



AZTEC MIDNIGHT

A NOVELLA BY
M.C. TUGGLE

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THE NOVEL FOX
A Publishing Company

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Original Cover Art by The Novel Fox, LLC

Published by The Novel Fox, LLC

P.O. Box 310458

Miami, Florida 33231

www.thenovelfox.com

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ISBN 978-1-68042-002-9 (ebook, epub)

ISBN 978-1-68042-004-3 (ebook, mobi)

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Dedication

“To my first reader, my mother, Helen Tuggle.”

Epigraph

“Behold, I Myself have created the smith who blows the fire of coals And brings out a weapon for its work; And I have created the destroyer to ruin.”

—Isaiah

Aztec Midnight

Our taxi stopped, and I peered over the driver's shoulder at the buildings ahead. On a wrought iron balcony overflowing with red flowers in clay pots I spotted a sign that read "ILUMINEMOS MEXICO."

Maybe Susanna wouldn't see it. But when I sneaked a glance her way, she was craning her neck and peering out my window. Our eyes met, but she just smiled and returned to her book. I exhaled in relief.

Something large pulled up beside us and blotted out the afternoon sun. I turned and looked up at the open bed of a large truck. A Mexican soldier with an assault rifle glared down at me. Beside the soldier was another man in the uniform of the Mexican Army, his face hidden by a black mask. His eyes did not appear friendly.

I turned away. This was the last thing Susanna needed to see.

The traffic light changed. The army truck roared forward, then swerved in front of us.

Our driver braked and yelled "Ay!" as he raised his hands over his head in exasperation. I watched the truck speed away. Eight men in uniform sat in the truck bed gripping their weapons. More than one wore a mask.

Susanna looked up. She stared at the truck, then frowned at me. "Jon, why are those soldiers on the street with guns?"

Before I could answer, the taxi driver said, "Drugs, lady."

Susanna shrank back into her seat.

"But don't worry," said the driver. "It's all just for show."

Susanna gave me a look that said, "What have you gotten us into?"

All I could manage was a weak grin. Susanna shook her head and returned to her book.

Minutes later, we stopped again. Hundreds of people, all dressed in white, blocked the street. They marched in total silence. Susanna and I studied the faces all around us. We heard nothing but an occasional toot from a nearby Volkswagen Beetle and a shout from a policeman. It seemed unreal that so many people could be moving in the street and surging around our car in such hushed resolve. The effect was more unnerving than if they had been screaming. Morelos State police and a few Metro police waved batons and plexiglass shields, trying to herd the protestors onward. The protestors waved signs over their

heads.

Susanna closed her book. "I can figure out '*No Más Sangre*.'" She scooted forward in her seat and pointed to a lady in a white dress thrusting a sign toward our taxi. "But what does that one mean?"

The ever-helpful driver pointed. "Yes, '*No Más Sangre*' means 'No more blood.' That one, '*¡Estamos hasta la madre!*,' means 'We've had enough!' And '*Iluminemos México*' is what they call these rallies. They want to illuminate all Mexico."

Susanna frowned. "What are they protesting?"

"This is Tuesday. It's another demonstration against crime," he said. "The drugs make many problems for us. People are getting killed. The authorities, no good. So people are angry." His face lit up as he looked left and right. "A very good turnout." He nodded with apparent pride, then caught my gaze in the rearview mirror and grinned. "But it's just another show."

Susanna turned toward me, her face taut. "I thought Cuernavaca was safe."

"Oh, no worries, lady," said the driver. He turned and added, "There's no drug traffic in Cuernavaca. Mexico City, yes, and Acapulco. But not here. Here we have many government offices. It's a good place to protest."

"So none of this will affect us," said Susanna.

Her gaze and the tremor in her voice told me she was asking a question rather than making a statement. I shook my head. "Drug lords don't care about archaeology."

Susanna nodded and returned to her book.

I turned from her and smiled at my latest white lie about this trip. The armed Mexican troops and protesters reminded me of what I was doing here.

The plan was for Susanna to attend a Spanish immersion program while I performed a little favor for the Mexican government—specifically, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia. I'd told Susanna the Institute wanted me to help find and identify an Aztec knife. Which was true. That's all Susanna had to know. As a professor of archaeology at the University of Texas at Austin, a specialist in pre-Columbian weapons, it made perfect sense. And as far as everyone else was concerned, we were just another middle-aged gringo couple on vacation. All part of the U.S. State Department's plan.

Our taxi passed the town's modern periphery, a regional center for government offices. I spotted the Institute's sleek tower and the formidable wall that surrounded it. Minutes later, we crossed into the center of the older part of Cuernavaca. I could've guessed that with my eyes closed. It was like going back

in time. The taxi left behind smooth pavement and rumbled onto cobblestone streets lined with stucco shops bearing red, white, and green signs. Almost all the windows had iron bars. Old men in rockers lounged on the sidewalks and watched us go by on streets more accustomed to foot traffic.

Our taxi veered off the street and wobbled over the ruts of a dirt path leading to the school's side entrance. We stopped and Susanna and I got out and surveyed the area. The school was surrounded by a stone-and-white-mortar wall at least ten feet high, with clumps of rebar sticking out at the top. Across the road stood a crumbling cinder block-and-brick hut where a donkey poked its head toward us out of a large rectangular opening.

My expression probably matched the donkey's bewildered look. I glanced at my wife. Susanna studied her surroundings in total silence. Frankly, I wondered if the language school I'd selected for her wasn't a dump with a misleading web site. We were supposed to stay here for three weeks, and I wanted it to be pleasant for both of us.

Our driver helped us with our bags and we walked toward massive wood-and-iron doors that looked like they belonged on a medieval castle. I pushed the doorbell button. A few seconds went by, and I pressed it again. The door cracked open, and a skinny man with black, shoulder-length hair peered out.

He flashed a smile. "Dr. Jon Barrett? Right on time. Pleased to meet you. I'm Roberto."

I shook his hand and said, "Roberto Zapotitla, this is my wife, Susanna."

"*Hola. Encantado de conocerlo,*" he said.

Susanna shrugged apologetically. "Hi. I don't speak Spanish."

"Well, we're going to fix that, aren't we? And why not start now?" Eyes on Susanna, Roberto tilted his head in my direction. "I know from our phone conversations that your *esposo* doesn't need me. Say that—'*mi esposo*.'"

With a shy smile, Susanna said, "*Mi esposo*."

Roberto beamed and grabbed two suitcases. "See? Already you can call your husband in Spanish. Let me show you to your room."

Roberto shouldered the huge double doors, and they opened up onto the school's courtyard. I breathed a sigh of relief. It was airy and elegant, with potted flowers and huge plants scattered between circles of black wrought iron chairs, all apparently new. Students conversing with instructors occupied two of the tables.

"We have a lot of Americans here. I'll introduce you later." Roberto nodded to his left. "Over there are

some church people from Chicago. A priest and two nuns. We get a lot of American Catholics here.”

They were dressed in street clothes. The priest watched us as we climbed the winding staircase to our apartment.

After Susanna and I had unpacked, Roberto gave us a walking tour of the neighborhood. The street we were on, Calle Revolución, was out of the main traffic flow, but still alive with activity. The shops and restaurants were historic, some in better shape than others, and made mostly of faded white stucco, with tile roofs. A few had fresh whitewash. Almost all the shops had rounded doorways with stubby tile awnings. The aromas of baking tortillas and spiced meat wafted out into the late afternoon air.

I didn’t think much of it at first when we passed folks who smiled and greeted Roberto. But after a while I thought it odd that every single person we met smiled broadly. One old man with a straw hat and sandals was selling lime ice cream on the street. In Spanish, he offered Roberto and us free cones. Roberto nodded, and the man scooped the ice cream from a round cardboard container. I thanked the man, who refused my tip without looking up at me.

We walked as we ate our ice cream. It was cool and tart. “People are very friendly in our neighborhood,” said Roberto.

When we topped a rise in the street, I spotted an unusual hill that I’d first noticed from the taxi. It was an almost perfect cone overlooking the town, with a gleaming white chapel atop its summit.

“That’s an unusual hill,” I said. “What’s it called?”

“Ah, that’s the Madre Guardia. Some say there is an ancient pyramid there.”

“That’s exactly what it looks like,” I said.

“Others say it is a volcano.”

“Has it been explored?”

Roberto popped the tip of his ice cream cone into his mouth. He wiped his lips and smiled. “The Archaeological Institute can use its money for excavations, or it can fatten the salaries of its members. So nothing is done.”

“Too bad,” I said.

“Ah, yes. ‘Too bad.’ We hear that a lot.” He pointed toward a tall and unsteady looking pile of concrete pipes on the side of the road. “For three years, the state government has promised to improve Calle Revolución. But nothing is done.”

A door opened in front of us and the sound of accordions and a dozen voices poured out. A man

lurched into the street and the door quickly shut behind him, muffling the noise inside. Susanna watched the man stumble past us. “Is there much crime here?”

“Very little,” said Roberto. With an impish sparkle in his eye, he added, “But a man was murdered a week ago. He had a bullet in his head. Some kids found his body beside the railroad tracks.”

Susanna stopped. “But wouldn’t the police figure out he’d been shot rather than hit by the train?”

Roberto shrugged and said, “It was the police who did it.”

I think Roberto enjoyed Susanna’s shocked expression. He turned and continued walking. Susanna and I followed. The look I gave him could’ve burned a hole in his back.

Police corruption was a fact of Mexican life. When I was a graduate student in 1985, free-lancing as a tour guide in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, I heard quite a few scary stories about the Mexican police. You didn’t mess with them. And you certainly didn’t trust them. Some things never change.

Roberto halted and pointed down the street. “Revolución continues to the railroad and circles back here on the other side of the median. There are only a few alleys along the way. Nothing else to see. But I do want to show you our new hospital.” He pointed toward a white three-story brick building. “It’s the finest health care you can get in the state of Morelos.”

“That’s good to know,” said Susanna.

He squinted at her. “Don’t get sick.”

Susanna gave our guide a wry look.

Roberto shrugged. “Welcome to Mexico.”

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Roberto had us test our card keys at the school’s main entrance. Once inside, he said, “Mama almost has supper ready now. I’d like you to meet her.” We followed him to the opposite side of the courtyard, where he led us to a separate building beyond three brick arches in the wall. He pushed open a screen door, and we pressed ourselves into a narrow kitchen full of the aromas of hot oil and spices.

A short woman had her back to us. She wore a plain brown skirt and a spotless white blouse. She stooped in front of a pantry, muttering to herself. When she turned, I saw a surprisingly youthful face despite the streaks of grey in her dark hair.

Roberto darted in front of me. “Mama, this is Dr. Jonathan Barrett.”

“Hola, Señora,” I said.

“Hello, Dr.—” She stared past me. Senora Zapotitla’s face went blank. She said nothing.

Roberto leaned close. “Mama?”

Senora Zapotitla pushed aside Roberto and gripped Susanna’s shoulders with both hands.

“What is your name, lady?”

Susanna stared down, eyes wide. “Susanna Barrett.”

The older woman studied Susanna from head to toe, then seemed to search the air over Susanna’s head. “Never have I seen such—” She stared directly into Susanna’s eyes, her nose almost touching my wife’s chin. “Is someone angry at you?”

“No.” Susanna turned nervous eyes at me.

Roberto touched his mother’s arm. “Mama, you’re frightening her.” He turned toward me and said, “She’s always worrying about people. Especially my students. She means well.”

Senora Zapotitla looked up at me, eyes narrowed. In a low, steady voice, she said, “Yes, I do worry about our guests. I want everyone to be safe.”

“That’s a mother for you,” said Roberto. He clapped his hands. “Okay, we eat supper at six.”

Senora Zapotitla turned her attention to a steaming pot of beans. As she stirred, she occasionally cut her eyes toward Susanna.

“Let’s go to our room,” I said.

Susanna didn’t need persuading, and I nudged the screen door open for her. The door slid shut behind us, and I heard Roberto mutter something.

I was barely within earshot when I heard his mother’s stern reply: *“Vigilarlos.”*

Susanna didn’t seem to hear that last remark, and I didn’t bother to tell her what the senora said. I didn’t think she’d find the idea of having someone watching us all that reassuring.

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The next morning I took my daily run, taking a dirt path up a hill near the school. When the sun emerged from low clouds, a few roosters crowed, and somebody’s donkey brayed. Far down the hill, another donkey answered. A couple of stray dogs barked at me as I ran past. One chased me until I stopped and faced it. When I bent down to pretend to pick up a rock, it slinked away. One poor stray, with dirty fur and a bad leg, ambled away when it saw me, its head wobbling from disease.

Pretty typical for dogs in Mexico.

I stopped on a bend in the path where a tall saguaro cactus towered over thick brush. I spotted the school in the valley below. Vacant lots of lush grass surrounded three sides of the school's high walls. On the horizon, Madre Guardia, covered in grass and bushes now wet with dew, sparkled like a giant emerald. From this angle, the mysterious hill looked even more like a pyramid. In the morning light, the white chapel on the peak reminded me of a miniature Taj Mahal, complete with tall twin columns flanking it.

My watch beeped. Seven o'clock. I glanced up and down the dirt path, then tapped a number into my government-issued cell phone. Eric Winwood answered on the first ring.

"You're up early," I said.

"You were supposed to call me on arrival."

"Couldn't break away. My wife needed me. The cook at the school freaked her out. Know what she said? She asked Susanna if she had any enemies. I have no idea why she said that. That's not usually a job hazard for university librarians."

Winwood paused. "She probably wants to sell you a good luck charm."

"Susanna was already shaken up by the flight. Wouldn't you know we hit some of the worst turbulence I've ever seen? Then the bus ride to Cuernavaca even had me gripping the armrest, and I've traveled everywhere. And just to top things off, we saw the Mexican army patrolling for drug smugglers."

I heard Winwood take a deep breath.

"Anyway," I said, "I'm at a place where no one can hear me."

"Good. The man you'll be working with is Dr. Martin Benitez. He's a senior official at the Institute, one of their best archaeologists, and an authority on the Aztec language. The State Department has arranged total clearance for you. So you can come and go anywhere on the Institute grounds, no questions asked."

I caught a motion in the corner of my eye. I turned. A white billow of morning fog was creeping down Madre Guardia toward the village. It moved almost like a living thing.

"What's the status of the Aztec codex I requested?"

"Benitez can fill you in today," said Winwood. "By the way—there've been more incidents. Six more Mexican historical sites have been vandalized, presumably by drug cartels plundering Aztec monuments."

I glanced left and right. "Is this communication secure?"

"Absolutely."

“Did they hit El Tepozteco?”

“Yes.”

My heart sank. “Let’s hope they didn’t find the Cuauhtli.”

“I doubt it. The drug cartel that gets its hands on Emperor Ahuitzotl’s knife won’t keep it a secret.”

Winwood took one of his long, thoughtful pauses. “Still think Tepozteco’s the site?”

“Yep.” I couldn’t help but look again at the unusual fog descending down the mountain. It seemed to be heading directly at the school.

“And you still won’t tell me why you think so? Even though no one else agrees with you?”

“C’mon, Eric. We’ve been through this. You get something, the Mexican government gets something, I get something. I get to find the Cuauhtli.”

“All right, I’ll shut up. Otherwise, good luck. And call me if you need anything,” said Winwood. “Remember, if things get sticky, don’t hesitate to hit the panic button on your phone. Good guys with guns will be there in minutes. Your phone is constantly being tracked.”

“That makes me feel warm all over.”

“It should. We don’t expect any trouble, but there are some bad types nearby. We’ve got you a good cover, so you should be fine. But keep your eyes open.”

He hung up. Winwood’s brusque manner irritated me, but that was just his way. I tucked my phone back into my pocket and looked out over the valley. The strange billow of fog had disappeared.

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I picked up my pace heading down the path to the school, though there was no reason to do so. It just seemed like a good idea to get back to our apartment.

Though I ran every day, the run had drained me. Travel always threw me a little off-balance. The higher altitude didn’t help. I was winded when I reached the entrance to the school. Hands on my knees, I focused on catching my breath. When I looked up, the donkey in the stable across the road was staring at me.

“*Buenos días*,” I said. The donkey blinked at me.

At that moment I heard a scream. I stood up straight. It came from the other side of the wall. I stared stupidly at the source, unable to move. Then it hit me: *Susanna*.

Pulse racing, I fumbled for my card key. The lock on the gate clicked, and I rammed my way through.

Our apartment was on the opposite side of the courtyard. I sprinted across it at full speed and bounded up the circular stairs. When I tried to twist the knob, I found the door was still locked. Despite my panic, I'd managed to hold onto the card key and swiped it through the reader. It took the lock several agonizing seconds before it clicked.

When I pushed the door open, I saw Susanna frozen in the middle of the room. She pointed behind the door.

Right fist clenched, I braced myself and jerked the door toward me. But there was nothing there.

"What is it?"

Susanna pointed at the door again, this time head high. I squinted. A desert scorpion clung to the middle of the door. A big one, with a dark, banded body and white pincers. It carried a hairy, oversized stinger on the end of its tail, which was cocked, ready to strike.

I relaxed my arm and took a deep breath. "C'mon, Susanna, it's a scorpion. I thought you were in trouble."

"Aren't they poisonous?"

"Yeah, but they squish under pressure." I grabbed a shoe off the floor.

"Don't kill it."

I turned toward her and made a face. "What?"

"Just—just take it outside." Hands clasped, Susanna peered at the scorpion. "Promise you won't kill it."

I dropped the shoe and grumbled toward the kitchen. After rummaging through the cabinets, I found a plastic bowl with a lid. The scorpion hadn't budged when I got back. I tapped the critter with the lid and it plopped into the bowl like a rock. He was a big one. I clamped the lid over him.

It felt silly, but I held the bowl close to my side as I circled back down the staircase to the school's courtyard. When I reached the landing, I glanced around to see if anyone saw me. The priest and two nuns were on their way to breakfast at the small dining area attached to Senora Zapotitla's kitchen. This was my opportunity. I stood on a concrete bench and dumped the scorpion on the other side of the wall, where I knew there was a wide, grassy lot surely teeming with lizards and mice it could prey on. This would be my venomous little friend's new home.

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When I arrived at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia later that morning, Martin Benitez,

the senior archaeologist, strode into the lobby to greet me. His height surprised me. I'm five-eleven, and ever since my grad school days, I've been used to being the tallest man in any room wherever I traveled in Mexico. Benitez was slightly taller than me, with a bushy black mustache and intelligent eyes. He wore a white suit with a dark tie. His posture was that of an aristocrat.

"Dr. Barrett?" He held out a hand that did not look like it had ever touched a bush ax or trowel.

I nodded. "Senor Benitez? It's a pleasure to meet you."

"My pleasure." Despite the fancy suit and polished manners, Martin Benitez had a strong handshake. Strong enough to make me look up and notice a gleam in his eye that was not altogether welcoming. Eric Winwood had stressed the importance of not insulting my Mexican hosts. I considered myself a down-to-earth guy, still blue collar at heart despite my degrees. Clearly, Benitez regarded me as another arrogant Yankee who'd come down south to show off his benevolence and superior education. From the look he gave me, I wondered if he might be offended at my outfit: jeans, work boots, blue cotton shirt, and Texas Longhorns cap. I was ready to hit the site.

Then Benitez added, "There is a new urgency to our mission. More sites were vandalized yesterday."

"Eric Winwood told me this morning. He said they hit El Tepozteco."

"And that is very strange." Benitez eyed me, arms crossed. If I didn't know better, I'd have thought he was looking at me accusingly.

I stared back. "Why is it strange?"

Benitez motioned for me to follow and he strolled with exaggerated casualness toward the elevator. "Emperor Ahuitzotl is a great figure from Mexican history. It is well known he is buried in Mexico City, where many monuments and relics associated with his reign are located. Naturally, the search for Ahuitzotl's knife has been focused there, both by the Institute and the cartels, who seek it for the status it will give them. But you are the first to suggest the Cuauhtli would be found at such a minor site, so far from Ahuitzotl's center of power."

He bent in front of an eye scanner, which responded with an electronic chirp. The door opened and we got in. Benitez tapped the button for the sixth floor, then wheeled around and faced me, his chin almost touching mine. "And now they have ransacked El Tepozteco. This has never happened before."

I resented the implication, but wasn't about to let it show. Eric Winwood had stressed the importance of tact in my dealings with the Mexican officials. So with all the tact I had in me, I replied, "Then like you said, it adds even more urgency to the job, doesn't it?"

Benitez had nothing to say to that. When we got to the sixth floor, I followed him down a hallway decorated with brightly colored murals. I saw only one employee, a thin man dressed in office casual clothing. He peered at us from the other end of the hall for a moment before he ducked behind a door.

"I had the Rubatlan Codex brought here, as you requested," said Benitez. "It's in our relics room. I have no problem with you examining it, since you say it will help locate the knife of Ahuitzotl. But I'm puzzled that you want to examine a post-colonial codex."

Just as I was about to reply, Benitez stopped in front of a forbidding metal door. It looked like it could stop a tank. "One moment, doctor." He leaned forward in front of another eye scanner, and from inside the wall came the sound of metal scraping metal, like two knives brushing against each other along their cutting edges. "Now you." I stepped closer and squinted into what looked like an old Viewmaster. At the same time, Benitez tapped some buttons on top of the unit. The device responded with a soft ping.

"You now have access to this building and its rooms. Just as the State Department requested." With a sly grin on his face, he pushed the door open.

I stepped into a long, darkened room full of rows of tables. The only illumination came from ultra-violet lamps. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the relic-friendly lighting. I slowly recognized piles of Aztec, Mayan, Toltec, and Spanish colonial artifacts on each table. As I gazed at the long rows of deadly and finely crafted weapons from four heroic cultures, my heart beat just a bit faster than normal. It felt like Christmas morning.

Benitez pulled the door shut behind him. It locked with a muffled clang. "You will find gloves on the table to your right."

I turned. Under the ultraviolet lights, a compressed stack of cotton gloves glowed blue-white from inside an open cardboard box. I pulled a pair on and turned toward Benitez. He made no move to put gloves on his own hands.

"The codex you asked for is in the right corner of the room," said Benitez. "I will be here to answer any questions."

I headed toward the far end of the dark room. As I crept between the rows of tables, I could not help but gaze at the ancient treasures all around me. I wished I could pick up and study every one. But time did not allow such a luxury.

I located the old manuscript. Scholars had traced the Rubatlan Codex to an unknown Aztec author who had written it around 1525, just a few years after the Spanish conquest of Mexico. I took a long, ner-

vous breath of air when I opened it. *Finally.*

“We have had several of our own experts comb through this,” said Benitez, a trace of indignation in his voice. “Including myself. Do you think you can interpret Nahuatl better than native Mexican scholars?”

I looked up at Benitez. “No, I don’t. My knowledge of Nahuatl is limited. My specialty is pre-Columbian weapons.”

“Weapons?”

“Knives, for example. How they were made, how they were used. Where you’d hide a sacred knife.” I started turning pages. “Ahuitzotl’s wars not only brought riches to his realm, but kept his priests well-supplied with captives for sacrifices.” When I turned the next page and saw what was on it, my heart skipped a beat. I pointed toward a colorful illustration of a human sacrifice. The image was stylized yet surprisingly life-like. “There’s your knife. And the happy character about to plunge it into that man’s chest is Coyotl, Emperor Ahuitzotl’s high priest. That knife is said to have sent 20,000 souls to the Aztec sun god.”

Benitez shrugged. “I’m well aware of that.”

“Did you know it gives the location of Emperor Ahuitzotl’s knife under the picture?”

I got a nasty scowl as thanks for that information. Benitez stooped close to the page. He studied the pictogram and text a moment and said, “That’s classical Spanish. It says, ‘The eagle is in the eagle’s eye.’” He stood straight and stared at me. “But that’s nonsense. Aztec scribes often added poetical flourishes.” His dark eyes gleamed in the ultra-violet light. “Besides, I see no mention of Ahuitzotl or his knife.”

I leaned back in my chair. “You have to tie this in with a clue from a long-lost codex I saw five years ago.”

“Which one?”

“Mendoza.”

Benitez nodded. “There are a number of Aztec manuscripts still unaccounted for. Over the centuries, many found their way into the hands of rich collectors. Especially Americans who thought of them as curiosities.”

Ignoring his little jab, I said, “Mendoza contained a hidden clue about Emperor Ahuitzotl’s knife.”

“Which you somehow grasped despite your limited skill in Nahuatl.”

“That’s right. I found a long section in Mendoza about Ahuitzotl. In addition to the Nahuatl text and the pictograms, there’s commentary in Spanish, too. It took me a while, but I found a hidden reference to the Rubatlan Codex. And a passage in Spanish said the Cuauhtli—the Eagle—was in the care of the drunken

god.”

“Tepozteco,” said Benitez, his voice a whisper. “The god of pulque.”

“The granddaddy of tequila.”

“But you said you found this five years ago. Why did you not pursue it then?”

“I did. But I got nowhere. I contacted everyone I knew in your government, everyone I knew in your universities. Everyone blew me off. I even contacted an old fraternity buddy who worked in the State Department—”

“Mr. Winwood.”

“And he said he could not help me.”

“Yes. Before the crisis with the cartels. And then suddenly he needed you, and things were different. I’m surprised you didn’t tell him to go to the Devil.”

Benitez seemed to have a good understanding of how bureaucracies work. Or don’t work.

“Well,” I said, “I’m glad to help stop the drug cartels. Whatever reason they have for wanting to steal one of their nation’s antiquities, it can’t be good.” I gazed up at Benitez. “You see, I want to be the one to locate that knife. Everyone I’ve talked to about this, even my old college friend, doesn’t know both parts of the puzzle. You’re the first person I’ve told about the clue I found in the Mendoza Codex.”

Benitez’s gaze softened a bit. “How did you get your hands on it?”

I grinned. “Dumb luck. An alumnus willed his personal library to UT—”

“The University of Texas?”

“Right. We get thousands of books donated to us every year, most of them useless. No one realized the old man had acquired an actual Aztec codex. But the university librarian recognized what it was, and let me look at it first.”

“Lucky for you the librarian knew what it was. That’s remarkable.”

“That’s why I married her.”

Benitez raised an eyebrow. “Interesting.” He stooped closer to the Rubatlan Codex. A deep frown covered his face. He pointed toward a picture on the opposite page of a conquistador standing alone on a mountaintop. Blood poured from the soldier’s neck. Despite the centuries, the blood still looked real.

“I’ve always thought this odd,” he said. “Every codex that illustrates sacrifices shows the victim getting his heart carved out by a priest. And battle scenes always depict the moment an enemy is mortally wounded. But this man is alone on a high peak, with his throat slit. What do you make of it?”

“Not sure. This is the first time I’ve seen this codex.” I gazed up. “That can be our next mystery—that is, after we’ve located Ahuitzotl’s knife.”

“But what does this clue of yours mean?”

“Guess we’ll have to go on-site to see for ourselves.”

Benitez pulled a phone out of his jacket. “A truck and two assistants will be waiting outside in ten minutes. Would you care to join us?”

I carefully shut the ancient volume and pulled off the cotton gloves. “It would be my pleasure.”

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The Tepoztlan Ridge is a series of towering mountains that wall in the lush Tepoztlan Valley. The mountains are massive, twisted blocks of stone piled to impossible heights. On the summit of the tallest mountain in the range is the most remote Aztec temple of them all, El Tepozteco.

The climb up Mount Tepozteco was slow. I found myself huffing up the slope ahead of Martin Benitez and his two assistants. Benitez still wore his white suit, though he’d taken off the tie and put on work boots. The assistants had folding spades strapped to their shoulders. Each also had a backpack of supplies.

As I paused to catch my breath, a small face popped up from the shadows in the bushes just ahead. I staggered closer, but it vanished. I heard the chittering of a band of coatimundis gathering around us to inspect the latest group of humans that had entered their territory.

In view of the critical nature of our search, I wondered why we couldn’t have taken a helicopter to the summit. It finally dawned on me that thick jungle covered the entire peak, so there was no safe spot to land. Thick vines dripped from the trees like eels. As we neared the top, I caught my first live glimpses of El Tepozteco.

The temple stood on the summit of steep, rocky Tepozteco Mountain. A dozen or so steep hillocks and rocky outcroppings surrounded the temple. The Aztecs, like the Mayans and Toltecs, wanted their gods to have convenient access to the human sacrifices they offered, so the higher the better. Hence the mountaintops. This temple was a flat-topped, terraced pyramid surrounded by trees.

It was mid-afternoon on a bright, sunny day. Though I’d never visited this particular Aztec site, I was familiar with its history and reputation. Tourists from all over the world roamed the summit. We squeezed through a narrow passage of massive stones and climbed the steps to the temple. On our way,

we passed folks practicing yoga or meditating. At the top, the grandeur and mystery of the ancient pyramid really hit me. I saw a dozen or so people simply taking in the sweeping view of the emerald valley far below.

We had work to do, and immediately set to it. Benitez's two associates took obvious delight in showing off their badges and handguns as they shooed folks away from the temple. Their tough-guy manner struck me as both amusing and juvenile. I accepted it as part of the job that had to be done.

Martin Benitez observed them with satisfaction. He turned to me. "See the damage to the wall?"

I did, and nodded. A notebook-sized section of the wall had been chiseled off. It was a sickening sight. The drug cartels had done that searching for Ahuizotl's knife.

"Do you mind if I ask a question?"

"Not at all," I said.

"It is an interesting area of study you have chosen. What drew you to your scholarship of ancient weapons?"

I frowned as the two assistants roughed up some local kids who'd been drinking beer and dropping their cans on the temple's steps. One of Benitez's men snatched a camera from one of the kids, and the other took another boy by the arm. I took a deep breath and decided to say nothing about it. "My great-great grandfather's cavalry sword hung over the fireplace in our home near El Paso, Texas. I loved swinging that thing. Sometimes I'd pretend I was with Stonewall Jackson at Chancellorsville. Also, my grandmother had a large vegetable garden, where I often found projectile points. I acquired quite a collection. And then there was Robert Horse."

Benitez raised an eyebrow. "Texas, you say? Was he an Apache?"

"Uh-huh. Mescalero. Robert Horse was 80, and a natural expert with the sling. In his hands, that simple weapon was lethal. An old man who could barely walk transformed into an Apache hunter from the past when he practiced with it. That weapon amazed me. And he—well, I will always remember him."

I guess I got a little nostalgic as I recalled that larger-than-life and long-gone figure from my boyhood. I cut my eyes at Benitez. He smiled and turned his gaze toward the pyramid.

"My men have cleared the way for you, doctor."

I realized at that moment I now had to prove my hunch. I'd told all my friends and rivals in academia, all my contacts in Mexican universities and museums, and even Eric Winwood, my friend from college who'd gone to work for the State Department—all these people believed me when I said I had a clue to the

location of Emperor Ahuitzotl's sacrificial knife. I'd had to fight to keep that clue a secret. Now I had to deliver.

My gut tightened. I felt light-headed, so bad that I staggered when I took my first step forward. I took a deep breath and walked up the steps to the pyramid dedicated to Tepozteco, the Aztec god of pulque, the precursor of tequila.

I could've used a shot.

The pyramid was only about three stories high, terraced, with a flat top. I climbed up to the side facing the sprawling valley and studied the images carved in the stone. I'd seen pictures of this site before, but nothing was quite like the experience of seeing these magnificent carvings in real life. The mysterious connection I always felt when I came face to face with ancient artifacts came back, and for a moment, I was lost in time.

That didn't last long.

I found the carving I was looking for, the face of the sacred eagle. It appeared to be gazing out into the valley. Taking a few steps back, careful not to step completely off the mountain, I studied the carved image. Neither of its eyes offered any kind of clue.

There was that tightening in the gut again.

"Is everything okay, doctor?"

I turned and looked down at Martin Benitez, who was on the terrace below me. "I'm fine."

Sure I was.

I backed away as far as I dared and examined the eagle's eyes in the afternoon sun. Then I noticed something. Both of the eyes were formed by holes. But the eye on the right was a hole that went deep into the bird's head at an angle. I smiled.

"Doctor, please watch your step. You're on the edge."

I waved at Benitez while continuing to study the carved image. I recalled the Aztec *xiqu-cuahuitl*, or sighting stick, a tool used by Aztec builders to line up architectural points. A stick inserted into the eagle's right eye would point toward one of the nearby hillocks that dotted the summit. But I had a better idea. Steadying myself with my right hand, I pulled out the laser pointer I kept on my key chain. Then, hugging the terrace, I worked the pointer off the chain and slid it into the eagle's eye. I pushed the button and searched the hillocks. There it was.

"Martin—I'm aiming a laser at those rocks to my left. See the red dot?"

Benitez craned his neck. "Yes."

"That's where we'll find Ahuitzotl's knife."

Benitez jerked upright and scurried away. His assistants followed him toward the hillock. It was about a hundred and fifty feet from the temple, but separated by a deep and treacherous ravine. It took twenty minutes for Benitez and his men to work their way to it. The two assistants immediately started clearing away rocks and bushes. I pulled my laser pointer out of the eagle's eye and headed toward the others.

When I reached Benitez and his men, they had cleared away the vegetation and most of the surface soil from the side of the hill. It was tight, but there was just enough room for us to stand next to the spot. A square outline about two feet by three feet had emerged in the area they'd dug out.

"They can't pry it open with the spades," said Benitez.

"Roots," I said. "Let's see if this helps." From my front pocket, I pulled out my hunting knife and flicked it open. I slipped the blade into the gap and started sawing. It cut through the underground growth holding the square rock in place.

"A very impressive weapon," said Benitez. "Also very illegal in Mexico. I'm surprised you got it through customs."

I dropped to one knee and continued slicing around the stone. "This knife is an old friend. My father gave it to me. He had it in Vietnam. He said it saved his life, so I guess you'd say it's got some history. Maybe good luck, too. Anyway, it comes with me on every trip to the field. Every expedition, every hike, every time I go hunting or fishing. When I camp out, it's within arm's reach of my sleeping bag."

When I'd cut around the entire stone, I stood up. "Just a second." I took out the phone Eric Winwood had given me and took pictures. Then I studied the stone a moment. It was carved limestone. I took a deep breath and said, "Try again."

I stepped back and let the two assistants pry the sides with their spades. A few more roots groaned and cracked, then the gap at the top of the stone opened wider. I stooped down and helped ease the stone down. The weight surprised me, but I managed to keep it from getting away from us and sliding down the ravine.

Benitez crouched beside me and peered into the dark vault we'd just opened. He said nothing. When I looked inside, I blinked. It was a bright day, but it was impossible to see inside. I crept closer, and as I turned my head, I saw something glisten.

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