

CUAUHTEMOC IN THE SKY WITH JADE BEADS

"I am the Axis Mundi"

Pilot

Written by

Juan Carlos Gutierrez

TEASER

EXT. TEMPLO MAYOR - NIGHT

SUPER: A LONG TIME AGO IN TENOCHTITLAN

DARKNESS. A land of white pyramids and palaces that glow only from the reflection of the brilliant stars in the obsidian sky. Blazing torches line the steep staircase of the pyramid.

ZYANYA (25), a stern high priestess with dark long hair, leads priests (14), NOPALTZIN and, his twin sister, XOCO.

The twins drag an elderly, NEARLY-DEAD MAN to the twin temples at the top of the pyramid. ALL wear hooded black robes, but only Xoco wears her hood, no hair exposed. The Nearly-Dead Man's body grows white with time.

CUAUHTEMOC (19), a wimpy priest with long, greasy black hair and excessive jade and gold jewelry, lingers at the base. His small eyes peak over his wide nose and dopey smile.

He slumps his shoulders and ascends the pyramid. His sandals DRAG against the plastered steps in his lazy procession. The others wait atop. Irked, Zyanya taps her own sandaled-foot.

Cauhtemoc finally reaches them. He throws back his robe, exposing his bare body covered only by a loincloth. He rubs his thighs vigorously. Hunched over and out of breath, he HUFFS and PUFFS as he struggles to speak.

CUAUHTEMOC

Wooh. That's one hell of a climb...
You guys go on ahead. My thighs are
on fire.

Zyanya groans. Nopaltzin and Xoco place the Nearly-Dead Man on a stone altar shaped like a man lying on his back. Cauhtemoc joins them, standing over their fidgety victim.

CUAUHTEMOC (CONT'D)

Hey, buddy. How's it going? You
sure you want to do this? I totally
understand if you want to scram.

(whispering)

I know I would...

The Nearly-Dead Man squints at him.

NEARLY-DEAD MAN

What? Aren't you supposed to be a
priest? And no, it's an honor to
offer myself to the Gods.

CUAUHTEMOC

I don't know. If you say so. But do me a favor. Think of all the great things you'll miss. The luxuries--

NEARLY-DEAD MAN

--I'm poor.

CUAUHTEMOC

Well then the market.

NEARLY-DEAD MAN

What?

CUAUHTEMOC

Food. What's your favorite from the market?

The Nearly-Dead Man shivers and doesn't answer.

CUAUHTEMOC (CONT'D)

Personally, I like the beans... No, wait... The squash is better. But then there are the corncobs. Ah, what the hell, you know what? I am rather fond of the Pozole.

Nopaltzin and Xoco giggle and nod in agreement. They rub their RUMBLING bellies. Zyanya's also makes a fuss but she muffles it by tugging on her robe.

ZYANYA

Cuauhtemoc, you'll do the honors?

She draws a flint blade from her robe. Small stones decorate the smooth surface, forming an eye and a toothy smile on the flat side of the flint.

CUAUHTEMOC

Mmmm. Pass.

She forces the blade's handle into his palm. His skin pales, nearly mirroring that of the Nearly-Dead Man. He swallows, his prominent Adam's apple jiggling in the process.

CUAUHTEMOC (CONT'D)

Fine. But remember, Zyanya, YOU asked for it.

He holds the blade in a single, trembling hand. BEADS OF SWEAT form on his forehead and trickle into his eyes. He rubs them dry and squeezes them shut to ease the sting. He looks at the face on the blade and holds it up to his own.

CUAUHTEMOC (CONT'D)

Haha, it looks like me.

ZYANYA

This is a sacred ritual. Please, you must treat it with respect.

CUAUHTEMOC

I am doing that. I know this guy is eager to die and all. I would be too if I were still living in squalor--

NEARLY-DEAD MAN

--Not die, I am a sacrifice.

CUAUHTEMOC

Yeah, yeah. Die. Sacrifice. Same difference. You'll get your wish, gramps. But don't get too excited or you'll die too soon, and it'll all be for nothing.

With the blade shaking in his hand, Cuauhtemoc makes a scraggly incision on the Nearly-Dead Man's abdomen. A light mist of blood squirts out from it.

Zyanya and the twins stand undisturbed, but Cuauhtemoc's eyes lock onto a speck of red that hits a bead of his jade necklace. GASP. He throws the blade. Nopaltzin dives for it.

CUAUHTEMOC (CONT'D)

Nope, I can't.

Zyanya pushes him away as he rubs the bead clean. She shoves her hand through the cut. With a curious face, she digs around the insides of the Nearly-Dead Man. She finds something, eyes widening. She rips out his HEART.

The Nearly-Dead Man dies with a soft smile on his lips. Zyanya hoists the BEATING HEART to the Heavens as blood pours down her arm. Cuauhtemoc flinches and covers his mouth.

ZYANYA

I thought I told you not to eat anything before the ceremony.

CUAUHTEMOC

I didn't. I swear.

Zyanya purses her lips.

EXT. TLATELOLCO MARKET - DAY - FLASHBACK

SUPER: MINUTES EARLIER

Cuauhtemoc sits on a reed mat as FAMILIES move about the bustling outdoor market. He stuffs his face with an array of tamales arranged before him.

A HUNGRY BEGGAR, an old man with scarred skin, a few shades browner than Cuauhtemoc's, watches him eat with his head cocked. He reaches for Cuauhtemoc's food, but he slaps away his hand.

HUNGRY BEGGAR

Please, sir. Just one?

Irritated, Cuauhtemoc tosses his corn leaf wrappers at him. He jumps for it, licking off the remnants of the starchy corn dough. Cuauhtemoc watches with disgust, continuing his binge.

EXT. TEMPLO MAYOR - NIGHT

Cuauhtemoc HURLS all over the beating heart and Zyanya. She shuts her eyes in disbelief. Her hands form fists and she quakes. She stares tight-lipped at him. He cowers and cautiously wipes his mouth with the end of his robe.

Zyanya tosses the heart into a bowl held by the twins and pushes the Nearly-Dead Man's corpse.

It falls off of the altar with a fleshy, wet SMACK and rolls down the pyramid.

She strolls down behind it, the twins at her heels.

CUAUHTEMOC

I feel much better now, if you guys were concerned...

No response.

CUAUHTEMOC (CONT'D)

Okay. I'll see you guys tomorrow.
This was fun!

He waves stupidly at them with an oversized grin.

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE

EXT. TENOCHTITLAN TEMPLE DISTRICT - DAY

The equinox. The sun rises from behind the green mountains. Its incandescent light shines through the cleft between the twin temples at the top of the Templo Mayor pyramid.

CITIZENS walk about at the bases of the stucco-covered pyramids, temples, palaces, and the Calmecac school building. Stone snake sculptures line the Templo Mayor's base. The buildings scrape the skies, dwarfing the citizens.

INT. MOCTEZUMA'S PALACE - THRONE ROOM - DAY

MOCTEZUMA (43), king of Tenochtitlan, sits on his miniature-pyramid-like throne. He wears an avian headdress made of gold, jade, and green quetzal feathers. The headdress's beak curves just over his forehead, his face fully exposed.

A cape of quetzal feathers cascades down his shoulders, an end secured to each of his wrists. A GOLDEN BUTTERFLY PENDANT secured to his neck.

ITZEL (39), a peasant woman with salt and peppered hair braided into two horns on her head, barges into the room. She shoves NECALLI (30), Moctezuma's hunched backed and rat-faced main attendant. He sprints, sliding in front of her.

NECALLI

King Moctezuma, I've told this peasant you're much too busy to see her.

(to the Itzel)

You think you're above the law. Out. Out, I say.

ATL (13) Itzel's blind son who wears a pair of jade goggles shaped like twined serpents, enters behind her. He and Itzel wear stiff maguey fiber clothing. Necalli tries to grab Atl's delicate frame but Itzel pushes his arms away from him.

ITZEL

Don't touch him. Get out of the way, I must speak to Moctezuma.

MOCTEZUMA

Let her by. It's fine, Necalli.

(to Itzel)

Now tell me, how can I help you?

Itzel looks right at Moctezuma's face, but he cowardly looks away, not quite meeting her gaze. His forehead lined with undying discomfort.

ITZEL

You promised to end the drought.
Months pass, but nothing changes.
Our crops aren't growing and my son
-- look at him -- he's
malnourished.

ATL

Ma, stop!

ITZEL

Quiet!

NECALLI

Aren't you being over the top? I
mean, we're doing just fine.

Itzel glares at Necalli's expensive cotton clothing and protruding gut. Moctezuma shakes his head.

MOCTEZUMA

I assure you, your problem is one
we share mutually. The priests are
hard at work at assessing the
drought.

INT. MOCTEZUMA'S PALACE - CUAUHTEMOC'S ROOM - DAY

A red stained bedroom with a fireplace. Cuauhtemoc, in his loincloth, lies on his reed mat. He clutches a wooden toy jaguar on wheels to his chest, his eyes shut. Drool spills from his mouth as he SNORES.

INT. CUAUHTEMOC'S MIND

Cuauhtemoc sprints in a stark white void. Chunks of GOLD, JADE, FEATHERS, and SHELLS fall gracefully around him. He grabs them, holding them close and rubbing his face with them. But something KNOCKS him from his feet.

INT. MOCTEZUMA'S PALACE - CUAUHTEMOC'S ROOM - DAY

Zyanya STRIKES Cuauhtemoc's face as he sleeps.

ZYANYA

Get up, you halfwit.

Cuauhtemoc opens his eyes. He backs up, eyebrows raised. Zyanya throws a black robe at his face.

CUAUHTEMOC

Hey, what's going on? It's only morning.

ZYANYA

It's the middle of the day-- You were supposed to join us hours ago. Instead I find you sleeping.

CUAUHTEMOC

I was meditating.

ZYANYA

I wasn't aware that drool and toys were such vital parts of our meditation practices. Get dressed.

CUAUHTEMOC

For what?

ZYANYA

We went over this. You must salvage the dry crops, bring rain to them.

CUAUHTEMOC

Can't one of the other's do it? I'm so tired from yesterday.

ZYANYA

You'll do it. We'll wait for you in the plaza. Do not take your time.

Zyanya leaves. Cuauhtemoc, half-asleep, slips into his robe and sandals. A gaudy assortment of jewelry follows: necklaces, bracelets, and his favorite golden earrings.

CUAUHTEMOC

Oh yeah. That's what I'm talking about. Style.

He whirls as he checks himself out in his obsidian mirror.

EXT. MOCTEZUMA'S PALACE - PRIESTS' PLAZA - DAY

Zyanya and the twins wait for Cuauhtemoc in a central, sky-lit plaza. SERVANTS tend to a miniature botanical garden. Cuauhtemoc approaches a servant with a strut.

CUAUHTEMOC

Hey, do you have what we talked about? I know only King Moctezuma can drink hot chocolate today, but man, I'm craving some.

The servant reaches for a ceramic drinking vessel shaped like flapping turkey, the head serving as the spout. Cuauhtemoc tries to take it, but Zyanya drags him away.

ZYANYA

You've held us up long enough.

As she drags him out, he folds his arms and frowns.

EXT. TENOCHTITLAN CANOE - DAY

Arms still folded, Cuauhtemoc sits in the back of a canoe. PADDLERS stand on the edges, thrusting the canoe forward. Behind them, Tenochtitlan's Temple District rises from the center of Lake Texcoco. Towering mountains encircle the lake.

Vibrant blue canals divide the entire city like streets, and canoes full of citizens fill them. Chinampas, floating man-made gardens, spring up around the canals. The poorer barrios sit furthest from the Temple District near the lake.

Zyanya, Nopaltzin, and Xoco sit at the front of the canoe.

CUAUHTEMOC

I could've had it to-go.

ZYANYA

Get over it already.

(to Nopaltzin and Xoco)

As I was saying, King Moctezuma is more than just a king. He has abilities beyond that of mortals.

NOPALTZIN

By abilities you mean powers, right? As in he can interact with the Gods?

XOCO

Touch them, even?

ZYANYA

Precisely. He's the mouthpiece of the Gods--

CUAUHTEMOC

Big whoop. I have special abilities too. I can eat a thousand tamales by myself. He can't even do that.

He sniggers. Zyanya looks at him for a moment, unamused.

ZYANYA

King Moctezuma has abilities that actually matter.

Cuauhtemoc scrunches up his face and mocks Zyanya.

EXT. CHINAMPA - DAY

They get off of the canoe and stand on the floating gardens. A paddler extends his palm to Cuauhtemoc for payment, but he ignores him. The paddlers frown and paddle away. Cuauhtemoc drags his sandal across the dirt, crumbling the dry earth.

CUAUHTEMOC

Haha. Look you guys.

ZYANYA

Stop that, you fool. That's exactly what you're here to fix.

CUAUHTEMOC

What? You brought me here to water some plants? That's what servants are for.

ZYANYA

You are a servant of the Gods. Perform a rain dance. Restore life to these dry crops. Meanwhile, we will go and tend to matters within the city.

Zyanya and the twins flag down another canoe and hop onto it.

Cuauhtemoc walks to the center of the Chinampa and raises his arms to the sky, the sun partially blinds his eyes as he squints. He shakes his arms with absolutely no rhythm and somewhat shimmies in place with a cabbage patch motion.

Several citizens pass by on other canoes and watch Cuauhtemoc dance. They LAUGH and HECKLE him in unison.

CITIZENS

BOO. You suck. We'll never have rain.

CUAUHTEMOC
Suck it, rubber-necks.

He continues to gyrate his body poorly and awkwardly.

EXT. TENOCHTITLAN CANOE - DAY

A few Chinampas away, Zyanya gets up and stands to watch Cuauhtemoc.

ZYANYA
Stop the canoe.

XOCO
What's going on?

They come to a halt. Zyanya points to Cuauhtemoc who stops dancing.

ZYANYA
He thinks we aren't watching--
Okay, let's go.

Nopaltzin and Xoco look at one another fearfully as they continue to travel through the canals.

EXT. CHINAMPA - DAY

Cuauhtemoc smiles slyly as he gets a paddler's attention. The canoe stops and the paddler holds his palm up to him.

CUAUHTEMOC
What? You haven't even provided me
a service yet.

PADDLER 1
You're notorious for not paying us.
Cough up some money or no ride.

Cuauhtemoc grunts and digs into his robe pocket. He draws a cacao bean and hands it to the paddler. The paddler bites into it. It cracks and he spits it out.

PADDLER 1 (CONT'D)
Ew, this is mud. It's a fake, I
could have you arrested.

CUAUHTEMOC
Ugh, chill. No need to get
dramatic. Here.

He hands him a real cacao bean and leaps into the canoe.