painted Mound's charge mirroring that of Hollow Mound on the far side of the meadow. Neither host cried out; rabbitfolk never cried out save upon death, and never in the presence of a god. Hurled by bucks from the cover of beeches and oaks, atlatls buzzed over their heads, swarms of hornets flying stinger-first for their foes. A few found their marks, felling bucks who would with any luck live long enough to be given to the god. Butterfly Milkweed and Blazing Star advanced together, an eagle and a red-tailed hawk to the eye, bright shields held before their faces, sword and shield straining ahead for the clash.

They met Hollow Mound upon the meadow, like themselves in all respects except unpainted. Another day their clans would trade corn for corn, strengthening one another's yields; but now they vied for the favor of the god, trading blows and skillful strokes. Butterfly Milkweed and Blazing Star found their contest in the middle of the line, where the leaves were already burning low and the pine pitch sweetly smoked. Two renowned and noble bucks brought combat to them there, Flame Azalea to Blazing Star and Phlox to Butterfly Milkweed: the one in peregrine falcon feathers, the other in speckled osprey.

"Sends your chief his changeling into battle now?" taunted Flame Azalea, beginning to circle Blazing Star's open side. "What wants a god with this pale portent, sown by a demon in his mother Pipevine's cradle, on whose account the lightning struck her dead?"

"Who will go to the god today?" Blazing Star retorted, with ferocity and eloquence both surpassing Butterfly Milkweed's. "I think it will not be me; but it was the priest, not my chief, who thought me worthy of the Flower War, and him I trust to know what pleases the god." Parting from his friend to trace his foe's circling, he stretched out his spear to meet Flame Azalea's leveled sword.

"Nevertheless, I will see you dead before him, as your brothers could not accomplish," said Flame Azalea, ducking under Blazing Star's spear to dare a cut, only to receive a spirited check from its haft and a torn tunic for the effort.

It was a gross impiety. Butterfly Milkweed knew it; and so, to judge by his expression, did Phlox. Blazing Star, newly grim, said nothing of it, but when it appeared that Phlox would say nothing himself Butterfly Milkweed's indignation, like the jewelweed, burst open in seed.

"You are not to kill what can be brought to the temple alive!" Butterfly Milkweed scolded him; and then, as shameful as it made him feel, appended: "This buck is my slave. My father counted him worthy of his house. Your zeal is an empty wind."

"Deaths of vengeance cannot be brought to the temple at all," Flame Azalea snarled, wrinkling a bleeding nose behind his shield. "And without his ears, this one will prove wholly unfit."

Here was a bridge too far. Driven beyond caution, Butterfly Milkweed's rage flung him at Flame Azalea, sword upraised for the stroke. It fell, however, upon Phlox's shield, who pushed the buck away from his brother and his devilish foe and began to harry Butterfly Milkweed himself. Both

pairs fell into the fever of battle, circling each other on the close-cropped clover, while the atlatls whined all around them and four hundred rabbitfolk churned in blood beneath the eyes of the god.

As bees alight upon their beloved blossoms, so the blows of Butterfly Milkweed and Phlox alighted on each other's shields. Turning circles betwixt whole scores of circles more, they sought their open flanks, hoping with each cut to bite with knapped flint the flesh beneath the woven cotton armor. No knaves – at least by reputation – the priests had chosen them all for skill, skill that Butterfly Milkweed had proven in the raid which had rescued Blazing Star from the burning stake. Swords bit and scratched. Legs kicked. Shields barked, bashed against shields and sometimes skulls; and yet for a time neither Butterfly Milkweed nor Blazing Star gave way to the spiteful violence of their foes.

Seeing then Blazing Star's spirited defense, Flame Azalea's endurance overmatched by the buck's righteous rage, Phlox was secretly inspired by a most ungodly plot. He feigned to be driven back by Butterfly Milkweed's blows. Their circling broke faith with the frenetic dance, and closer and closer they both drifted to their comrades' own pitched battle. Very nearly they collided; then pretending to trip, Phlox stretched out behind him his black-bladed sword and caught the back of Blazing Star's knee. The flint split layer and layer of forbidding cotton, perilously sharp, and bit deeply into flesh and sinew. Blazing Star staggered back and nearly fell. Seeing then his cunning, Butterfly Milkweed cried foul, but not before Flame Azalea had seized his new advantage. Blazing Star's bared neck was ripe corn to his sickle. The bright blood sprayed where his sword's blade met it, and like a stripped white birch the stupefied rabbit fell upon the trampled clover blossoms.

It was then that Butterfly Milkweed cried out again, a wordless imprecation answered swiftly by the god. The measure of his brother's strength entered his nostrils. He felt – nay, he was, for his foes saw it also – a full head taller, packed with wrath full tightly like the cattail. Leaping high, he kicked Phlox's feathered shield so that the wrist snapped, and the forearm cracked, and his defense fell limply to his side. Striking for his paw, a few deft strokes cleaved his claws clean off, and by the time that Flame Azalea reached them Phlox's severed femoral was spilling his life's nectar upon the meadow-ground.

Intent upon his brother's body as the hornet is intent upon his hive, Butterfly Milkweed rose up against the hopeful scavenger, locking sword and shield until their flints shattered. The atlatls ceased. Out of spears, the throwers sprinted down the hillsides, clashing in a last bid for victory, and in this press Butterfly Milkweed and Flame Azalea fell to grappling. Mighty lapine legs tore up the blood-damp earth, searching for purchase that each might pull the other's joints from their sockets. Holds were broken, only to reconvene elsewhere. Desperation drove them both, only for the scales in time to tip in favor of the righteous. Legs locked around his waist, Butterfly Milkweed hooked his arm around Flame Azalea's neck and pulled as hard as he could. Flame Azalea's eyes bulged from their sockets. His limbs flailed, beating Butterfly Milkweed's immovable flanks. Upon the god's errand, he might even have claimed his foe for the altar, if in the shifting tide of battle a brute, a near-giant, one who might have claimed the lineage of the Macacalitic, had not rushed in to intervene.

Thistle he was called, firstborn of Hollow Mound's chief. As pale as the late bluestem, his fairness only served to magnify his uncanny strength, a blessing of the god upon his father's house. In the pride of his thew he fought without armor, without the woven cotton or the jeweled bands, with only a linen loincloth to cover his nakedness and a skull of the Macacalitic, with only the great horned owl's feathers in his ears and upon his shield. Three rabbitfolk already he had claimed for Hollow Mound's altar, all but one of them alive. This prince found Butterfly Milkweed clinging as a grapevine to Flame Azalea's bluing body, mindless in his vengeful passion of the rout befalling Painted Mound. Their line was broken. His brethren were falling back, leaving Hollow Mound to gather up their offerings. Butterfly Milkweed was alone when Thistle reached him, when that giant with the oaken spine of his sword clubbed his head like a landed pickerel.

His head full of stars, Butterfly Milkweed's limbs fell loose of their own accord, leaving him to crawl away from Thistle toward Blazing Star's red-stained body. Phlox's own sword he retrieved on the way; then crouching between the giant and his brother, bared his buck teeth and made ready to fight.

But Thistle would not engage. "The Flower War is over, red-tailed hawk," he boomed, shouldering his sword. "Give way in your anger."

As if newly granted sight, Butterfly Milkweed saw that it was true. His comrades were fleeing back up the hillside, leading the wounded with them. All around the smoldering leaf-pile, Hollow Mound's fighters were collecting his brethren, gingerly carrying away the dead and leading the wounded ahead of them unbound, already garlanded with white clover. Flame Azalea lay close by, death-mask frozen in horror. His claws tightened upon Phlox's sword.

"I know you, Thistle, son of Chief Heliotrope," said Butterfly Milkweed darkly, "and I will not give way in my anger until I have received a vow from you."

"And I know Blazing Star, red-tailed hawk," said Thistle, nodding to the spiritless body, "but I do not know you."

"Butterfly Milkweed, son of Elderflower," he answered. "Blazing Star was my brother."

Thistle's green eyes flashed. "A formidable foe, that one," he said, nodding, "and no doubt the reason the god did not favor you in the Flower War. What vow would you have from me?"

"Flame Azalea would have mutilated Blazing Star to make him unfit for sacrifice," said Butterfly Milkweed, surprised to find himself snarling at the purple corpse. "I will let none lay claw on him until you have sworn by Chahuapapalotlacatl that he will receive the honor of sacrifice." And then, pointing his sword at Flame Azalea: "And that he will not."

But Thistle shook his terrible head, and the gold and copper rings rattled in his ears. "I need not swear to that," he said, shouldering both Phlox and Flame Azalea with an easy heft. "You will all be given to the priest alike. Tell him your tale, if you wish; his is the final word. Carry Blazing Star thither yourself, if you can be persuaded to put down your sword."

To be led away in a crown of bloodstained clover, smelling of burning pine pitch and exertion, toward the foot of Hollow Mound's distant western temple, was something very near a dream to Butterfly Milkweed. The victorious warriors deferred to him as if he were a prince, bowing and pulling down their ears to him, running ahead to make his path clear and clean, hanging flowers on him wherever they found them. He said not a word, as is meet for sacrifices; and yet they, in their cavorting songs of triumph, danced before him as they would dance before the god. With Blazing Star in his arms, soon to be stripped of all his trophies, he was mindful of little else save sorrow until they reached the Outer Court. He should not have wept, given the joy of which Blazing Star had reminded him – he wept nevertheless.

The great, flowering mound that was Hollow Mound's temple rose above the patchwork wetlands amidst the forest. Like the temple of Painted Mound, it was the center of the clan's warrens, those cool, smooth tunnels which had already awaited them when they had driven out the Macacalitic in their ancestral flight north. At the foot of its eastern slope was the Outer Court, tremendous ribs of smooth, porous stone overhung with dyed skins and wound with flowering purple wisteria. The sun was emerging after the morning's rain, filtering through the canopy to splash muted colors over the stone censers, the conical apiaries, and the garden of sacred datura. A forked line was forming in the middle of the court, where warriors passed off their offerings, living and dead, to young, piously placid acolytes draped in dayflower blue. Butterfly Milkweed had delivered no such offerings in his life, in either of the two Flower Wars in which he had fought; to be behind Thistle now, waiting to be received by bucks half his age, sparked an angry disappointment, the full brunt of the shame he had always felt in his father's house.

That disappointment turned to sorrow again when he remembered that Blazing Star would not be going with him. They reached the front of the line, where the summer sun beat down unobstructed. The blood began to stink in the heat. The acolytes took Blazing Star from his arms, piling his selfsame flower upon his corpse when they had learned his name, and carried him toward the temple. They did the same for Phlox and Flame Azalea, then began to undress Butterfly Milkweed.

"The name of the offering?" shrilled one of the acolytes to Thistle.

"Butterfly Milkweed," answered Thistle, for sacrifices could answer only to the priest.

"Is he wounded?" asked a second acolyte, as he folded Butterfly Milkweed's armor and pawed it to a third.

Thistle shook his head. "He slew two, but he is unscathed."

The third acolyte whistled, only to be cuffed across the mouth by the second.

By the time he was fully undressed, a fourth acolyte had returned with a bouquet of fragrant, bright orange flowers, which he began to weave with practiced speed and dexterity into the buck's chestnut fur. Thus adorned, they led him to the far side of the Outer Court, toward a great, iron door in the foot of the temple mound. It was a door he had never entered, even in his own temple, the door to the Holy Place which he now realized he had never quite believed he would see in the flesh. Dutifully polished, yet rust-spotted from the inevitable breath of the wetlands, its doorpost boasted a bronze plaque illegible to all but the priest, whose runes their first priests had seized from the Macacalitic. Manifold flowers trailed down the slope to the meadow floor on either side, covered in the god's little angels, obscuring the doorway from unholy eyes.

They led him past these, through the iron door, and the cool, close air within brought sober clarity to Butterfly Milkweed. Alive and unscathed, he was the most coveted offering one could win in a Flower War. They would treat him like a god before they laid him upon the altar; and Chahuapapalotlacatl, with any luck, would find him comely.

The high stone vault of the Holy Place was second only to starry heaven, spangled in soft-edged strokes of impossible color left behind by the Macacalitic. Fish-oil lamps burned everywhere, mingling with the scent of holy cedar resin. Upon the far western apse, hedged in by flowering screens, was an image of the god in his dayflower posture, hunched with great wings furled, eyes as red as cardinal flowers watching the priest and his acolytes prepare the offerings below.

They led Butterfly Milkweed to a curtained cell along the round vault's southern wall, and there let him rest upon cushions alone until his time came. The songs of the cantors, soaring in swarms of echoes, flitted about his thoughts, drinking them like nectar until even his sorrow settled and he was left with some measure of the serenity known only to the sky-born gods. Already dead, Blazing Star would be sacrificed first, and he would never again see his brother's body; but his spirit would return to the earth, so the priests said, and would spring up again as nectar in some flower, and would ultimately be born anew in the cradle of the god's belly. Perhaps Blazing Star would be delivered to him again, he thought, just as he had been delivered to Hollow Mound who had spurned him.

In time the acolytes returned. Guiding him with the utmost care that he might not so much as stub a toe against a stone, they led him to the apse, where waited a steaming copper bath and a great hill of votive flowers beneath the god's white image. The priest was there in his high-backed, dayflower robes, resembling one of the god's angels as he prayed with his back to Butterfly Milkweed in a low, urgent voice:

"In memory of the forty-six souls who lost their lives on Silver Bridge. O Chahuapapalotlacatl, pass over our bridges. O Chahuapapalotlacatl, alight not upon our barns. O Chahuapapalotlacatl, receive our seed in faith, grant the increase of the tochcalpolli…"

The priest's voice fell too low to hear. The acolytes, with their small, deft paws, removed the flowers from Butterfly Milkweed's fur and helped him into the bath, wherein they cast fistfuls of

mountain mint before scrubbing him from ear to sole. No more thorough a washing had he ever received, sublime in that lamplit darkness, surrounded by buzzing cantors and the smell of mountain laurel and honeysuckle. By the time they had helped him from the tub he felt himself another rabbit entirely, an exiled native of some clime inaccessible save by wings.

The acolytes dried him, and briefly he considered requesting chalk with which to renew his woading, only to think better of it. Hollow Mound received offerings from Painted Mound often enough; if the god desired that he be painted, they would see that he be painted. They gave him no chalk, of course. Rather, they began to weave flowers once more into his fur, clusters of the orange milkweed for which he was named, cluster after cluster after cluster until he was wholly clad in them.

Only then did the priest complete his prayers and turn to regard Butterfly Milkweed, a positively hoary soul with rheumy eyes and whiskers so crooked as to be useless. Like the acolytes he was wholly dispassionate: so used to temple service, Butterfly Milkweed supposed, that it was as unremarkable as his own heartbeat. Looking his god's offering up and down with eyes discerning of things Butterfly Milkweed could not fathom, he cleared his throat and asked: "Will you go to the altar of your own free will, chosen flower?"

"Will you give me assurance that Blazing Star will be given to the god as well?" he asked in turn. "Flame Azalea was going to mutilate him."

A slight widening of the eyes was all that betrayed the old priest's surprise. "I will offer him tomorrow with the rest of the dead, at the Great Star's first appearance over the horizon," he said.

"Then I consent," said Butterfly Milkweed, allowing himself the full thrill he had until that moment suppressed.

The priest bowed low, sweeping a paw down both ears. "I am your servant," he said. "Repose in peace until my acolytes fetch you by morning. They will not announce themselves. You must be ready."

With that the blue-clad acolytes led him back to his curtained cell, and there as he reclined upon its sumptuous cushions they set before him a feast worthy of a chief's house: steaming corn grits, to which they added the flesh of deer, of pickerel, of wild turkey, with stewed greens and summer fruits sticky with the temple's holy honey. He drank dandelion wine until the hope that Blazing Star had sown in his breast rose up and spun in circles; then he laughed, and the acolytes stomped their feet, and the song of the cantors told of his future until he fell asleep.

Morning was still some ways off when the priest woke him. Butterfly Milkweed knew it, though the Holy Place was windowless save for the vent-holes in its roof, for rabbitfolk are no less mindful of these things underground. Sitting up, he looked for the promised acolytes, but was puzzled to find none. Only the priest was there, bowing in honey-thick silence until the cloud of sleep had passed from Butterfly Milkweed's mind. No longer in his dayflower robes, he wore only a jumpsuit of white silk, clasped at the wrists and ankles with copper rings. His age was all the more apparent now, rheumatic joints making him spindly and hunched. There was a curious look upon his face, however, a sharp alacrity that might have been amusement, though he could easily have denied it.

"Is it time?" asked Butterfly Milkweed, fully awake as soon as he said it.

The priest shook his head. "I must rise very early to offer the dead," he answered in a low voice. "But I wished to speak with you before the sacrifice, and I could not have done so while you were being washed."

"My ears are up, Father," said Butterfly Milkweed, crossing his legs under him. "Instruct me, and I will heed you."

"Your instructions I will give you with Hollow Mound's prayers when you are laid upon the altar, chosen flower," said the priest. "I came not to instruct you, but to inform you."

"Inform me of what?" asked Butterfly Milkweed.

Here the priest crouched, a motion that Butterfly Milkweed found far more graceful than his frame suggested. “You know, do you not, that the god prefers living sacrifices to the dead?”

Butterfly Milkweed nodded. “Aye, Father.”

“Do you know why?” he asked, almost whispering now. “Have you ever guessed?”

Butterfly Milkweed thought for a moment, only to shake his head. “I know that he desires his offerings to be full of life,” he replied, “but I do not know why. Why do we prefer our food fresh? It is more nourishing, I suppose.”

The priest smiled then, and it seemed scandalous to Butterfly Milkweed that such a holy buck should seem so blithe. “He uses the dead to nourish his gardens farther abroad,” he told him. “Not so the living. Theirs is a higher calling.”

“Blazing Star told me as much,” said Butterfly Milkweed. “That I would win glory in the Flower War if only I fought bravely, even if I lost.”

The priest’s smile faded. He shifted uncomfortably, and a thin, hissing sigh escaped his throat. “There was not always the Flower War,” he said confidentially. “All of the dead were once offered, and the living according to lot, before our great flight north when you were only pollen. But our rancor is bottomless, and this is still less bloody than war.”

“I don’t understand, Father,” said Butterfly Milkweed.

“Soon enough you will, chosen flower,” said the priest. “For now you know enough to understand the import of what I have come to tell you: that Flame Azalea cannot be offered with the rest of the dead. His windpipe is crushed. His spirit cannot escape. He is unfit for the god.”

A joy wholly unlike the priest’s found Butterfly Milkweed: as heavy as stone, provoking no smile, and yet infinitely precious. The last of his disappointment fell away, the last of his shame. He nodded once, knowing that it was unseemly for sacrifices to bow. “Then Blazing Star is avenged,” he said. “Thank you, Father.”

The priest rose and bowed, then without a word slipped out between the curtains and left Butterfly Milkweed to wait alone.

When the acolytes finally came, they swarmed into his tent with a performative urgency so intensely convincing that Butterfly Milkweed’s heart raced. They were not rough with him – indeed, their deference was if anything greater now – and yet they proceeded with his preparations as if the sun would not rise if he were not sacrificed that very hour. The old flowers they removed from his fur, weaving in the fresh until he was damp with the early dew that clung to them. Two of the acolytes, opening clay pots of yellow pollen, sprinkled it over him until his every movement sent up sneezes. After this they deemed him ready, then hastened him out of the Holy Place and onto the flowering temple mound.

The path up the mound was an ascending spiral, a thin strip of green between enormous blossoms of cultivated morning glories, lobelias, wood lilies, cardinal flowers, and countless other blooms born of the temple’s secret arts. Cantors were singing at the top of the mound, where the late stars were making way for the rising sun. The Great Star herself hung over them, as far advanced as she would ever get; the Flower War had marked her elongation, the window when the god would come to receive his offerings. Taking a deep breath of rapturous fragrance, Butterfly Milkweed began to pray silently for Blazing Star, until he crested the mound and saw the altar.

Round blooms of pale purple milkweed thrice the size of a rabbitfolk clustered in a square behind the priest, who stood with his back to them in order to receive him. Paws outspread once more in prayer, he held no sword as a warrior would, no spear, not even the merest knife. The cantors flanked either side, waist-deep in dayflowers beside rows of acolytes who shook wands of flowering goldenrod. Thistle was among them, sporting the spoils he had won from Blazing Star, waiting anxiously to see if

the god would accept his offering. The acolytes led Butterfly Milkweed to the priest, who took him by the paw and walked him to the altar of flowers. His prayers ascended to the Great Star, practiced and serene, yet tinged with an earnest joy that cured the last of Butterfly Milkweed's fear.

When he was finished, the priest turned to him once more, then leaned in to whisper the holy secrets in his ear. Butterfly Milkweed wept for joy, and the tears cut dark trenches in the pollen on his face.

"Chahuapapalotlacatl is a dread god," the priest concluded. "You may be startled to see him, chosen flower, but fear not. You will scatter pollen as you go. When you arrive, roll in the flowers to rub off the rest."

Butterfly Milkweed nodded as the priest braced a paw against his back. Turning him toward the west, he kicked the back of his knees, and with surprising strength let him gingerly down onto the altar. Butterfly Milkweed was buried at once in fragrant flowers, cradled by them as by a well-stuffed bed. Pollen floated in the air, framed against the last bright stars. All was sweetness and lightness, a pledge of what was to come. Even so, Butterfly Milkweed's heart rolled behind his ribs, swollen with the glory he was to bring Painted Mound, with the dread of visitation.

The wind arose. The priest stepped away from the altar as the cantors' song became a high, shrill wail. A great shadow passed over the Great Star, then descended in a spiral to the mound, where it alighted with a beating of tremendous wings upon the milkweed. Butterfly Milkweed seized, terrified, his limbs outsplayed while he gulped great breaths of pollen. Over him crouched the colossal divinity in the shape of a dayflower, pure white with eyes as red as burning coals and a mouth made, not for chewing flesh, but for drinking nectar. Thick fur not unlike his own swayed in the early breeze, nothing like the feathers he had expected, the feathers the rabbitfolk wore in case the god chose to take them up. To judge by the size of his talons, Butterfly Milkweed would need no feathers to fly; the god would have no trouble carrying him. Those talons entangled him with an unfathomable gentleness, with an expression of satisfaction worth the struggle of the Flower War, and Chahuapapalotlacatl flew away with his offering.