

The Path to the Sun

by
Jaine Fenn

Of course it was a hoax. It had to be.

No doubt both the original telegram and the brightly coloured *thing* floating in the cove below were some rustic eccentric's idea of a joke. Dawson was sure he had only been sent on this wild goose chase as revenge for the affair with Alice.

He steadied his bowler hat on his head and leaned forward to speak to the young man who had picked him up from the station. Perhaps the boy could lead him down the cliff to get a closer look at the wretched contraption.

“Sir?”

Dawson turned to meet the intense gaze of a heavily built man with light brown skin, high cheekbones and jet-black hair. He forced his face into a welcoming smile and jumped from the cart. Mud splattered up his trouser leg.

“Mr...Ar..Ahuitzotl, I presume?” Dawson resisted the urge to extend a hand in case the chap took the gesture as some sort of insult. He looked like a U.A.S citizen all right, just as the telegram had claimed. Maybe there was something to this after all. “I am James Dawson, administrative assistant to Commodore Gordon Cameron, head of the Transportation Research Division in His Majesty's Ministry of War.”

“You are Cameron's secretary?” The visitor sounded faintly incredulous, but that might just have been his accent. “The Commodore did not come himself, then.”

“Commodore Cameron is an extremely busy man. Your telegram was somewhat...vague, and he had no way of checking your credentials without risking diplomatic complications. If you had come directly to London, he may well have met you in person.” And I would not have to stand on this windy cliff-top being insulted by you.

“If I had come to London I would already be dead, Mr Dawson.” The

Aztecan spoke calmly, as though his life were not overly important to him, and Dawson found himself looking along the rugged coastline to avoid the visitor's eyes. "However, in the same situation, I also would be cautious. But you are the first representative of the British Government I have encountered since my arrival, so it is to you that I must state my plea."

He paused, then held his hands out in front of him, palms up. He tilted his head towards the sky, closed his eyes, and started to speak, "I am Ahuizotl, child of Acamapichtli of the city of Tetzoco. My Caste is Pochteca, my Clan is Itzconatzin. I have knowledge of the ways of those who were once my enemies, and I have an artifact of those who were once my people. I ask you, James Dawson of London, as a representative of your King, Edward, to grant me sanctuary in this land from now until I die. I offer my fealty and my knowledge, and all material goods which I have brought with me. I renounce citizenship of the Empire of the Sun, which you call the United Aztecan States, in favour of any claims you wish to make on me. On your word, I am reborn."

In the ensuing silence Dawson was acutely aware of water seeping into his shoe, of the heat of the sun, and of how ill-equipped he was to deal with this situation. Damn Cameron for taking Dawson's interest in his niece as a personal insult! But he was stuck with this mission, so he had better try and placate the foreigner. "Er, yes. Well, this is rather outside my jurisdiction, I'm afraid. You really need to speak to someone from the Foreign Office." The Aztecan seemed not to have heard him. He tried speaking up a bit, "Terribly sorry I can't help you, old chap, but there it is."

The Aztecan opened his eyes and shrugged. "I thought you would say something like that." His tone was casual. "No matter. You have heard my request, even if you cannot grant it." He looked past Dawson at the boy on the cart, "Thomas, please secure the cart and accompany us down to the cove. Shall we go, Mr Dawson?"

"Go where, precisely?"

"To see if I have something worth trading for British citizenship." The Aztecan smiled, and Dawson noticed laughter lines around the man's eyes. He had assumed Ahuizotl was younger than him, but it seemed he might be slightly older. "Please take care: the path is a little slippery in places."

Dawson followed the Aztecan down the cliff, noting with mild distaste that though the foreigner had adopted European clothes, his hair hung over his collar. “I must say, er, Ahuizotl, I really am quite impressed by your grasp of English. I thought your people rarely learnt other languages.” Actually, Whitehall gossip claimed that the U.A.S. ambassador, Nethual...whatsisname, understood English perfectly well, but still used a translator when he spoke to his hosts. Then again, he also turned up at official functions wearing patterned blankets, animal skins and feathers, regardless of the weather or the potential offence to any ladies present.

“Mr Dawson, I speak English well because I am Pochteca.” Ahuizotl slowed at a switchback in the path. “I am, or rather was, a merchant. You work for the War Ministry so you understand what that means, I assume.”

“Ah.” Dawson stopped, grabbing a stunted tree for support. “Of course. I see. A...merchant.” A spy, rather. It was people like this, as much as their fearsome soldiers, which had allowed the U.A.S. to conquer half a continent.

Ahuizotl looked up at Dawson across the gorse, “I learnt English, and Spanish, in Sierra, where I lived under a false identity between the ages of twenty-four and twenty-nine. I have travelled extensively in Louisiana, New England and Canada. And it is as you think. In my old life I performed acts of espionage and terrorism. But that is *the past*. You must understand that. I have renounced everything: my home, my culture, my nation. I am not who I was.” He made a small cutting gesture with his hand and strode off down the path.

Dawson glanced back up the cliff, where sparse white clouds raced over the grassy lip, then released his grip on the tree and scrambled after the Aztecan.

Ahuizotl waited at the base of the path, watching the waves flop and suck across the shingle. He spoke without turning. “I am sorry, Mr Dawson. If I am to live amongst the English I must do a better job of adopting English ways. I am a little too forward in my speech. Please forgive me.”

“Of course.” Dawson wondered whether this apparent frankness marked the man as a deceiver of consummate skill, or whether he really was the startlingly honest outsider he appeared to be.

Ahuitzotl swept a hand out to indicate the strange device out in the cove. “Mr Dawson, may I present to you, and your government, the *Cloud Serpent*, the only powered flying craft in the world at this time.” It had a cylindrical body bisected by a flat plank, which presumably formed the wings; some sort of a box on legs squatted over the point where the wings crossed the body. “Now, if you will follow me, I will prove my claim.”

“I’m not entirely sure I understand your intentions here,” said Dawson, worried that he did.

“I would like you to fly with me to London.”

“Ah, wait a minute, sir. I really don’t think I am the man for this. I am no engineer: I would have no way of assessing how well the machine functions.”

“Assessing its function is simple enough. Either it flies, or it does not. The fact that I am here implies that it does.”

“Yes, of course, but I really...” Dawson found himself taking a step backwards. “Surely you could just take it out for a, well, a fly, while I wait here and watch.”

“I understand your unease, but even if you are convinced, you have already told me that you do not have the authority to grant me asylum without consulting your superiors. That will take time. I do not have time.”

“So you keep saying. What exactly is the problem?”

“If I turn up in London unannounced and unaccompanied the British authorities will assume this is a trick, as you yourself probably do, and turn me over to the U.A.S. embassy, who will torture and execute me for having betrayed the Empire. If I stay here, the Pochteca will soon find me. I know how effective Aztec foreign agents are. I was one. But if you come with me to London you can intercede for me, if you will.”

“And if I chose not to?”

“Then I will ask Thomas to take you back to Penzance and I will fly to London alone, and face the consequences. But, Mr Dawson, surely this,” he gestured at the craft riding the swell of the bay, “is one of the greatest adventures of the age. The chance to fly is not something many are offered. Are you not at least curious?”

“Er, well, of course . . .” Dawson ran his finger under his collar. Actually,

he was terrified. But he could imagine Cameron's face if he turned tail and ran now. "All right dammit, I'll fly in your infernal machine."

"Good. Very good." Ahuizotl turned and crunched off over the shingle to where Thomas stood by a rowing boat. Dawson glanced up at the sea-birds wheeling effortlessly overhead. He had always taken birds for granted.

Dawson addressed the Aztecan's retreating back. "Just make sure your chap sends my overnight bag back to London. I've left it in his cart."

By the time he reached the boat the boy had taken his place on the rower's bench and the Aztecan was seated in the prow. "I'm sorry to presume, Mr Dawson, but would you be so kind as to push the boat off?"

After a brief hesitation, Dawson did as Ahuizotl asked, even though it left him soaked to the knees. He could always make an expenses claim for a new pair of shoes when he returned to London.

Thomas started rowing with long confident strokes, his cheap jacket pulling taut across his shoulders as he tugged on the oars. On his far side, Ahuizotl shifted slightly to keep eye contact with Dawson. "I imagine you have a few questions, Mr Dawson. Please, ask what you will."

Dawson thought of all the questions he could ask. There was little to be gained from entering any sort of verbal duel with the Aztecan, but neither did he want to miss the chance for information gathering. He needed something harmless to get the man talking. He looked past the foreigner at the brightly painted machine, then said, "Well, I can't help wondering...why is your craft green? It's a little garish, don't you think?"

"Because green is the colour of beings who fly. What other colour would we paint a flying machine?" At that moment they rowed out of the shadow of the cliff, and Dawson, squinting at the Aztecan, thought he saw a quick smile.

So much for useful information. "I must say that is precisely the sort of answer I would expect from one of your people! One might almost be think you were mocking me, sir."

"The Azteca are no longer my people. And I am not mocking you. Please allow me to explain. Green is the colour which signifies flight, escape. For the Children of the Sun, colour, place, and time are not matters of chance

or whim: they are ciphers, symbols of what we cannot hope to otherwise comprehend. An expression of cosmic order, if you like. I was smiling because I know how strange such ideas must seem to you. If I was mocking anyone, it was myself for being fool enough to think I could cross the gap between two cultures as easily as crossing an ocean. Yet here I am.” He spread his arms, as though encompassing the sky and the cliffs, then favoured Dawson with a direct stare. “Do you know who Hernan Cortes was, Mr Dawson?”

“Cortes? Er, no, never heard of him.” The flying machine's growing presence beyond the Aztecan's shoulder was becoming distracting.

“No, I would not expect you to. He was a Spanish criminal who fled to the mainland from the Carib islands to avoid a death sentence. He was the first European to see Tenochitlan, the heart of the Empire. He came with men and horses and guns, and he tried to abuse an ancient prophecy to gain power. Emperor Cuitlahuac saw him for what he was: a lesson from the gods that the outside world would destroy us if it could. I suspect his late brother, Moctezuma, would not have been so wise. It would be heresy for me to say this in the Empire, but if the Azteca not acquired gunpowder and horses from Cortes the Empire would not have lasted four of your decades, let alone four centuries. Technology is power.”

“And what happened to this Cortes chap?” Dawson found his gaze drawn to the *Cloud Serpent*. It looked somewhat flimsy. Wires were strung between every surface, and the only substantial part was the box in the centre, a complicated affair of greasy metal with some sort of wooden bar fixed across the back of it.

“What do *you* think happened to him?”

Dawson tore his gaze away from the flying machine. “I would prefer not to speculate.”

“All power, Mr Dawson, is in the heart. So Cuitlahuac ate his heart. We have a national holiday to celebrate the event.”

“Charming.” Dawson glanced at Thomas. His neutral expression was a credit to his class.

They were pulling alongside one of the wings; a pontoon on the wingtip dipped down to the water to keep the craft steady and stable. Ahuitzotl

reached out and ran his fingertips absently along the edge of the wing.
“Cortes was a European, yet most Europeans have not heard of him. To the Azteca, he is, well, not a hero, but a celebrity. What I am saying is the differences between the two cultures are merely a matter of perspective. What is that quote? ‘History is written by the victors’. We see the world as we are told to see it, because that is the path of least resistance. For the Azteca this occurs to a degree you would find hard to comprehend.” The boat came round to nestle, prow first, in the angle between the wings and the body of the craft.
“It amazes me now that it is quite possible to go almost one’s entire life without questioning one’s beliefs. I would wish to see you so amazed.”

Thomas had shipped the oars and the boat bobbed gently, not quite in time with the rhythm of the *Cloud Serpent*. Ahuizotl half stood and grasped one of the legs that supported the box in the centre. “I will get off first and sit down, then you can follow.”

“Get off onto what, precisely?” The body appeared to be an unbroken cylinder, save for three small fins at one end.

“Let me show you.” Ahuizotl turned and started to climb onto - no into - the body of the thing, directly below the metallic box. Apparently one sat inside.

Dawson gently poked the material covering the body. It felt disturbingly springy. “Er, Ahuizotl, what exactly is this thing made of?”

“The engine, here,” he nodded to indicate the box above his head, “is a light alloy. The screen at the front is reinforced glass, and the base and frame are wood. The covering, most of what you actually see, is waxed fabric. The trick is getting the right ratio of power to weight.” The Aztecan lowered himself into the body of the craft, setting the boat rocking as his weight was removed.

Dawson rather wished he hadn’t asked. But there was no going back now. He raised himself from the seat, careful not to tip the balance of the boat. Thomas moved aside to let him step over the rower’s bench, and said cheerfully, “I’ll see your bag gets sent back up to London Mr Dawson sir, don’t you worry.”

Dawson muttered his thanks and eased himself into the craft. It was not that difficult: the *Cloud Serpent* sat so low in the water that its body rode

beneath the rowing boat's prow. Once Dawson was inside Thomas started to move the boat away. As Dawson watched his last safe route to land disappear, the boy smiled and shouted back, "Good luck, sirs." Good Grief, was that envy in his eyes?

Ahuitzotl crouched in front of him, "Please excuse the rather sparse accommodations. Proper seats were a luxury that had to be left out."

"Actually I'm rather surprised you built it with room for a passenger at all, given what you just said about weight."

"The space was originally intended for spare fuel and luggage. However the fact that it will accommodate two makes it more valuable from a military point of view. The space could be used to house an observer, or a gunner. And I did not build the *Cloud Serpent*. My son did." Ahuitzotl knelt up and started fiddling with the engine. Dawson found himself staring at the man's midriff. "I am afraid I am going to have to presume upon you again, Mr Dawson. I will prime the engine, but then we need to start the propeller. Given how cramped things are with two of us in here, it might be easier if you reach up and do it."

The propeller? Of course! That was what the wooden thing was. Dawson turned, banging his knee on one of the internal supports, then reached up for the wooden bar across the back of the engine. He wished Alice could see him now: she often got irritated with the restraints and taboos of her upper class world and longed to do something real, something physical. Of course she had, and so had he; and that was why he was here now, performing contortions in a floating box with this mysterious foreigner. Perhaps his life needed a little more unpredictability, just as Alice had said when they spoke for the last time.

A sweet, pungent odour brought him back to the task in hand.

"Sorry about the smell, Mr Dawson. Cane alcohol; engine fuel. Azteca technology has rather taken to the internal combustion engine. Now, when I tell you, please pull the propeller round sharply in a clockwise direction. As soon as it catches you must get your hand out of the way and sit down. That's it. Now."

Dawson tugged the propeller. After some initial resistance, it spun free.

The engine above him coughed, then died. He caught the wooden paddle again.

“It rarely starts first time. We will have to try again in a moment.”

Dawson realised that Ahuizotl's apparent impoliteness in making him push the rowing boat out had been a test. If he balked at getting wet feet there was no way he would be able to deal with this undignified and smelly procedure.

“Now, if you please, Mr Dawson.”

Dawson pulled again, harder, and this time the cough became a roar. He snatched his hand back from the whirring blade and sat down abruptly. The sweet smell became sharper, and pale smoke vented from the sides of the engine. The noise was deafening.

Ahuizotl was fitting a plank across the space between them for his backrest; he shouted to be heard over the engine, “You might find it best to sit cross-legged, Mr Dawson.” Dawson adjusted his posture accordingly. He hadn't sat like this since he was a child but he found it surprisingly comfortable.

“Once we start moving things will get a bit breezy. You may wish to remove your hat.”

Dawson realised he was still wearing his bowler. He took it off and placed it on his lap. He shouted back, “Will it be this loud all the way to London?” He was not sure how he would survive the journey if it was.

“No, it will much quieter once we take off: the engine position means that most of the noise is swept backwards.”

“I'm glad to hear it. When we get to London, where will you— we land.”

“On the Thames somewhere near Greenwich: I would have preferred to come down outside the Houses of Parliament, but there are too many bridges that far up. Are you ready, Mr Dawson?”

No, thought Dawson, but nodded anyway.

Ahuizotl faced forward again and pulled a lever beside him. The engine note changed and the vibration increased. Dawson grabbed the edge of the craft. He was pressed back against the wooden backrest, gently at first, then more firmly. As the *Cloud Serpent* gained speed Dawson's tailbone was bruised by the craft's tiny collisions with the water beneath them. Then the

vibration stopped, and there was a faint lifting sensation in his gut. The noise fell away, as though they were leaving the world of harsh sounds behind.

He was flying.

They climbed quickly. Below them Dawson glimpsed a tiny figure - Thomas - pulling the boat ashore. The high cliffs were a wall which they paralleled and passed effortlessly. He felt, at a visceral level, the lethal distance between his frail body and the cold hard sea. Strangely, the operation of this primitive instinct did not scare him. It thrilled him, as though he were dreaming, and somehow indestructible.

Then they were over the headland, amongst the birds. The wind tugged at Dawson's hair as they dipped slightly and flew into the next bay. The sea sparkled like a mat of diamonds. Some of the birds from the headland followed them out over the sea, curious to see who was invading their world, but soon gave up the chase.

As they swept over the bay Ahuizotl turned slightly, smiled, and raising his voice to be heard over the drone of the engine, said, "Do you regret your decision, Mr Dawson? You could be safe on the ground now, heading for the station."

Dawson found himself smiling back at the Aztecan. "No, I don't regret it sir. Not at all. To fly in a craft built by man, to challenge the birds: who would have thought it possible?"

Ahuizotl laughed, though the wind snatched most of the sound away. "Not your master, apparently."

Dawson looked up. Overhead, the sun was pulling itself towards noon, burning off the last of the clouds. Though Dawson knew it must be a fancy the sun seemed somehow closer. For a moment the fear was back: fly too close to the sun, and your wings will be burnt from you. When he had first heard the legend of Icarus at school he had thought the man must have been a fool. Who would want to risk themselves like that? Better to keep your feet on the ground than attempt to challenge the gods. But a man had built this machine and – dammit – it worked. And even if they did fall, he would not have missed this experience for the world.

To his left the coastline unfurled like a magic lantern show. On the

cliffs, a flock of sheep turned and ran from them in perfect unison. What would it be like to fly over people? Would they scatter like sheep?

“I wonder, could we go inland for a while? It would save fuel and time if we cut across the foot of Cornwall.” And I will be the first Englishman to fly over my native soil like a god.

Ahuitzotl hesitated for a moment, then nodded and reached forward. “Of course.” Dawson felt something shift below him, and the machine started to turn in a gentle arc. Dawson began sliding to the right, and braced himself on the sides of the craft, careful not to press the fragile surface too hard. He looked around, trying to locate the piercing hum at the edge of his hearing. The sound was coming from the wires that held the wings in place. His heart-rate quickened for a moment, but he was not really afraid. He realised that he trusted the Aztecan.

As they crossed the coastline the view beneath them jumped into focus, becoming a beguiling patchwork of brown and green and grey. Stone walled fields lapped at islands of rolling heathland and rocky outcrops. Dawson glimpsed movement and craned his neck back. Their shadow raced across the earth, their only link to the world below.

The land dropped away and they flew over a sheltered valley. On the valley floor, a score of whitewashed cottages clustered along a small river. Women sat outside the cottages, spinning yarn and gossiping: their upturned faces were pale smudges. The *Cloud Serpent* was over the settlement in moments, but on the far side a gaggle of children spilled out of the buildings, racing up the side of the valley to keep pace with the apparition in the sky. The children pointed and whooped, though their shouts were muted by distance. Dawson turned in his seat: just before he lost sight of the children he saw one boy stop and wave. He raised his arm to wave back, but the figure was gone, lost in the dip of the land.

If only Alice could see this! If only she could share this with him, then the experience would be complete. Then he would be complete. He still loved her. Now that he had tasted wonder he could, finally, acknowledge that fact. He still loved her, despite the discrepancies of age and social class. But he would never see her again. 'It would have been a boy...' she had written in her

final letter.

The wind was making his eyes stream. No, not the wind.

For a while he let tears blur the view. True, he might never get the chance to fly again and should treasure every moment of the journey; but he might never get the chance to cry like this, either.

When his eyes cleared he leaned forward and placed a hand gently on Ahuizotl's shoulder. "Thank you," he said. "You have created something wonderful."

For a moment he thought the Aztecan had not heard him. Then Ahuizotl turned slightly and said, "When Cozmatzin, my only child, was born, and his horoscope was cast, the priests said this: 'He will die young, to chance, but first he will challenge the skies, and his handiwork will change the fate of nations'. Do you believe in the power of prophecy, Mr Dawson?"

Up here it was possible to believe anything. "I don't know. Perhaps."

"A far better answer than you would have given on the ground!" They were over high moorland now. Occasional farms and abandoned mine workings dotted the heather-bound landscape. "I do, though there are many things which I once held as truth that I now reject. Prophecies made by Azteca priests do come true more than can be accounted for by mere chance. A month after he finished work on the *Cloud Serpent* Cozmatzin's name was drawn in the spring lottery. One week later he walked the path to the sun. He was twenty-six. Only children and youths die to usher in the spring. The next year his name would not have gone forward. My wife also went to the sun, willingly, ten years ago, as the Azteca always have in times of famine or crisis. I accepted her death. But Cozmatzin was not willing. He should not have had to die. He was so full of life, of potential. I can no longer serve gods who demand that we accept such losses." Ahuizotl turned back to his controls.

Dawson said nothing, because there was nothing to say. He was ashamed. In his arrogance, he had not thought to ask the most important question: why Ahuizotl had risked his life, abandoned his country and his people, and thrown himself on the mercy of his enemies.

Ahead, sunlight glinted on water. They had almost crossed the foot of Cornwall. A cart was pulled up on one side of a muddy track which ran off

towards the coast. As they approached, two men jumped from the cart. One pointed up at the flying machine. Dawson raised his hand to wave, then stopped. The other man was hurriedly pulling a tarpaulin off the back of the cart, exposing something Dawson recognized only too well from his years in the War Office.

“My God. Ahuizotl, they’ve got—“

“I see it.” The craft banked sharply to the right. Dawson had a last glimpse of the man on the back of the cart bringing the gun to bear, then the whole craft shook as bullets tore into the thin fabric. A triad of holes appeared on the wing, just beyond Dawson’s hand. The clatter of the gun was strangely distant; surely it was too far away to be causing the damage magically appearing around him.

Something snapped below him and the *Cloud Serpent* lurched violently. Dawson flailed for a handhold. Splinters pierced his fingertips, but he managed to get a grip on the internal struts.

Ahuizotl had been thrown forward: he pushed himself back into his seat and grabbed for the controls. He was calling out something in a language Dawson did not recognize. It sounded like a curse, or maybe a prayer. The craft twitched and veered for a few seconds, then came round to fly straight again. Dawson could no longer hear gunfire. He started to settle back into a more comfortable position.

The engine cut out.

The *Cloud Serpent* stalled as though snagged by a giant hand. The front end dipped sharply and Dawson’s fingers tore into fabric as he scrambled for purchase. He piled into Ahuizotl’s backrest. The view ahead, once full of sky, was now terrifyingly full of earth. The only sound was the rush of the wind and the thrumming of the wires.

Ahuizotl started pulling levers. The *Cloud Serpent* shuddered and jumped, and their descent slowed almost at once. They were no longer heading straight for the ground. But they were still losing height rapidly.

The sea seemed an impossible goal. They would never reach the water before they came down.

Dawson found himself less concerned about the probability of dying

than the certainty that the flight would end. Such a short taste of freedom. And they had not even been struck down by the gods; it had been men, with their stupid politics, who had broken their wings. He shimmied back and pressed himself as far as he could into the body of the craft, pulling his legs to his chest and wrapping his arms around them. He closed his eyes. He would prefer not to see the moment of impact.

Yet despite the lack of power, the *Cloud Serpent* flew remarkably well. Their path began to even out into a shallow glide. Perhaps they could reach the relative safety of the water before they crashed. He might even live through this.

Dawson opened his eyes and raised his head. "Ahuitzotl?"

The Aztecan did not reply; presumably he was still intent on the controls before him.

"I'm sorry. This is my fault: if I hadn't asked you to fly inland they wouldn't have seen us."

Ahuitzotl shook his head, "No apology needed." His voice sounded strained above the eerie whistling of the wind. "If the Pochteca had not stolen the gun from your government, they would not have shot us with it. Do not curse fate. Wonder at it."

The open land below gave way to sand dunes. Dawson caught his breath: their grass covered tops seemed close enough to touch.

Then they were over water.

The sea rushed up to meet them.

At the last moment Ahuitzotl pulled the front of the craft up, and they belly-flopped into the waves. As it hit there was a loud crack, and the craft slewed violently to the left. Dawson was thrown upwards: his head hit something, but for some reason the pain was in his hand. Then he was flying again, no need of a machine to help him now.

Everything crashed down. He was under water, mouth and nose full of brine. He kicked out and his foot hit something solid. He kicked again. Sand. He realised he was still clasping his legs, and forced himself to uncurl and stand up. The water came up to his chest. His left hand hurt abominably, and he lifted it out of the water to examine it. The back of his hand was a bloody

mess. He put it back in the water so he didn't have to look at it.

He looked around. To his left, perhaps thirty yards away, was a beach. Ahead, the *Cloud Serpent* rode the gentle swell. The pontoon had been torn from the shoreward wingtip and the craft was listing badly, but did not appear to be sinking.

He started to wade towards it, passing a tattered shape of black felt which might once have been a bowler hat. The only sound was the swoosh-sloosh of his own progress. Coming up from behind it was difficult to see inside the craft, and he called out Ahuizotl's name. There was no answer.

Once he was past the wing he could see the Aztecan slumped across the broken screen. He called again and Ahuizotl stirred and pulled himself upright. He shook his head, then, ignoring Dawson, reached forward.

Dawson came up to stand beside the craft. The *Cloud Serpent* had tipped towards him, and his head was level with the Aztecan's chest. Ahuizotl pulled himself upright, then turned and offered a large map case of waxed leather over the edge of the craft.

"Take this." There were dark stains on the leather.

"You're hurt, sir." Dawson could smell the sickly fuel, and something else fainter, metallic.

"Yes. That does not matter. These matter, now. The plans, for the *Cloud Serpent*. For the others not yet built: all Cozmatzin's dreams. Please, take it." Ahuizotl closed his eyes as Dawson took the map case.

"Let me get help. A doctor—"

Ahuizotl waved the suggestion away, then put his hand on the edge of the craft to steady himself. "I am not important. What is important is history: 'the fate of nations'."

"I'm sorry?"

Ahuizotl opened his eyes and looked down at Dawson. His gaze was still intense, but it seemed to be dimming, as though the light were leaking out from behind his eyes. "You have to hear this. The priests know. The Empire will fall. Europe is the new power. Your sun is rising. But first you must suffer...the worst war in history. Power over the air...will win that war. Win it quickly. Save more pointless deaths. That power is yours now. Use it well."

“I . . .of course. Now let me help you—”

“No. I have played my part.” Ahuizotl drew back his hand, leaving a red smear on the vivid green of the bodywork. “All I ask is. . .a small favour...if you please.”

“Anything within my power.”

“I had matches. They...got damp. Do you have a light? Perhaps one of those, ah, excellent petroleum lighters which work when wet?”

“Yes, yes I do,” Dawson put the map case under his left arm and fumbled in his jacket for his lighter. “Can I ask what you intend to do?”

“Damn myself to the lowest circle of hell...if the priests are right. The Pochteca must have seen us crash. If they get here and the plans are gone...they will hunt you down. Cane alcohol burns hot, fast. No traces—“

“Good god, you can’t be serious.”

“You know I am. Give me the lighter. Then go.”

Dawson handed the lighter to the Aztecan, then took a step back. “Sir. It has been an honour.”

“For me also,” Ahuizotl's voice was a whisper. “May you ever travel with the Earth below you and the Sun above, and never walk in shadow.”

Dawson turned and waded ashore. Standing dripping on the sand, he took a last look at the marvellous craft. Ahuizotl stared back across the water at him for a moment, then raised his hands. Dawson was too far away to see the flame until he dropped it. Then, for a moment, the *Cloud Serpent* shone brighter than the sun.

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