

The Sacrifice

Based on the Aztec “Legend of Five Suns”

Sterling slouched in his hard desk in the second-floor room at Jackson High School. Mrs. Matham put up page after page of notes about the Aztecs on the overhead projector. She usually had students working on posters, but today the hideous student creations that scarred the walls were slightly camouflaged by the dark, windowless room.

“Mrs. Matham,” Sterling said, raising his hand, “What made them believe killing each other was a good thing? Wouldn’t they realize they were dooming themselves by killing everyone off?”

She looked up from the dusty light of the projector, startled. Her eyebrows were raised. Sterling had never been anything but the stereotypical jock, always sleeping through class. She’d given up on his grasping the importance of history.

She adjusted her glasses importantly. “Well, they believed the sun needed blood for fuel or it would die, and if they didn’t provide it, the gods would punish them.”

“Kinda like paying taxes so the government won’t kick us out of the country,” a student said. Some people laughed. Mrs. Matham continued her lesson until the bell rang, but Sterling couldn’t wrap his mind around the idea. Human sacrifice. It was the most twisted thing he’d ever heard--no, that anyone had ever heard. And the Aztecs, one of the “great” Native American peoples, thought it was normal? *Right*. He couldn’t make it fit together logically. Never had a school subject gotten on his nerves, especially history, but he just had to understand it. Even if it meant paying attention. Well, that, and he’d get kicked off the basketball team if he didn’t bring his grade up.

Usually the first one out of the boring atmosphere, Sterling found himself alone with Morris Harvey, captain of all things weird. Morris's black, greasy curls bounced on his brown cheeks while he loaded textbooks and pens into a bulging bag on the floor. It was covered in symbols exhibiting his Native American pride. *Hm*, Sterling thought, *Aztecs are technically Native American*. That was an idea, except Sterling never talked to Morris. He was a nut. Everyone knew it. He had all these crazy ideas about rituals so outrageous that just listening to the kid would "curdle your blood," or at least the Cheer Captain said so. Sterling had never thought talking to Morris was worth the risk. Until now.

He watched Morris neatly zip his bag shut then glance around before heading for the door. On impulse, Sterling yelled, "Hey, Morris, wait up!"

Morris jerked to a halt, waiting awkwardly for Sterling. His hands were constantly moving against his body, like he'd misplaced something and it had somehow gotten stuck to his clothes. Sterling couldn't tell who was more shocked at the yell, but he wanted to talk to someone who could explain Aztec beliefs to him. *After all, weirdos know weirdos*.

"Hey," he said, waiting for a response. Morris's eyes jumped from Sterling's shoes to his face, then to either side. "Hey do you understand this whole Aztec sacrifice thing?"

Morris nodded spastically before continuing his pattern. Shoes to face, left to right.

"Oh man, do you think you could help me with it?"

Morris nodded again and immediately walked into the hallway. Sterling paused, bewildered. *I guess now's a good time*. He flew out the door after Morris, practically running him over; he'd stopped right outside. One quick glance at Sterling towering over him with hulk-like shoulders, and he was off again; a left through the West corridor, down the far staircase, out the

broken side door, then across Layton Avenue. Morris kept walking. He took long, crisp strides. *Like a Jewish Pharisee would on the Sabbath*, Sterling thought. He kept looking back, hoping the basketball coach wasn't watching him skip practice.

The sun was bright as Morris led him down Main Street. An electronics store had all its display televisions set to a news report on the recent run of minor earthquakes. None of it was new information; the school faculty had been pounding earthquake safety protocol into them over the last month. It didn't worry Sterling like it did the adults. *"Even now seismologists are predicting these relatively harmless earthquakes to come more frequently and with more force."* *"So I guess the Mayans' 2012 prediction is on its way to fulfillment, huh, Randy?"* The newscasters laughed at the joke before Sterling passed the streaked window and lost their voices to the sounds of small town traffic.

After tramping around a few side streets, Sterling found himself in a neighborhood bordering the old fairgrounds. Morris ducked under a young maple tree and behind a tall rundown fence, only glancing back to make sure Sterling was still following him. Scraping around the rough wooden slats, Sterling found a spread of weeds and dirt completely secluded from the world. There was some sort of platform in the middle. It looked like a palette crudely covered in hieroglyphs and grotesque depictions of pagan gods.

Morris immediately pulled a blow torch and tinder out of a little nook dug under the fence. Looking around hesitantly, Sterling tried to be conversational. "So, uh, what is this place?"

"My lair."

Morris revered the phrase like an Egyptian might the pyramids. His wispy voice made

Sterling jump. *Creepy*. Sterling leaned against the fence and watched Morris place the fire-lighting material tenderly on the other side of the palette.

“So what did Mrs. Matham mean about blood killing the sun?”

“It doesn’t kill the sun,” Morris burst impatiently, “it keeps it alive!”

Sterling’s muscles clenched up as Morris spoke again, but he hid his discomfort. He decided he never wanted Morris to speak to him again. Or at least not after today. From the nook under the fence, Morris drew a seven-inch bowie knife, blade curved and shining in the daylight. It was followed by a fist-sized rock. In his twitchy manner, he slowly grated the knife’s edge along the stone, creating a jabbing sound that rang loud around them. Then again, and again. Sterling forced himself not to shudder.

Morris began, “There were five cycles of suns. In each, a god had to sacrifice himself so the world could live. His blood gave life to the sun, and the sun gave life to the people with its light--do you mind helping me since you’re here?”

Startled by the direct question, Sterling only nodded.

“I’m making this platform for a community production. Our screenplay writer wants more authentic drawings on it. So here’s a permanent marker . . .”

Sterling stood, taking it, and Morris handed him a page of sketches.

“Copy these. Get the detail.”

Morris grabbed his newly sharpened knife and began carving on the palette’s side. Sterling glanced at his guide, then got to work, his face inches from the wood.

“Where was I?” Morris asked. “Oh yeah, sun giving life. So of the five suns, only four have died. Each sun eventually ran out of blood, causing some kind of catastrophe to kill

everyone, and it was followed by the next sun.”

“So what about the fifth sun? It didn’t die?” Sterling thought out loud. “Because if it isn’t dead, that means it’s still here--our sun would be the fifth one!” He smiled at his deduction.

“Exactly!” Morris’s pleased voice was even more hair-raising than before. It rasped like a tendril of fog.

“Okay, so why were they sacrificing humans if the gods were giving their own blood?”

Morris’s knife gouged deeply into a two-by-four. “The Aztecs lived during the fifth sun, like us, but it’s different from the first four. The god who sacrificed himself didn’t do it wholeheartedly. It made him weak. His blood was weak, too weak to sustain the sun--”

“--So the Aztecs needed blood to keep the sun going!” Sterling grinned ingeniously. “I get it now! They thought it was something good for everyone, that if they didn’t sacrifice people, the world would be destroyed again. But hey, how does that end the world?”

“Earthquakes,” Morris answered solemnly, “Not all the suns caused earthquakes, but our sun will die, and earthquakes will kill us all.”

Sterling thought of the earthquakes they’d been having. Last week, one had been strong enough to send dishes crashing to the floor in their small kitchen. “We’ve had a lot of earthquakes. Maybe the Aztecs would think--”

“Not think. Know,” Morris interrupted. “We know.”

“Hm?” Sterling said absentmindedly.

“The sun is dying, but I will prevent it from destroying the world.”

Sterling glanced up just in time to see Morris swinging his bulging backpack toward him. It thudded solidly on his head, and he let out an *oof!* Lying on the palette, Sterling’s last bit of

logic clicked. *It's an altar! O God, save me!* Morris rose over Sterling's dazed figure, gripping the gleaming blade with both hands, unworried about his prey. His face transformed into a demon's.

No, not a demon, thought Sterling, an Aztec.