



Quetzalcoatl and the Maize

An Aztec myth retold by Yanitzia Canetti

Illustrated by Micha Archer

The Aztecs were a Mesoamerican people whose civilization arose during the twelfth century in what is now central Mexico. The powerful Aztec empire ended suddenly, at its height, with the Spanish conquest of the capital city of Tenochtitlán (teh-knowch-teet-LAHN) in a.d. 1521. Maize (mayz), or corn, was one of the main agricultural products of the Aztecs. The corn plant played a significant role in many aspects of their culture, such as art and mythology.

According to Aztec creation myths, Quetzalcoatl (ket-sahl-CO-ah-tl) was one of two gods responsible for creating the world that the Aztecs inhabited. This particular myth tells the story of how Quetzalcoatl saved the Aztec people from starvation by bringing them corn from Tonacateptl (toe-nah-cah-TEP-tl), or the Mountain of Maize.



One beautiful spring day, Quetzalcoatl, known also as the Feathered Serpent, reclined on a cloud high up in the sky. He was reminiscing about his achievements and exploits. “I, Quetzalcoatl, have brought this world into being and created the Aztec people to inhabit it. And I have given them all that they need to survive,” he reminded himself. “Thanks to me, they now have gentle winds to cool them when they are hot. They have stars in the dark sky to guide them at night, and wide lands to walk through. And they have me, the great Quetzalcoatl. Who could possibly ask for more in this perfect world?”

As Quetzalcoatl continued to lazily drift along the sky, his reverie was pierced by a tiny, plaintive call. Peering down to the earth far below, he searched for the source of the crying. He spotted a young Aztec woman who, with tears streaming down her face, stood gazing up at the sky.

“It’s strange that anyone living in such a perfect world should be sad,” Quetzalcoatl concluded. “I must find out what has brought this woman to such tears.”

He had barely finished this thought when the woman called to him by name. “O great and powerful Quetzalcoatl, you must help your people find food that will last us forever,” she cried out as she clutched a baby in her weak arms. “We have no food to eat, and we are dying from terrible hunger.”





“Something has gone horribly wrong,” groaned Quetzalcoatl. “How is it that these humans cannot feed themselves? If they cannot survive in this world, then I’ll be forced to create another world in its place. That is too great an undertaking—even for a god as powerful as the great Quetzalcoatl.”

Quetzalcoatl immediately summoned the other gods from the thirteen heavens to the cloud palace, seeking their assistance in finding a solution.

The Aztec gods arrived quickly. And, just as quickly, they began offering their advice all at once.

“The solution is simple!” roared the god of the rain and lightning, spreading his fiery glow across the gray clouds. “I can send down lightning. That will get them running for their food!”

“Your idea is utter nonsense. You would simply scare them, and they would still be hungry,” said the god of the sun. “I will bring them bright sunshine to make it easier for them to find food.”



"Your idea is just as ridiculous! There is no food for them to find," murmured the god of night, war, and death. "But, alas, I don't have any idea about what to do in this case. Perhaps you will have to create humankind again, Quetzalcoatl, don't you think?"

The god of the underworld interrupted, "No, no, no. It would be so much easier if I bring them to my kingdom under the earth. Their hearts will stop and their bodies will no longer be hungry."

"The easiest thing of all," laughed the goddess of water, "is to send a cleansing flood to wipe them all away!"

"Or I can erase them from the earth in a magnificent inferno!" offered the god of fire, not wanting to be outdone by the others.

"How awful! I can send them a rain of flowers to help them flourish," sang the goddess of flowers in her beautiful voice.

"They are humans, not bees," snickered the god of the sun.

Quetzalcoatl knew that none of these solutions was the right one. The humans needed to be self-sufficient like the animals. But how could he ensure this?



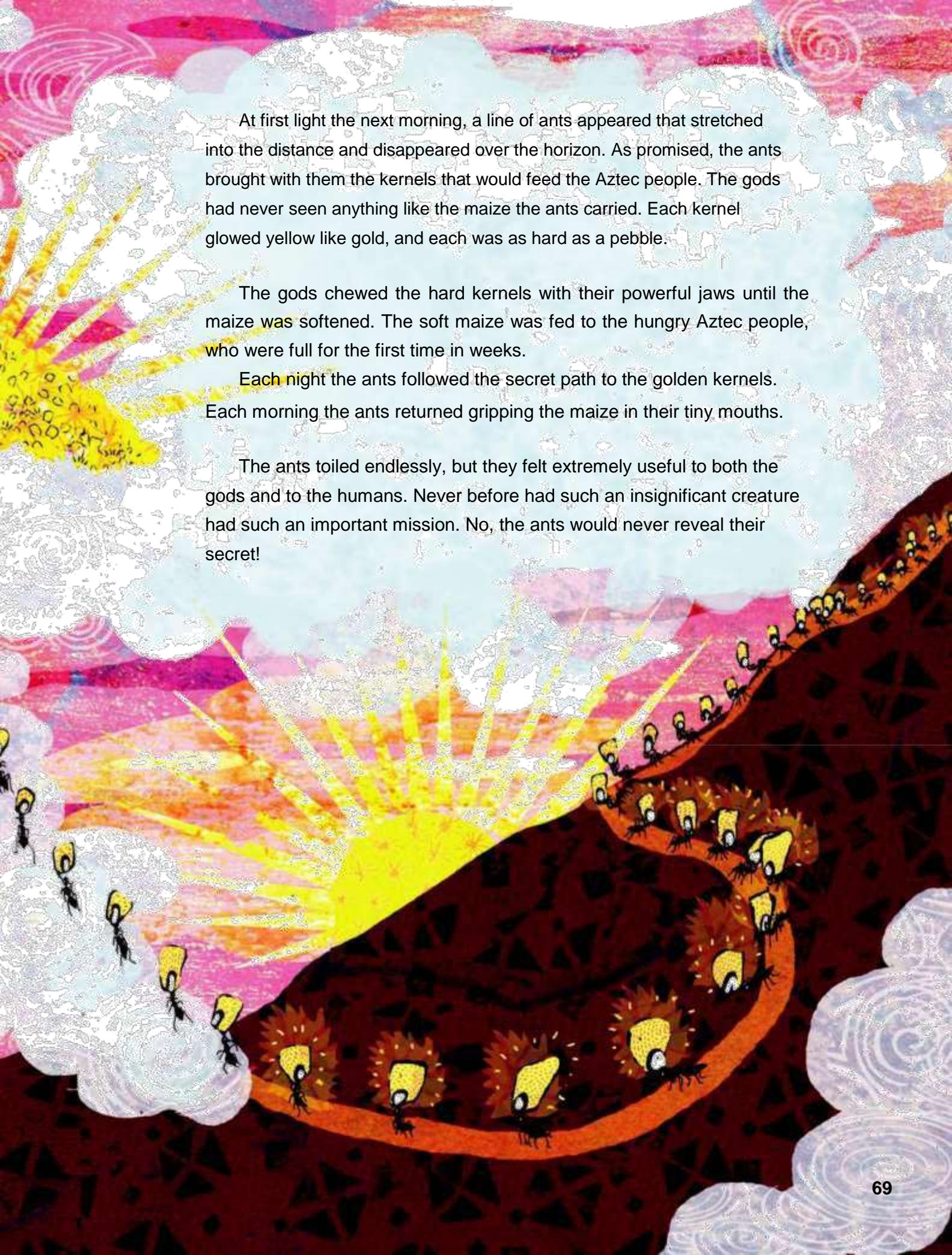
All of a sudden, a little voice attracted Quetzalcoatl's attention. It came from a tiny red ant standing next to his foot. "I am the queen of the ants," she announced proudly. "My sisters and I can bring food to you for the humans. It will surely keep them alive for a long time."

Overhearing this, the gods laughed until their bellies hurt. How could a creature as insignificant as an ant have the solution to a problem that not even the gods of creation could solve?

Quetzalcoatl, however, did not laugh. "Perhaps you can show me the path to this food, little friend," he suggested to the ant queen. "This way, you won't have to toil away for us."

The ant queen was certainly small, but she wasn't foolish. The queen knew it was better to be useful to the gods than to be unnecessary. She was determined that the ants would play a role in feeding the humans and thereby remain in the favor of the gods.

"O great Quetzalcoatl," the ant queen replied, "the kernels, which we call maize, are hidden inside the inaccessible mountain Tonacateptl. My sisters and I are the only ones small enough to reach this spot. We are only too happy to offer our assistance."

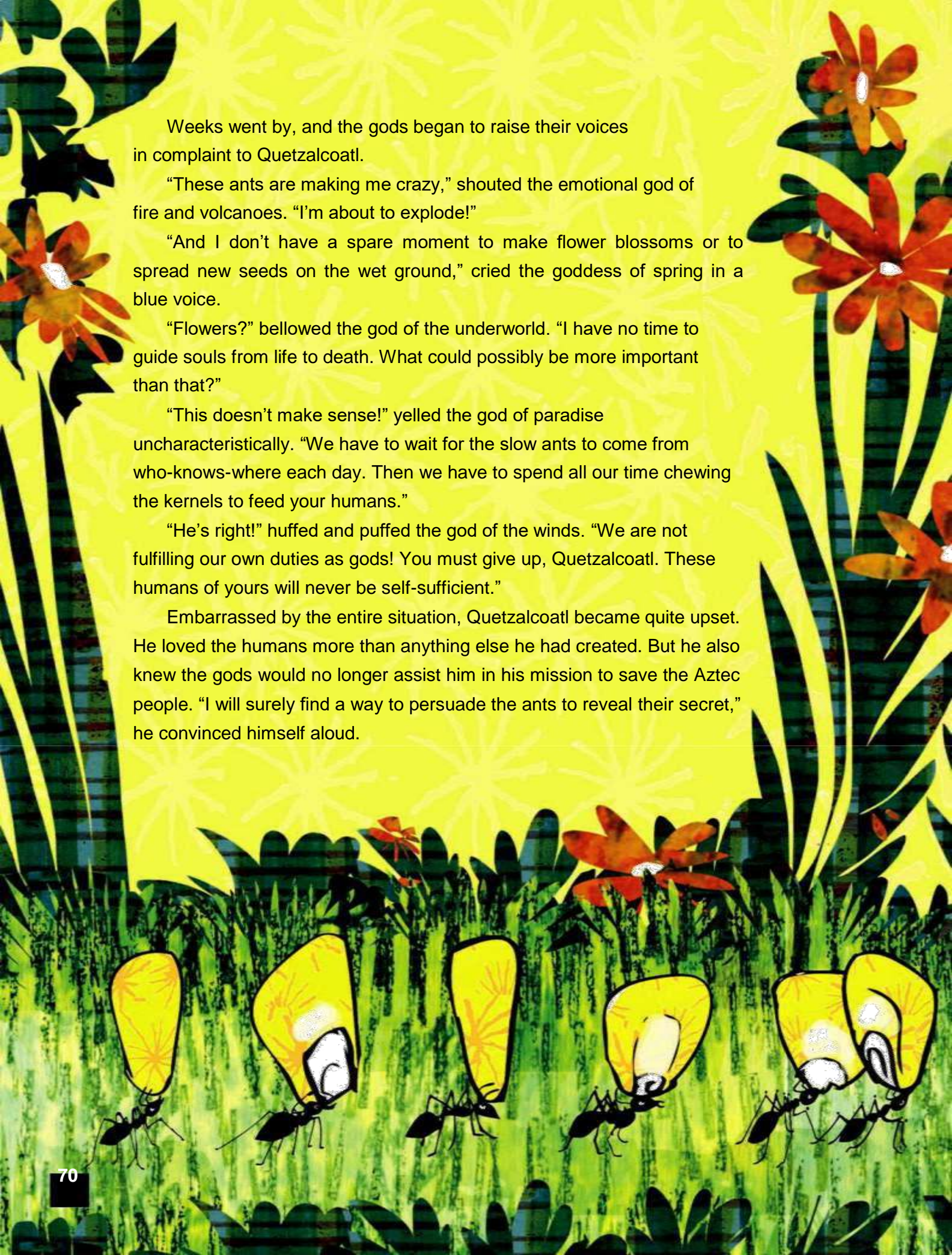


At first light the next morning, a line of ants appeared that stretched into the distance and disappeared over the horizon. As promised, the ants brought with them the kernels that would feed the Aztec people. The gods had never seen anything like the maize the ants carried. Each kernel glowed yellow like gold, and each was as hard as a pebble.

The gods chewed the hard kernels with their powerful jaws until the maize was softened. The soft maize was fed to the hungry Aztec people, who were full for the first time in weeks.

Each night the ants followed the secret path to the golden kernels. Each morning the ants returned gripping the maize in their tiny mouths.

The ants toiled endlessly, but they felt extremely useful to both the gods and to the humans. Never before had such an insignificant creature had such an important mission. No, the ants would never reveal their secret!



Weeks went by, and the gods began to raise their voices in complaint to Quetzalcoatl.

“These ants are making me crazy,” shouted the emotional god of fire and volcanoes. “I’m about to explode!”


“And I don’t have a spare moment to make flower blossoms or to spread new seeds on the wet ground,” cried the goddess of spring in a blue voice.

“Flowers?” bellowed the god of the underworld. “I have no time to guide souls from life to death. What could possibly be more important than that?”

“This doesn’t make sense!” yelled the god of paradise uncharacteristically. “We have to wait for the slow ants to come from who-knows-where each day. Then we have to spend all our time chewing the kernels to feed your humans.”

“He’s right!” huffed and puffed the god of the winds. “We are not fulfilling our own duties as gods! You must give up, Quetzalcoatl. These humans of yours will never be self-sufficient.”

Embarrassed by the entire situation, Quetzalcoatl became quite upset. He loved the humans more than anything else he had created. But he also knew the gods would no longer assist him in his mission to save the Aztec people. “I will surely find a way to persuade the ants to reveal their secret,” he convinced himself aloud.

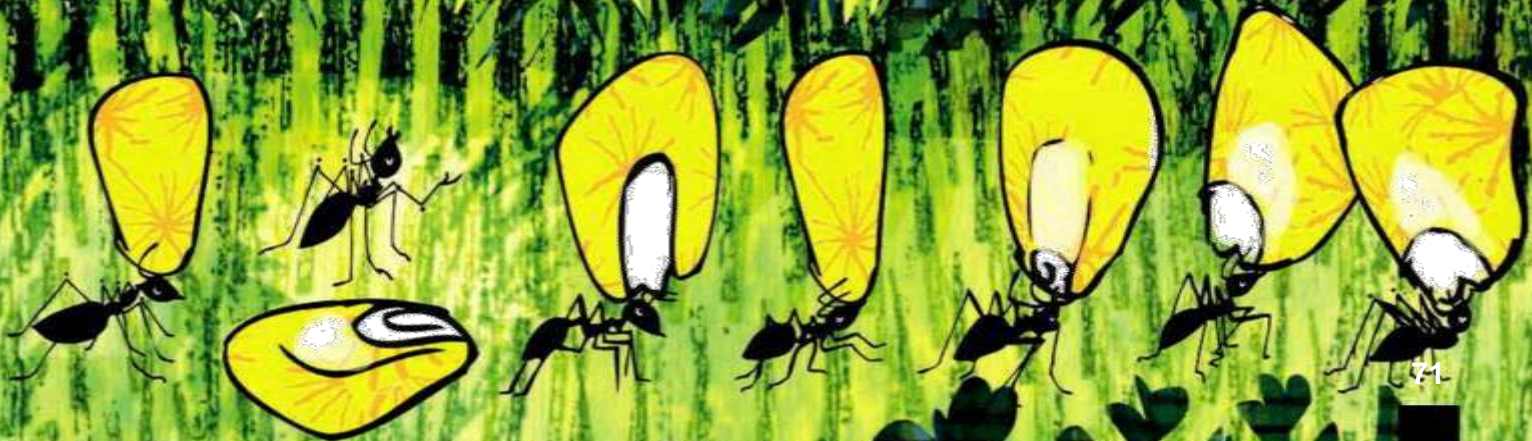



One peaceful afternoon, Quetzalcoatl patiently waited for the right moment, when the ants were in their best mood, to persuade them to reveal the secret location of the maize.

“My dear creature,” he called to an ant in the line, “you are so kind, so loyal, and so helpful.” He continued as graciously as possible, “But I so worry that this undertaking is too much for you. Wouldn’t it be easier for you and your sisters if you were to tell me about the route to the maize?”

“Nothing could make me happier than to help you, O wondrous Quetzalcoatl,” replied the ant. “But our queen forbids us to reveal the secrets of our anthill.”

This went on for quite some time. Quetzalcoatl asked each ant that came by in the line, until he sensed that the ants were making fun of him. Their secret was held as tightly as the kernels that they gripped in their tiny jaws.





Quetzalcoatl observed that all the ants were black, except for the little red queen. In the deepest dark of the night, he transformed himself into a tiny black ant. He quietly sat on a gray stone that lay on the side of the path that the ants always took. There he waited for them on their nightly journey to the secret location. Soon, the line of ants appeared. Quetzalcoatl recognized the red queen leading her sisters. Once she was close enough, he scrambled down from the rock and ran to her.

“Thank the gods I found you, my queen,” said Quetzalcoatl, pretending to be an ant lost on the trail.

The red queen’s antennae flicked the air around her. She sensed something was not quite right. Never in millions of years had an ant strayed from the line. Growing suspicious, she asked the lost ant three questions that only a true ant could answer.

“What is the greatest treasure that not even the gods can obtain by using all their divine powers or all their mighty strength?” she posed to the ant.

Quetzalcoatl smiled, knowing the answer. “All the ants know, my queen, that it is the golden maize, of course,” he said with his new, little voice.

“That is as true as me and you,” replied the queen.

But the queen's antennae shivered. She still suspected that this lost ant wasn't what he seemed to be.

"Tell me, you who have strayed, what is the most inaccessible place on Earth and in the thirteen heavens?" she demanded to know.

"Your majesty, all the ants know the answer is the mountain Tonacatepetl," said Quetzalcoatl. He bowed in exaggerated reverence with his little legs.

"That is as true as me and you," replied the queen once again.

But the red ant remained skeptical, and she quickly posed the last question.

"Who is our god of light, justice, mercy, and wind, our god of the morning star, our god of forever and eternity, since the origin of time, and even before?"

No one knew the answer better than Quetzalcoatl, for he himself was the answer. However, he worried that the queen would never ask such a simple question, even to a creature as simple as an ant. So he carefully contemplated the question and considered how an ant might answer it.



“We, the ants, hold deep respect for all the gods, those who created the stars, the Milky Way, and Earth. And the moon goddess, the god of the sun, and the wondrous god of the sunset.” Quetzalcoatl paused, catching himself. For a moment, he had forgotten he was a black ant and almost referred to the god of sunset as his brother.

“Yet,” he continued, “no one is as great as Quetzalcoatl, god of wisdom, life, and knowledge. He is the magnificent creator of humankind who had even the kindness to create the most self-sufficient creature in the universe—the ant!”

“That is as true as me and you!” replied all the ants proudly.

Her suspicion no longer aroused, the red queen allowed the black ant into the line and said, “Now we are late and must hurry! The humans are waiting for their food. The gods will be angry!”

Along the way, Quetzalcoatl came to realize that the life of an ant was not as easy as he imagined. He had to keep his antennae upright and alert, making sure to never step out of line or stray from the path to the mountain. There was never a moment to rest during their arduous trip. What a miserable life!

Though his journey was full of difficulties, Quetzalcoatl thought only of his people and the food they needed to survive on their own. When his weak legs started to fail and he began to doubt his strength, the Feathered Serpent disguised as a featherless ant finally came to the foot of a spectacular mountain.



The red ant queen walked up to a tiny crack at the base of the mountain and gestured to the line behind her. "Be on guard and enter quickly!"

As Quetzalcoatl made his way through the tiny opening, a bright light nearly blinded him. An enormous treasure of maize kernels, glowing gold like the sun, stood before him. He watched in awe as each diligent ant climbed up the pile of corn. Then it picked a single kernel from the pile and carried it away in its strong jaws. Not one ant dropped a kernel or bumped into a neighbor as they swarmed in and out of the crack.

All the while, the ant queen stood guard by the small opening, shouting to her sisters. "Come on, come on, and gather the kernels! We don't want to anger the gods with our tardiness. We are important at the moment. But the gods are still capable of crushing us in a blind rage if we are too late."

An obedient Quetzalcoatl took a kernel in his small but strong jaws, and he carefully made his way through the crack. Upon reaching the outside once again, he was filled with a terrible realization. The trip to the mountain was only part of the arduous journey, for he still had to carry the kernel of maize back to the gods. A single kernel was as light as a feather to a god. But it was an incredible burden for one small ant. For the first time, the great Feathered Serpent saw the world from the perspective of one of his own creations.



After a long and grueling trek, Quetzalcoatl finally arrived at the cloud palace of the gods. The ants slowly entered the cavernous chamber where the gods sat waiting to chew the kernels for the humans.

Right away, the observant ant queen noticed that the seat usually occupied by Quetzalcoatl was empty. But before she could inquire about it, Quetzalcoatl appeared in a bright flash of light from within the line of ants.

The ant queen shrank back on her tiny legs, horrified at the realization that the lost ant was, in fact, Quetzalcoatl.

Although she had been deceived, the queen had no time for anger. Now, as she had always feared, she and her sisters were no longer of any use to Quetzalcoatl. He had tricked her into revealing their secret. She trembled at the thought of the terrible fate that now awaited the ants.

But Quetzalcoatl had no intention of destroying the tiny ants. In his quest to save the humans, he had discovered more than just the secret of the maize. He also had gained a deep appreciation for these hardworking ants. Quetzalcoatl understood that these little creatures did not guard their secret to mock the power of the gods of creation. They only wanted to be useful.

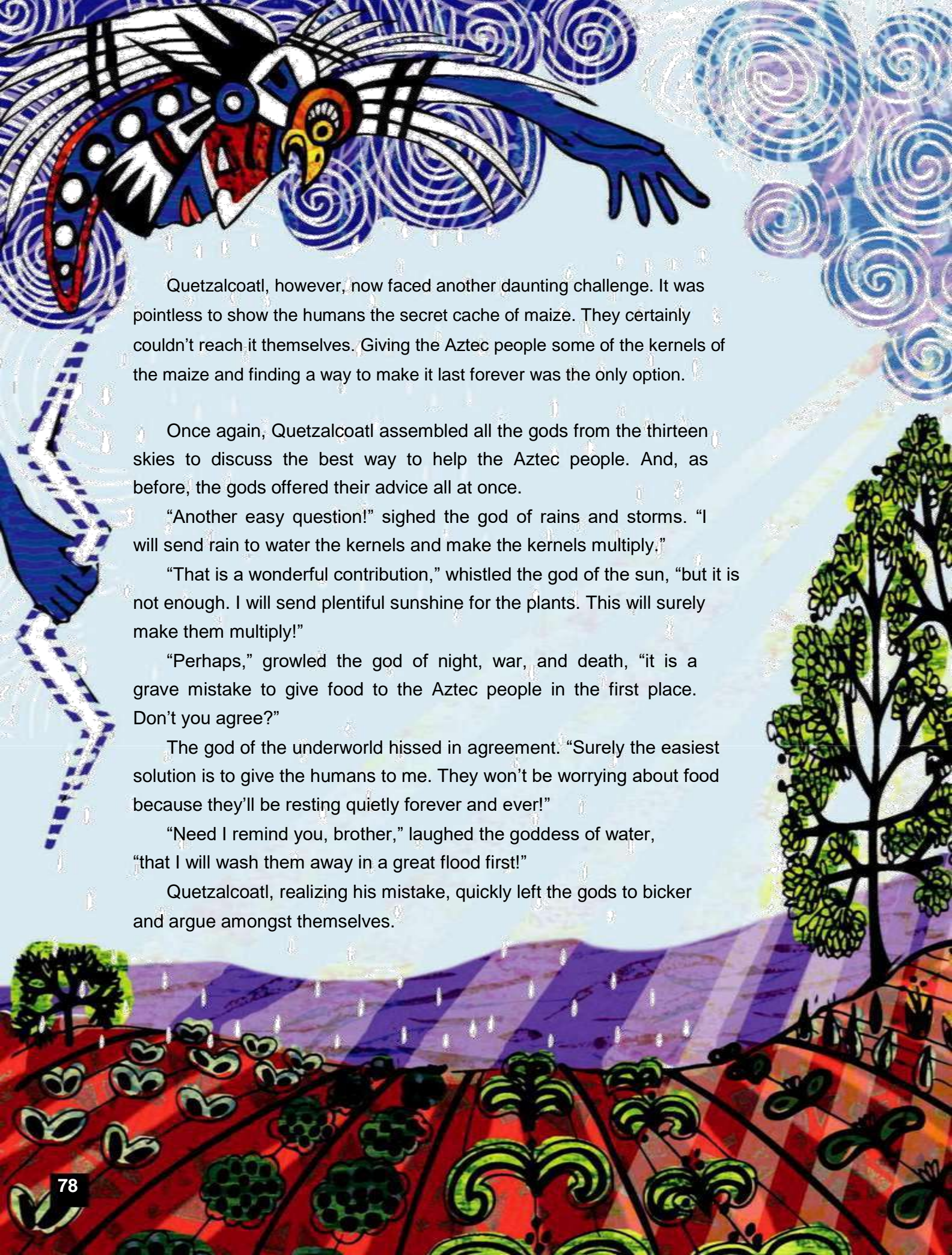
“Now you know our secret of the maize, O great Quetzalcoatl!” said the queen, her voice quivering with fear. “My sisters and I are prepared to meet our death.”

“My dearest queen,” replied a serene Quetzalcoatl, “you need not worry for the safety of your sisters because I will not harm you. You all toiled so admirably and were of such great service to the gods. I am gratefully releasing you from your labors.”

The queen sighed in relief, and began eagerly awaiting the day when she and her sisters could help the gods again.







Quetzalcoatl, however, now faced another daunting challenge. It was pointless to show the humans the secret cache of maize. They certainly couldn't reach it themselves. Giving the Aztec people some of the kernels of the maize and finding a way to make it last forever was the only option.

Once again, Quetzalcoatl assembled all the gods from the thirteen skies to discuss the best way to help the Aztec people. And, as before, the gods offered their advice all at once.

"Another easy question!" sighed the god of rains and storms. "I will send rain to water the kernels and make the kernels multiply."

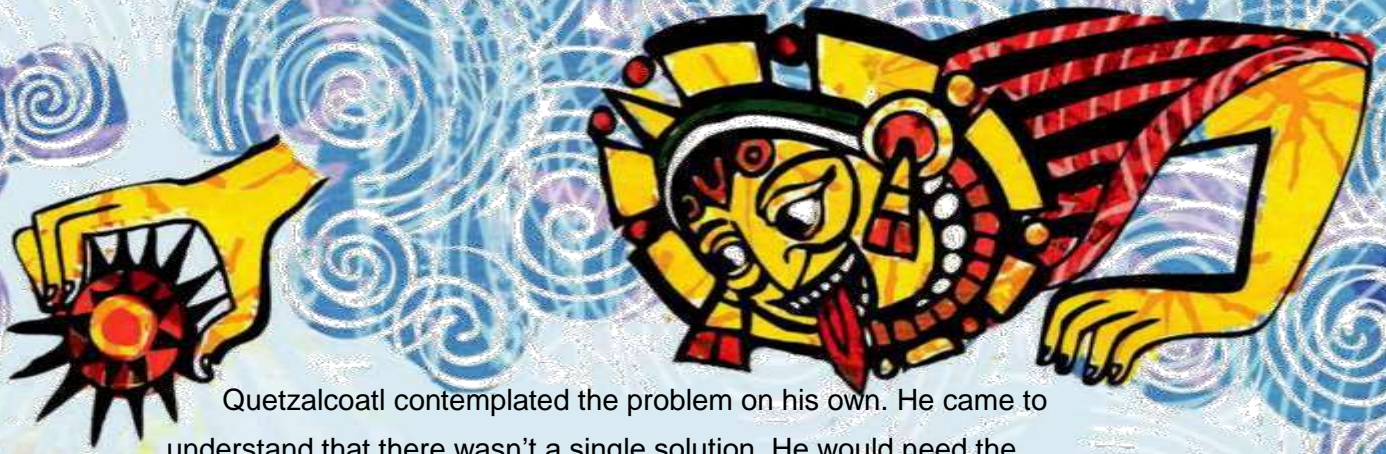
"That is a wonderful contribution," whistled the god of the sun, "but it is not enough. I will send plentiful sunshine for the plants. This will surely make them multiply!"

"Perhaps," growled the god of night, war, and death, "it is a grave mistake to give food to the Aztec people in the first place. Don't you agree?"

The god of the underworld hissed in agreement. "Surely the easiest solution is to give the humans to me. They won't be worrying about food because they'll be resting quietly forever and ever!"

"Need I remind you, brother," laughed the goddess of water, "that I will wash them away in a great flood first!"

Quetzalcoatl, realizing his mistake, quickly left the gods to bicker and argue amongst themselves.

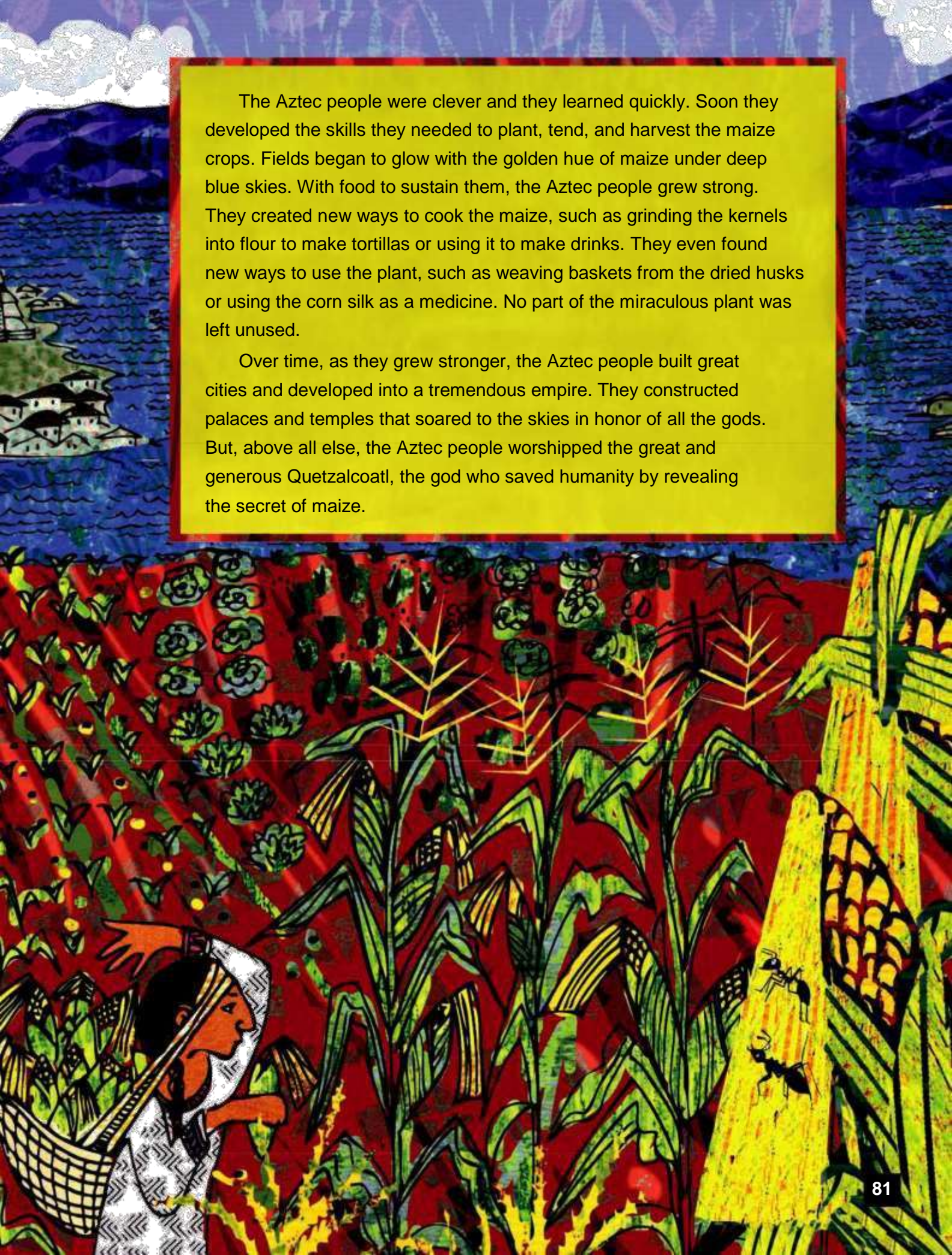


Quetzalcoatl contemplated the problem on his own. He came to understand that there wasn't a single solution. He would need the contributions of several gods. So he accepted the help of the god of rains and storms as well as the god of the winds. The rains and winds would surely help the maize to multiply. Finally, he beckoned forth the god of the warm and splendid sun. Quetzalcoatl asked him to brighten up during late spring and early summer, so the maize could grow strong and healthy.

Quetzalcoatl then took the time to teach the Aztec people how to plant the maize and care for it. "You must plant ten seeds for each person so that each of you has enough food," he instructed the humans. "Be sure to harvest enough during the fall so that you have enough to survive through the winter. And do not forget to honor all your gods—especially the god of rains and the god of the sun."







The Aztec people were clever and they learned quickly. Soon they developed the skills they needed to plant, tend, and harvest the maize crops. Fields began to glow with the golden hue of maize under deep blue skies. With food to sustain them, the Aztec people grew strong. They created new ways to cook the maize, such as grinding the kernels into flour to make tortillas or using it to make drinks. They even found new ways to use the plant, such as weaving baskets from the dried husks or using the corn silk as a medicine. No part of the miraculous plant was left unused.

Over time, as they grew stronger, the Aztec people built great cities and developed into a tremendous empire. They constructed palaces and temples that soared to the skies in honor of all the gods. But, above all else, the Aztec people worshipped the great and generous Quetzalcoatl, the god who saved humanity by revealing the secret of maize.



Secret to Mayan Blue Paint

FOUND

by Clara Moskowitz



The bottom of this sacred well contains pottery shards with traces of blue pigment.

Ancient Maya would paint unlucky people blue and throw them down a sacred well as human sacrifices.

Now scientists have solved the mystery of how to make the famous blue pigment by analyzing traces on pottery left in the bottom of the well.

The Maya associated the color blue with their rain deities. When they offered sacrifices to the god Chaak, they would paint them blue in hopes he would send rain to make corn grow. The blue paint has been found on objects for a long time, but scientists have debated how the Maya created the pigment.

Now Gary Feinman, curator of anthropology at the Field Museum in Chicago, and Dean E. Arnold, a professor of anthropology at Wheaton College, have figured out the secret ingredient in the ancient Maya concoction.





The scientists studied pottery found at the bottom of the well at an important Pre-Columbian Maya site called Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico. During the Postclassic Period, from around a.d. 900 to a.d. 1500, the Maya would sacrifice people and objects by throwing them into the well, a wide, naturally-formed sinkhole called the Sacred Cenote. Based on studies of bones found at the bottom, it seems most of the human sacrifices were male.

The researchers analyzed a bowl from the cenote that was used to burn incense. The pottery contained traces of Maya Blue. Scientists have long puzzled over how the ancient people created such a vivid, durable, fade-resistant pigment. They knew it contained two substances—extract from the leaves of the indigo plant and a clay mineral called palygorskite.

By examining these pigment samples under an electron microscope, the researchers were able to detect the signatures of its key ingredients.

“Nobody has ever really figured out how those two key ingredients were fused into a very stable pigment,” Feinman told *LiveScience*. “We think that copal, the sacred incense, may have been a third ingredient. We’re arguing that heat and perhaps copal resin were the keys to fusing the indigo extract and the clay mineral. And also we have some pretty decent evidence that this was likely taking place at the edge of the cenote.”

The copal incense may have been the binding agent that allowed the color to stay true for so long, Feinman said.

“One of the things that’s always been distinctive about Maya Blue is how durable and steadfast a color it is, which is unusual compared to many natural pigments, which fade a lot through time,” he said. “This may have been one reason why it was quite so durable.”

The scientists think making Maya Blue was part of the sacrifice ritual.

“My guess is that they probably had a large fire and a vessel over that fire where they were combining the key ingredients,” Feinman said. “And then they probably took pieces of the hot copal and put them into the vessel.”

When the Sacred Cenote was first dredged in 1904, researchers found a 14-foot thick layer of blue residue at the bottom, but didn’t understand its origin. Now, Feinman said, we know it is probably left over from the years’ worth of blue-coated sacrifices thrown into the well.

During its heyday, Chichén Itzá was a thriving city. Even after the city collapsed, ancient Maya would take pilgrimages to the site to make sacrifices. Now tourists flock there to see the cenote and a giant step pyramid temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl. In 2007, it was designated one of the New Seven Wonders of the World by the New Open World Corp.

Maya Blue on an ancient Maya mural. Scientists have solved the mystery of how the Maya concocted this pigment.