

# AZTLAN

## THE LAST SUN

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**CRAZY 8 PRESS**

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First edition

# Aztec Names: A Pronunciation Key

**a** as in father

**e** as in net

**i** as in police

**o** as in note

**u** as in flute

**au** as in flautist

**ai** like the first e in eye

**c** hard before a, o, or u and soft before e or i

**ch** as in choose

**cu** like the qu in queen

**h** as in hello

**hu** like the w in way

**l** as in lose

**m** as in make

**n** as in nose

**p** as in pie

**qu** like the k in kite

**t** as in tell

**tl** like the ll in llama

**tz** like the ts in cats

**x** like the sh in shell

**y** as in you

**z** like the s in sun



## Chapter One

**I**t was the End of the World.

It was the Last Sun, the Final Days. It was, as the commentators on the Mirror liked to put it, The Millennium.

The Calendar of a Thousand Cycles was grinding to a halt. Time itself was faltering like a wounded jaguar, bleeding out its life's blood into the rich, dark earth of the jungle, seeking a cool, shaded place to lay its head down and expire.

And all my aunt could talk about, in the guttering light of her rainbow-colored Renewal candles, was her heartburn.

"If only I could get some nice, dark chocolate," she said, placing tiny ceramic statuettes of the gods around her old, tarnished silver candle-holder, each little god a riot of turquoise and red ocher and amber hues. She slid me a sideways glance. "Chocolate would take care of my heartburn, Maxtla."

My aunt, a slender, pinch-cheeked woman with gray streaks in her long, braided hair, never asked for anything directly. It was always "If only" and "How I would love," never "Can I have?"

Standing over by the curtains, I smiled to myself. "Aunt Xoco," I said, as if I were the elder and she the younger, "I'm pretty sure that chocolate *causes* heartburn, if it does anything at all."

"Maybe so, when it comes to *other* people," she allowed, standing back to consider the way she had distributed the statuettes. "For me, it works."

"Even if there were some medical support for what you're saying, you know that—"

"Chocolate is off-limits to us," she said, cutting me off.

"Well," I said, "yes."

She dismissed my objection with a flip of her bony wrist. It jangled her clutch of antique silver bracelets, which had belonged to her mother and her mother's mother. "And yet people get their hands on it, don't they? Somehow, Maxtla, they get their hands on it."

What she said was true. There was a thriving black market for the stuff, now more than ever before. But then, a pocketful of chocolate was no longer the death sentence it had been in ancient days.

"And you want me," I asked, "an officer of the Empire, to acquire this chocolate for you? How would it look for someone in my position to break the Emperor's Law?"

She snorted. "You're too obedient, Maxtla."

"Too obedient? How is that possible?" I gibed.

Instead of answering, Aunt Xoco closed her eyes and touched her heart in obeisance to Huitzilopochtli, Tonatiuh, and Chantico, just as she had at holiday dinner the cycle before

and the cycle before that, all the way back to the time of my earliest memories. The candle light picked out the hollows in her face, making her look like some other woman entirely.

Finally, she opened her eyes, signaling that she had completed her devotion. "In my day," she said, "officers of the Empire overlooked such technicalities as the Chocolate Law. They did whatever they could for those they loved."

"Things were looser then," I pointed out. *At least in some ways.*

She harrumphed. "*Looser.*" Then she added, "Close the curtains," and vanished into the kitchen, which was situated right alongside the eating room.

I smiled again. Then I turned to my aunt's big, north-facing window. A vast panoply of red-gold lights rolled away from me in every direction across the city's carefully ordered, geometrically shaped districts, sparking fiery reflections in a thousand still pools and a thousand narrow canals, interrupted here and there only by the splendid, silver web of Aztlan's rail lines.

The River of Stars, which bisected the city, wasn't visible from this angle. But that too, would be ablaze with reflected light, a gargantuan, scaled serpent slithering silently under and alongside the walkways of man.

Normally, those walkways would be full of people, millions of them, most of them on their way home from work. The food markets would be full, the *octli* vendors busy, the taverns packed with young men and women. But not that night.

That night, not just in Aztlan but everywhere across the

vast Empire of Mexica, from the Bay of Ice in the far north to the Land of Fire in the distant south, every business was closed. The only doors that were open were the doors of fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, aunts and uncles. It was a night for family, for solemnity, for gratitude.

And adult men all across the Empire would be doing exactly what I was doing—pulling closed white linen curtains against the uncertainties of the world, asking the gods to cup our kin in their divine hands the way we might cup a match against a savage wind.

That night—on the first of the Five Unlucky Days that preceded the Fire Renewal—there were no nobles, no commoners, no workers, no chiefs. No distinctions whatsoever. Or so it was said.

There were only the People. And the People, for the time being, were at peace.

By the Fifth Day, it would be an entirely different story. Starting early that morning, Aztlan would lose its mind. There would be fires in inconvenient places, and people doing odd things in the streets, and crimes of passion.

All *kinds* of passion. And all kinds of crimes, including the *worst* of them.

But such depravities were to be expected when a bundle of cycles came to an end, when a Fire Renewal burned away the veneer of civilization and exposed the painted, pierced, howling wild men in us. Because no matter how far the Empire advanced, no matter how sophisticated we became, we never knew in what light the gods would see us when our time came,

or—having seen us—what they would decide to do with us.

And it was not knowing that drove us crazy.

We would be driven to this madness by *any* Fire Renewal. But this one was different. It was, as I've mentioned, the End of the World.

When Aunt Xoco came out of the kitchen, it was with a platter in each hand—one piled with spiced corn cakes, the other full of bulging vegetable bundles.

"We've always had *laws*," she said, resuming our conversation as if it had never been interrupted. She set the plates down around the statuettes. "You know that, Maxtla. And there has always been a risk involved in breaking them."

I was about to respond when my aunt left me again. She returned with a bowl of deep-green limes from Texcoco and a decorated gourd full of newly distilled *octli*. I knew about the limes and the *octli* because I had bought them on my way there.

This time I actually got a couple of words out before she held up a hand, silencing me. "The food, Maxtla. It's hot *now*."

A third time, she retreated into the kitchen. When she emerged, she was carrying a mound of grilled gopher and a poached water snake. The aroma should have been illegal, like chocolate.

Placing the plates on the pitted wooden surface of the table, Aunt Xoco surveyed the landscape of delicacies for a moment. It was more food than we could possibly eat. But that was the way my aunt liked to cook—as if she were feeding not only us but every last one of our ancestors.

"Sit," she said at last.



I pulled out a chair and sat.

As she took the seat opposite mine, she looked like she had every intention of continuing our conversation. I, on the other hand, wanted to change its direction.

“Now that I think about it,” I said, as I picked up my knife and fork, “chocolate is supposed to be good for diarrhea. Is *that* the problem, Aunt Xoco?”

“*Please,*” she said, holding up a blue-veined hand and rolling her lidded eyes, “must we talk about such things while we’re eating holiday food?”

The eye rolling reminded me of my father. He had been a lot broader than my aunt, a strong man for his modest height, but no one would ever have missed the fact that they were brother and sister. My father had the same mannerisms as Aunt Xoco, the same facial expressions, the same dark eyes and high cheekbones.

I, on the other hand, took after my mother’s side of the family. I was taller than most men, longer of leg, and my eyes were brown rather than black. That had always bothered my father—the fact that I didn’t look like him. But he left his imprint on me all the same.

“No,” I agreed, “we can avoid such topics.”

I sliced off a dark, juicy piece of gopher meat. Then I laid it on my orange, blue, and white holiday plate, obscuring the likeness of medicine-bringer Patecatl, Aunt Xoco’s birth-god.

The gopher meat was rubbed with an assortment of spices, the names of which my aunt would not have divulged on pain of death. It melted in the mouth the way the sun

melted in the Western Ocean.

"You approve?" she asked, taking some white, flaky water snake for herself.

"As always," I said.

"Then why don't you come for meals more often?" She indicated the otherwise unpopulated holiday table. "It's not as if I've got so many to cook for that there's no room for you."

It was an old complaint. As ever, I did my best not to hurt her feelings. "You know that investigators keep crazy hours, and seldom take meals at reasonable times."

"Your father kept such hours," she reminded me, "and yet he seemed to find time to eat my food. Even after he was married to your mother, he came here for a meal now and then. Especially at . . ." Her voice broke a little, and she took a moment to collect herself. "Especially at Renewal Time."

I felt a stone in my throat as well. Placing my hand over my aunt's, I waited for the stone to go away.

"I miss him too," I said finally, as gently as I could.

"At least," she said, "he died a hero."

"Yes," I said, "at least that."

My heart beat once, twice. The drapes fluttered around the open window and the candles danced in the breeze.

"Anyway," I said to my aunt, again trying to change the subject, "I get some time off after the holiday. What if I were to take you down to the Gulf for a couple of days? They'll be opening the Western Markets."

Aunt Xoco's eyes narrowed to arrow points. "I'm sure that's what you want to do with your time off—drag an old

lady around and look at sea shells.”

“First of all, you’re not an old lady. You’re a lovely, vibrant woman with an eye for quality. Who *else* would I want to take to the Western Markets?”

“Well,” she said, ignoring my compliment, “someone in the Merchant City, for starters.”

I pretended to double over in pain. “Now *that* was a low blow.”

“She was a beautiful girl, Maxtla. You should have pursued her. You still *can*.”

“Beautiful, yes,” I conceded. “But too flashy. And too ambitious.”

“*You* were ambitious once,” said my aunt.

“*Once*.” I felt the old bitterness rising in me and tamped down on it. After all, this was a holiday dinner. “Now I’m an officer of the Empire,” I said genially. “I uphold our traditions. I don’t trample them to gather a few more beans.”

Aunt Xoco poured herself some *octli*, then offered me the gourd. “Gathering beans is a tradition too, Nephew.”

So it was. The Merchant City had been around for five hundred cycles. So what was my problem?

I picked up the gourd and poured out a cup of my own. Then I took one of the limes, cut it in two, and squeezed half of it into my *octli*. “Maybe it wasn’t the bean-gathering,” I allowed. “Maybe it was just the girl.”

My aunt sighed. “Always so picky. How am I going to fill this table with little ones if you insist on imposing such impossible standards?”

I shrugged. "All I require is that she be like you, Aunt Xoco. Is that so much to ask?"

She pressed her lips together to keep from laughing, but it didn't work. And as she began to laugh, her face turning a dark red, I laughed as well.

"Gods," she said as she attempted to regain her composure, "we haven't even had the *octli* yet!"

That made us laugh some more.

We might still have been laughing if my radio hadn't buzzed. Fishing it out of my pouch, I activated it and said, "Colhua."

It was my chief, Necalli. There was no mistaking the gravel in his voice.

"Sorry," he said, "but something's come up." Unfortunately, I knew what kind of something he meant. "I want you to take the lead."

"I'm off-duty," I said hopefully.

"Not anymore," he told me, making it clear there was no room for negotiation.

It had been the same way with my father, more times than I could count. I put the radio back in my pouch and looked at Aunt Xoco.

She shook her head, doing her best to hide her disappointment. "Always during the Unlucky Days. Can't they wait until after the Renewal to kill each other?"

I felt as if someone had slipped a knife between my ribs. After all the cooking she had done, for her to eat alone . . . and yet, what could I do? I was an Investigator.

"I guess they can't," I said.

I got up, came around the table, and drew her up out of her chair. Then I hugged her. She was little in my arms, littler every cycle.

“Go,” she said finally, pushing me away. “Catch the criminals, Maxtla. Make me proud.”

“I will,” I assured her.

“See you tomorrow, then. By the way, I’m making your favorite.”

“Venison?” I asked, excited already.

“That’s *tomorrow*,” she said for emphasis, as if I might not show up if she didn’t entice me with food. She saw me to the door of her apartment. “And if you change your mind, Maxtla, remember . . .”

“Yes?” I said.

She pulled my head down and whispered in my ear: “*Dark chocolate.*”

The Centeotl Pyramid sat by the River of Stars where it made a wide, lazy turn through the shabbier parts of District Seven.

Chimalma Milin, a small woman with a child’s face, was a security guard on the night shift at the pyramid. When I arrived, she was sitting on one of the redwood benches in the building’s huge, black lobby, as pale as a maize cake in the light of the partially completed ceiling grid. Her chief, a heavysset man, was standing next to her, trying to maintain an air of business-as-usual when what had happened that evening was very definitely *unusual*.

Either he or someone else had given Milin a cup of cane

water. She was clutching it with both hands, the way a drowning woman clutches a lifeline.

I nodded to her superior, then knelt beside her. "My name is Maxtla Colhua," I said. "I'm an Investigator for the Empire."

Milin nodded, but didn't look up at me. "You want to know what happened?"

"Yes."

She drew a ragged breath, still a little sour-smelling from all the vomiting she must have done. "I was on the north side of the property, making sure the crazies hadn't come back."

"The crazies," I repeated. "You mean the cultists?"

Milin nodded. "The cultists."

For the last moon or more, a cult of religious fanatics who called themselves Ancient Light had marched in a single line around the pyramid site, singing for the benefit of anyone who would listen that the erection of the building was an offense against the gods. No one had stopped them. After all, protests were legal in the Empire, even if the protestors in question had a screw loose.

Then, one night, some of the protestors tried to burrow under the fence and desecrate the pyramid so it couldn't be sanctified. Fortunately, one of Milin's fellow guards spotted them and called the authorities. I had seen the story on the Mirror.

The sanctification ceremony, scheduled for the next day, began on time nonetheless. As soon as the High Priest arrived, the cultists were forced to back up out of respect for his presence. A little while later, the rites were completed without incident.

They were more than a nod to old Fire Renewal traditions. Tenants liked to be able to say they had taken space in a sanctified building. It was considered bad luck to visit with people whose premises hadn't been sanctified.

"I saw a yellow light," Milin continued, "about halfway between the pyramid and the fence. It was small, close to the ground, and it flickered every time the breeze came up. Like a candle. I approached it to see what was going on."

She stopped talking, her eyes wide. It seemed she was stuck on that moment.

"Then what?" I asked, hoping to get her going again.

Milin frowned. "I saw a man. He was lying on the ground next to the candle as if he were sleeping. I wondered why someone would have broken into the site just to take a nap, and also why he would have brought a candle with him. Drunk, I decided. Too much *octli*. What else could it be?"

"I called out to him, hoping he would wake up. But he didn't. I should have buzzed for help then, but I thought I could handle the problem on my own. After all, he looked harmless. So I moved closer. It wasn't until I was almost next to him that I saw—"

She doubled over and started to gag. I put my hand on her shoulder and waited until she regained control of herself.

"His chest," she said, her voice little more than a whisper now, "was cracked open. Like a crab shell. And the candle. . .it wasn't next to him, as I had thought. It was *inside* him. Someone had lit it and planted it in his *chest*."

Lovely, I thought.

I exchanged glances with her chief. “Unfortunate,” he said, knowing how big an understatement it was.

“Yes,” I agreed.

In as kindly a fashion as I could manage, I obtained Milin’s assurance that she would remain on the premises for a while. Then I got up and went to see the victim for myself.

Centeotl, which was slated to open its doors in a few days, was a cascade of gaudy golden light on two flanks—the side that faced east and the side that faced south. But the northern and western quadrants were still dark, leaving the grounds in those directions deep in shadow.

There wasn’t any starlight, either. Just a talon moon, barely visible through the overcast of the sky.

Of course, there were other pyramids nearby—Amimitl to the east, Tonantzin to the west, and Xilonen just across the river—and they were lit up, as usual. But I couldn’t see anything except the very tops of them, thanks to the landscape of smaller, more modestly illuminated buildings that rose between us.

So it wasn’t easy to make out the two police officers standing there beside the body, a thousand hands from the base of the pyramid. In fact, if I hadn’t already known they were there, I might have missed them.

But I knew to look for the yellow tunic of the Seventh District that they would be wearing over their white police shirts. After all, an Investigator had to train for two cycles with a district police force, and for those two cycles I had worn a yellow tunic.



As I approached the officers, I saw that I knew them. Or rather, I knew their faces. But they looked paler than I remembered.

“Investigator,” said the taller of of them.

“May the gods smile on you,” I said.

“If the gods were in a mood to smile,” the officer said, “they would have saved *this* for someone else’s shift.”

Having been an Investigator for a while, I knew better than to position myself downwind. Corpses always smelled terrible, and this one smelled worse than most.

I took my light out of my pouch, hunkered down beside the victim, and waved away some of the flies circling above him. There were dozens of them. But then, they knew a feast when they saw one.

The candle had gone out, but everything else was as Milin had described it. The victim’s chest had been split wide open as if with an axe. His splintered, ghostly-white ribs protruded from the mess, giving testimony to the force of the blow.

I played my light inside him.

“He’s got no heart,” said the shorter of the officers.

He was right. The victim’s heart was missing. There was an island of ghostly white wax in its place, floating in a sea of black, crusted blood.

In ancient days, the sun priests had dragged themselves to the tops of stone pyramids, leading human sacrifices who were too drunk to know what was happening, and up there, so close to heaven they could almost touch it, they had ripped open the chests of their victims and torn their hearts out to honor the

gods. As far as I knew, it wasn't ancient days anymore.

Unfortunately, someone hadn't gotten the news.

I studied the dead man's expression, which was a remarkably calm one, especially in contrast with the bloody ruin below it. The beam from my pocket light glinted in his eyes. Now that I was close to his face, I could smell the *octli* on his breath among all the other smells.

If he had been drunk, it would have made him that much easier to kill. But why this way—unless it *meant* something to somebody?

I felt a breeze, the same warm one that had lifted my aunt's curtains, hard as it was to believe. Aunt Xoco and her statuettes seemed a million worlds away.

"Any identification?" I asked the officers behind me.

"Nothing," said the shorter one.

"Murder weapon? Other evidence?"

"Not yet."

"You think it's those cultists?" asked the taller one.

"I don't know," I said. But by the gods, I was going to find out.