

Chapter 1 - Cipactli

Late afternoon shadows crept across the city's dusty streets as the busy sounds of traders, priests and messengers gave way to the gentler sounds of evening traffic. Children shrieked and babbled as they played between the whitewashed mud-walled houses. An argument was taking place in one of the nearby buildings, accompanied by the intermittent wailing of a child. Every time the shouting stopped, the child paused too, only to resume as the dispute flared up again. A subtle, slightly sweet smell was detectable in patches, as pockets of air wafted over the city from the lake's rotting reed beds, ever more exposed to the warming spring air.

Clawfoot and Little Maize moved cautiously through the gradually emptying streets with Little Maize's brother, Indigo, and another boy called Shield of Gold in tow. They used the doorways and dingy alleys to pause and watch the dwindling crowds. The clamour of the Cuepopan district was beginning to settle down as market stall holders made their way back to the mainland via the north and west causeways. Weary porters trudged by with enormous reed baskets on their backs. Although empty now, the baskets would have contained maize cobs, fruit, string-beans, tomatoes, chillies and tortillas on the inward journey earlier in the day. The Tlatleloco market was a much subdued affair nowadays when compared with the pre-famine bustle, but people still did business there, with those who could afford to pay the inflated prices. The prolonged drought and repeated crop failures of the last four years were taking their toll. Labourers were struggling to pay for the basic foodstuffs and those without regular work were beginning to starve. Things were bad enough in the valley around Tenochtitlan, but Clawfoot had heard that rather than starve, the people on the Totonicapán plateau had been selling themselves into slavery in such numbers that the place was deserted. He had no intention of following suit, but it would be a grim summer unless the rains returned.

Clawfoot paused and looked back at Little Maize, the only girl in the gang. Like the boys, she was thin to the point of emaciation. She had a small, button nose and a chaos of tangled hair that Clawfoot found attractive in a way he didn't understand. She had a rough weave sack slung over her back that contained their meagre pickings from the day; a maize cake, dented on one side, three tomatoes one of which had partially burst open and a small wooden doll that Little Maize had convinced them she could sell to buy more provisions. At ten years old, she was a year younger than Clawfoot but already fiercely independent.

'Do you want me to take the bag for a while,' Clawfoot offered again.

Little Maize just scowled back at him.

The other two caught up with them. Indigo had been the leader of their gang when Clawfoot had come across them. Little Maize's brother had large ears and an untidy collection of teeth but he was tall for his age and with a long reach, so Clawfoot had had to use all his speed and cunning to beat him in a fight to take control of the group.

'I'm hungry!' whined Shield of Gold for the hundredth time that day. His eyes had a sunken, hollow look and he had the same kind of listless look about him that had caught hold of Flying Star before they had lost him to the hunger. The youngest member of the gang had become increasingly lethargic and then caught a cough that he couldn't shake. Then one day, Flying Star had been too weak even to cough and the others knew that he would not make it through the night. There wasn't a day that went by when Clawfoot didn't recall that night in the hovel they all shared, listening to the boy's breathing grow quieter until with a small, trembling sigh it had stopped entirely. He had listened as Little Maize sobbed gently when she too realized that Flying Star had died and there had been more tears the next day from the others when they'd helped Clawfoot carry the featherweight corpse from their dilapidated shack for the city undertakers to dispose of. Clawfoot had not cried. He had no more tears to give up for the famine.

Ordinarily, one of the gang would have snapped at Shield of Gold and told him to be quiet, but they had all gone for nearly two days now with nothing more than a tamale each and they all felt the same. Clawfoot's stomach ached and two of his teeth hurt like hell. He could only hope that they would drop out soon and take the pain with them.

For a while, the gang wandered along Coyote Street. From the high ground here, they could just see a few canoes in the distance, making their way back across the sparkling lake surface to Texcoco. Eventually, they turned north, onto Turquoise Street, where the wealthy merchants lived. The pickings would be richer here, but they would have to be more careful, the city watch was more active in this area. The passers-by went about their business, scarcely noticing the children. Soon the gang arrived at the entrance to a courtyard, the other side of which fronted the North Canal. Here they stopped and moved just inside, where they could keep the street in view.

A large man wearing the peasant hat and brown fibre cloak of a mayeque briefly held their attention. He was heading towards the northern causeway, with a rolling gait which made the sack on his shoulder swing from one side of his back to the other.

As he passed the gateway that hid the lurking children, they saw that the sack was empty, so they settled down to wait.

From their vantage-point, Clawfoot could just make out the top of the Great Temple of the Sun and Rain. The twin crenellated shrines perched on top of the lofty, stepped stone pyramid basked in the full gaze of the sinking sun and radiated a fiery orange colour against the darkening purple sky. For a while the street was empty. The evening rush was at an end. Shield of Gold began kicking impatiently at the remains of a woodpile, disturbing a nest of beetles in the process. The others stopped him as they caught sight of a tall figure heading in their direction.

The man was barefoot which would have marked him out as a commoner except that he was clothed in a black, ankle-length cotton mantle that spoke of important connections. He strolled along the deserted thoroughfare with a measured, unhurried gait and paused once, briefly to run a hand through the long hair that hung below his shoulders. His long black apparel flowed easily about him as he approached the waiting children. Hanging from the man's left hand was a large dead turkey, which he held by the legs.

The children shrank into the shadows as the tall man passed the spot where they were hiding.

'Look at the size of that bird!' Indigo whispered to Clawfoot. 'With the money that will make us in the market, we can live like royalty for a week.'

'Why sell it? My father can cook it for us,' said Shield of Gold. He was the only one who wasn't orphaned although he'd lost his mother to a fever the year before and his father was infirm and incapable of any paid work.

'We're not sharing with your father,' insisted Indigo.

'He won't want a share of his own. He and I can halve my share.'

Clawfoot waved them both to silence. 'I don't like it. Why's he heading towards the centre if he's on his way home.'

'Oh who cares!' groaned Shield of Gold. 'I have to eat.'

'Yeah, come on. When will we get another chance like this?' added Indigo.

Clawfoot nodded slowly. 'Alright, take a log from that pile and hand me one too.'

The children burst forth from the courtyard at a run, their bare feet soundless on the dusty earth. Clawfoot and Indigo were in the lead. As they ran, they each wielded one of the logs as a weapon. When they caught up with the man in black, they swung at the backs of his legs with all their might. His knees buckled and he let out a cry, releasing the turkey to break his fall with both hands. Man and bird impacted the

street with a thud, one sending up a cloud of dust and the other an explosion of feathers.

‘Quick!’ squeaked the Little Maize, pointing at the turkey. ‘Get it!’

Shield of Gold gathered the load and the four of them turned tail and fled, whooping with relief and delight but their joy was short-lived. Three young, shaven-headed priests with fierce expressions blocked the street ahead.

‘Stop where you are!’ commanded one of them.

‘Shit! It’s a trap!’ shouted Clawfoot. ‘This way,’ he cried and headed back towards their victim, his heart pounding a fearful quick-time in his throat, thinking they could make it past him as he lay stretched out on the ground. To his horror, the pile of black robes was unfolding eerily and getting to its feet. He glared at the children with a triumph in his eyes. Clawfoot had dismissed the stories of Catchers as nothing more than exaggerated tales told by frightened street urchins who had escaped the clutches of the clan sheriffs. Catchers weren’t supposed to exist. The priests had no mandate to keep the streets free of muggers but still the rumours persisted that they were short of offerings for the gods. These four were definitely not clan sheriffs and Clawfoot had no intention of finding out what they wanted.

Somehow, all four children instantly knew the peril. Some innate understanding between them communicated the danger they were in. Young children weren’t allowed to watch the more brutal ceremonies, but they all knew about them. Sometimes they awoke in the dead of night to the sound of drums, and often, cutting through the momentary gaps in the beat, the terrible, tearing, high-pitched shrieks.

Clawfoot and Little Maize ducked around the figure in black and ran until they were beyond his reach then stopped to check on Indigo and Shield of Gold. The shock had jolted Shield of Gold from his torpor. Deciding that the turkey would slow him down, he lobbed it at the sinister man and used the distraction to get around him to safety. Indigo had been less lucky. He was gangly and slower to react to the threat so when he finally tried to follow his friends he found his path blocked and the priests behind him were advancing to close the gap.

‘Run!’ screeched Little Maize, but it was no use. The man in black caught her brother by the arm and twisted it brutally around until he was forced to the ground. When the other three priests saw that Indigo was firmly held they gave chase.

Clawfoot grabbed Little Maize’s arm. ‘Come on!’

Together the children fled up Turquoise Street, squeezed through a narrow passage and leaped over a ditch with the sound of pursuit loud in their ears. They ran north, towards Cuepopan before doubling back into the filthy warrens of Moyotlan

where they hoped the priests would not follow. They ran until their starved bodies gave up for lack of energy and hid in a disused warehouse gasping for breath. Little Maize was wracked with sobs and tears rolled down her grimy cheeks. Shield of Gold looked too shocked for tears. He leant up against the wall of the warehouse, his jaw opening and closing as he fought to get his breath back.

‘Who were they?’ he said after a while.

‘Chachalmeca,’ said Clawfoot, using the name for the priests who presided over sacrificial rites. Nobody knew if the Catchers were the same priests who presided over the bloody temple ceremonies but the more terrifying the notion, the firmer it seemed to take root.

Clawfoot held Little Maize’s arm gently to comfort her and she looked up at him with a plaintive expression that was unmistakable.

‘I’ll go back and see if I can get him,’ he volunteered.

Moments later, Clawfoot was cursing himself as he took a circuitous route back to where they had been ambushed, loping along through the lengthening shadows and wondering why he had offered to go on such a foolish mission. There could be no prospect of recovering Indigo from the priests if they were still there but it had seemed the right thing to say, and as leader of the gang, he felt some responsibility for what had happened. He changed course slightly, deciding to try and intercept the priests at the East Gate as they would surely be making for the temple complex. Sure enough, when he arrived at the corner of a building that afforded him a view of the gate in the Serpent Wall, he saw the priest with dark clothes and the mane of black hair gripping Indigo by his wrist with one hand while in the other, he held the turkey. He appeared to be waiting for the other three priests to return from their hunt.

Clawfoot could see that Indigo was terrified. Even though he was nearly as tall as the priest, the boy was too skinny and malnourished to put up a fight. He was visibly shaking and a dark puddle was spreading over the flagstones at the boy’s feet.

‘Stop snivelling,’ said the priest in a disgusted tone.

Indigo must have said something but it was too quiet for Clawfoot to hear. Whatever it was, the priest didn’t like it.

‘Shut your mouth!’ he replied and caught Indigo with a backhand. ‘You shouldn’t have been trying to rob people then should you?’

Clawfoot wondered whether he could force the priest to let go of Little Maize’s brother. Barrelling into him might just cause him to let go of Indigo long enough for the pair of them to escape. It wasn’t a simple question of bravery though. There was a moral dilemma to work through as well. They could forage for food just as

effectively as a team of three so Clawfoot reasoned that one less mouth to feed wasn't such a bad outcome. Clawfoot didn't waste tears on anyone since the death of his siblings and his parents, but the thought of Little Maize's face if he came back without her brother was too much for him to bear. He had just worked up enough courage to launch himself at the priest when the others Catchers returned to report their failure to apprehend the rest of the gang. There was no way for Clawfoot to free Indigo now. He'd never get past them. Relief and guilt flooded through him in equal measures.

There was a gruff exchange between Indigo's captor and the returning search party. It was clear that the priest in black robes was very unhappy.

'Well go out and look for them again! Post a watch on the main routes into and out of the slums. They're hungry. They'll need to go out searching again.'

One of the priests asked a question.

'I don't care how long it takes,' shouted the priest at the others who were obviously his juniors. 'Stay out until daybreak if you have to.' With that, he led Indigo into the temple complex without a backward glance over his shoulder.

Clawfoot watched in dismay. Three wasn't much of a gang, he reflected. It also occurred to him that Indigo had been the better thief amongst them. He took careful note of which direction the three priests were heading before setting off on another rat run that would lead him back to their tumbledown shack without crossing any of the major thoroughfares.

Jaguar hurled himself at the ball and missed, sprawling face-first in the dust. Ignoring the hoots of laughter from the other players, he levered himself into a sitting position and spat to clear the dust from his mouth. He was drenched in sweat and exhausted. What had begun as a friendly knockabout, supposedly just a practice session, had turned seriously competitive.

'Twelve points to eleven!' called the referee.

Jaguar allowed himself a tight smile. 'Still in the lead,' he muttered to himself. He got to his feet and returned to his position near the centreline, breathing deeply through his nostrils. Jaguar was lean and fit, but an hour's continuous play had begun to sap his strength. The ball was out of play so he took the opportunity to refasten the tie that held his black, shoulder-length hair out of his eyes. Reaching up

behind his neck, he tugged hard at the knot, determined to prevent it from coming loose and interfering with his vision again.

At seventeen, Jaguar was the youngest official player of the ball game. One of the talent scouts from Moctezuma's training academy had spotted him playing in a street game three years ago. Passing through Teopan one day, the tutor had chanced upon a group of children engaging in a rough knockabout between the houses. There he had watched as the children played out their lawless version of the sacred Ullamalitzli with a homemade ball that didn't even bounce well. Jaguar was fast and agile, turning and chasing tirelessly. All of the children had been keen but none had been as committed as Jaguar. He missed fewer shots and those he hit were more accurate than his fellow players.

After the game, the tutor had invited him to one of the regular try-outs at the training academy. The others in the academy needed no persuasion after seeing the young prodigy in action. The game was so popular with the nobility and sufficiently taxing on the players that promising recruits were highly sought after. Now Jaguar was one of the most promising stars of the game and was looking forward to the day he was allowed to participate on the main circuit against the men. In the meantime, he had to be content with practice sessions and the junior competitions.

One of his team mates had retrieved the ball and was ready to restart the game. Jaguar eyed up the players in the other half of the court. This practice court was off the main temple precinct and was run by the training academy. It was one hundred and eighty feet in length and seventy five wide. An eight foot high wall ran the length of the court on both sides, and set into each wall at the halfway point, just above head height, was a large stone hoop. The opposing team of four jockeyed for position, waiting for the ball to be put back into play.

The server bounced the ball on the ground once and then brought his knee up to connect with it, sending it looping over towards the opposition. None of the players looked very spritely. In spite of the late start, the court was still warm. The walls, and even the dusty floor, had soaked up the warmth of the sun all day long and were now pumping that heat back into the still evening air.

One of the opposition intercepted the ball on its second bounce. He turned his body neatly and nudged the ball back towards Jaguar's team with his thigh. It was a good shot, too deep into Jaguar's end for him to reach. Magic River was in position to receive it though and played a return to the right-hand side just past the halfway mark. The ball caromed off the side wall gaining spin as it did so. Too tired to notice, or too tired to make sufficient course correction as the ball skewed back

towards the wall after the next bounce, the player opposite Jaguar missed the ball completely. Fortunately for him, one of his team had taken up position behind him. The rubber ball was rapidly losing impetus so the tall player had to lunge to reach it. He just managed to get his knee under the ball and knock it back at Jaguar but there was no power left in it.

It was a gift of a shot. Any other time, Jaguar would have felt sorry for the man, but his mouth was dry, his lungs were heaving and his body was simultaneously burning from the exercise and numb from the repeated impact of the heavy rubber ball. Jaguar sidestepped once and brought his knee in behind the ball aiming it up at the nearest hoop. It was a makeable shot at this range,. A ragged cheer went up as the ball clipped the inside edge of the hoop and dropped through.

Jaguar turned to the spectators' area and raised his fist to the sky. Two figures waved back at him, one of them jumping up and down in excitement.

'Game over!' called the referee.

One of Jaguar's teammates patted him on the back. 'Nice!' he said as they all made their way to the end of the court.

Magic River put his hand on Jaguar's shoulder on the way past and gave him a friendly shake. 'You did it again!' he grinned. 'I don't know how you do it.'

As the players filed through a gap in the wall, Jaguar was met by Obsidian Crocodile and Precious Flower. Crocodile got a well aimed punch to Jaguar's arm before Precious Flower threw her arms around him, oblivious to the sweat and dust that covered him head to foot.

'You won!' she exclaimed.

Precious Flower was sixteen years old and a slave in the keeping of Jaguar's family. Her dark brown hair was pinned once at the back of her head in a simple leather grip with a wooden pin through it and from there it cascaded luxuriantly to the small of her back. She wore a plain, cream coloured dress tied simply around her waist. Jaguar suddenly became aware of how much she had changed since his family had bought her at the market. When had the frightened, fragile waif developed such a perfect oval face, dark, limpid eyes and such long eyelashes? Jaguar extricated himself quickly from her embrace to avoid this troubling train of thought

'Pfff!' Crocodile made a sour expression. 'Did you see how neatly the ball was dropped at Jaguar's feet?' he scoffed. 'A blind monkey could have scored that!'

'Ooh Itzcipactli! You're rotten,' said Precious Flower, feigning outrage. He dodged her sideswipe easily.

Hey!’ exclaimed Crocodile. ‘You shouldn’t let her out Jaguar. Ever since your family announced the end of her term of slavery she’s been getting ideas above her station.’

Precious Flower shot Crocodile a venomous look from which he pretended to cower.

Jaguar couldn’t resist a smile. ‘What brings you two here?’ asked Jaguar. He was delighted that his friends had turned up but doubted it was just to witness a practice session.

‘Precious Flower wants to see Huitzilopochtli,’ said Crocodile.

‘Yes please,’ replied the girl, her eyes sparkling, their feud instantly forgotten. ‘This is the last day he’s on display and the last chance I’ll have to see him before Nemontomi. Crocodile came by the house to find you and when I told him where you were, he said he’d escort me here and that we could all go together.’

‘You know it’s just the statue on display don’t you?’ said Jaguar. ‘Sacred Stone has done his last procession before the New Fire.’

‘Oh yes, that’s fine. I don’t think I’ve seen Huitzilopochtli’s likeness before. I’ve seen Tezcatlipoca, Mictlan and we watched the priests anoint Quetzalcoatl in the marketplace just two months ago didn’t we?’

Jaguar laughed. ‘All right, I can see how excited you are. Look at me though,’ he said. Looking down at his dust a sweat streaked body. ‘I’m filthy. I can’t go like this.’

Crocodile looked him up and down then wrinkled his nose. ‘You’ll be fine. There’ll be plenty of mayeques there, some of them even more disgusting. We’ll just stand upwind of you. Try to avoid talking to us though,’ he added. ‘People might think we’re friends.’

‘Ha-ha.’ Jaguar made a face. He and Crocodile had met at the age of ten at school. Crocodile was now a warrior in training and looked the part. He was a hand shorter than Jaguar but he had the well developed musculature so typical of the elite warriors of Tenochtitlan. Crocodile had a broad face with a small scar on one cheek that he had received in his first real engagement with enemy forces. He had not yet earned the right to shave his head and wear a warrior’s queue but like the other young in the military training school he shaved the hair around the back of his head so that it looked like a black, upturned bowl.

Training had honed Crocodile for battle and he had proved himself a courageous fighter in several skirmishes. He had already taken three captives. One more would make him the youngest warrior ever to qualify to join the knights.

In contrast with Jaguar's very plain dun-coloured, dust-streaked loin cloth, Crocodile's was immaculately clean, cream coloured and had short tassels. It was also embroidered with a small red eagle motif on the loose ends that hung at his knees.

'What's that?' asked Jaguar, pointing at an unsightly smudge on his friend's arm.

Crocodile looked offended. 'I'm surprised you have to ask,' he said. 'Meet my namesake and god of the river, Cipactli.' He made a flourish as though revealing the tattoo for the first time.

'Oh I see,' said Jaguar innocently. 'I thought a bird shat on your arm.'

'You just don't appreciate high art,' complained Crocodile.

'High art? That looks like it was done by Rat Face or his boy down at the market.'

Crocodile was indignant. 'It was done by Rat Face and I got a good price for it too.'

'Well that's a relief,' said Jaguar because I could have slapped some bird shit on your arm for the price of a few cocoa beans.'

'Argh!' roared Crocodile and punched Jaguar again, this time a great deal harder. Jaguar rode the blow, grinning all the while and led his friends out onto the street where a few of the players were still discussing the game or exchanging a few parting words.

Magic River beckoned to them. Magic River was a captain in the battalion of the warriors of Island Home North, Jaguar's own clan. As such he held an honorary rank, equivalent to that of a warrior in the Eagle Knights. He was short and stocky and his scar made Crocodile's look like the scratch it was. Magic River's lower lip was split where the blade from an enemy's sword had caught it, knocked out the two central teeth and raked down over his chin. Magic River's scalp stubble was patchy, supposedly as a result of shock from the same battle, making his round head look like the lobe of a mesquite cactus. He was not often asked to look after children of a nervous disposition. 'I just wanted to remind you two,' he said, indicating the boys, 'that we're assembling at the gate to the northern causeway tomorrow.'

A cold, heavy stone of worry in the pit of Jaguar's stomach immediately replaced the last vestiges of the thrill of victory in the ball game. He fought to get control of himself. It was a scouting party round the north-eastern end of the lake. They probably wouldn't even encounter the enemy so far from Chalco.

Crocodile winked cheerily. 'We'll be there!'

Jaguar scowled. How did Crocodile make light of it so easily?

‘Good! Make sure you are,’ called the old veteran over his shoulder as he turned to go. ‘You don’t want to lose out on the chance to make your tally!’

Precious Flower looked concerned. ‘You two will be careful won’t you?’

‘Of course we will,’ replied Crocodile. ‘Anyway, Jaguar will be at the back like he always is!’ Crocodile gave a deep chuckle and then yelped as Jaguar kicked his backside. ‘Hey! You see!’ he added with a hurt look. ‘He’ll probably even attack his own side.’

‘Only if they’re being idiots,’ Jaguar retorted. ‘Come on then! Are we going to see Huitzilopochtli or not?’

Precious Flower made an excited noise and Crocodile made a long-suffering face at Jaguar over her head. Daylight was fading fast when they arrived at the Black House near the southern exit from the temple complex. A few people had gathered to see the statue which had been placed on display near the palace for one final time before it was returned to the temple in preparation for the ceremony of the New Fire. Eight stern warrior priests from the order of Huitzilopochtli stood in formation around the statue in dark grey robes and watched everyone with suspicion.

The God of the Sun and of War was about the size of a stout child of ten, seated on a blue wooden litter. From each corner emerged a serpent-headed pole, long enough for a man to bear on his shoulder. Huitzilopochtli was festooned with gold jewellery; necklaces, bracelets and anklets that hung around his sandals. The god’s forehead was blue and on his head was a rich headdress in the shape of a bird’s beak wrought of shining gold. The idol wore a green mantle and over this, hanging from the neck, an apron made of iridescent green feathers, stitched thickly together. In his left hand he held a white shield with a border of yellow feathers and upon which was mounted a cross made of white feathers. A golden banner protruded from the top of the shield as well as four golden arrows that had been sent down from heaven. In his right hand, the god held an undulating serpent staff of aquamarine from the top of which sprouted a forked tongue in vivid red.

‘Oh,’ breathed Precious Flower. ‘He’s so beautiful! I wish I’d brought some flowers!’

Jaguar and Crocodile noticed the tribute that had been laid down reverently all around the plinth on which Huitzilopochtli’s litter rested. Bright yellow marigolds, dahlias, poinsettias and even some white cactus blossom carpeted the flagstones, fresh ones overlaying the desiccated older ones from previous days. As they were watching, a wealthy family stepped forward with armfuls of silvery grass fronds and

marigolds the colour of the setting sun. The head of the family was an urbane looking man with a pronounced paunch, jowls and a shock of grey hair.

‘Who’s that?’ whispered Precious Flower. ‘That offering is worth a small fortune!’

‘That’s the Moctezuma’s uncle, Acamapichtli,’ offered Crocodile. ‘He’s a successful merchant. They say he has trading partners all the way to the Yucatan jungles and he’s one of the members of the High Council’

The three of them watched as the warrior priests allowed Acamapichtli to approach the statue where he and an extended family including two women and eleven children of varying ages placed their voluminous offering.

‘Come on, let’s go,’ said Precious Flower. She had a sour look on her face. ‘It’s easy for the nobility to be pious isn’t it?’

‘Good. Can we go home because I’m famished?’ said Jaguar. He looked at Crocodile. ‘Want to join us?’

‘I don’t think so,’ he said, serious for a change.

Jaguar knew the reason his friend was reticent. Crocodile knew that Jaguar’s family business was struggling. The proximity of the New Fire meant that commissions had dropped away entirely and the only revenue was coming from small good luck charms that were still selling in the markets.

‘Oh come on! I’m sure there will be enough to go around.’

Precious Flower chimed in. ‘Yes, please do Crocodile. Musical Reed was saying only this morning that she’s hardly seen anything of you recently.’

Crocodile gave in under pressure and the three of them locked arms and headed for Harbour Street, Crocodile whistling the tune to a ribald song about the ‘Hill of the Prickly Bush’ that Jaguar had to pretend not to know so that he didn’t have to explain it to Precious Flower.

‘Where in the name of the Creator Pair have you been?’ demanded Cloud Face.

At the entrance to the Room of Souls, Feathered Darkness bowed and placed the turkey on the low table in front of the high priest. ‘I’m sorry My Lord,’ he said. ‘This plan to clear the streets of beggars and thieves is taking up a great deal of time. We set a trap for some of the scum but several others gave us the slip and we spent a long time trying to find them again.’ He set the turkey down on a stone table that jutted out from the left-hand wall.

‘Did you succeed?’

‘No, my Lord Mixayacatl. I’m afraid we didn’t manage to recapture the others.’

Cloud Face was displeased as Feathered Darkness had known he would. The birthmark on Cloud Face’s forehead above his left eye flushed livid red, a sure sign of his mounting anger.

‘Will he fetch a good price?’

‘I don’t believe he’d survive the trip to Zempoala My Lord. What would like me to do with him?’

‘Put him in the cells for now. I have a feeling we will need a supply of prisoners to practice on.’ Feathered Darkness was about to run his hands through his long black hair when he remembered how much it irritated his master. Cloud Face was utterly bald and Feathered Darkness knew that his own luxuriant hair was a perpetual source of irritation to the old priest.

‘Mictlan take these filthy urchins! What is the city coming to?’ asked Cloud Face. ‘And what of the calpullicalli? They are the ones who are supposed to be dealing with law and order in the streets.’

‘I saw no watchmen this evening My Lord.’

Cloud Face rose from his seat. He was tall and slender. Like Feathered Darkness he wore the long black robes of high office in the service of Huitzilopochtli. Feathered Darkness watched the high priest reposition the only ornament that the old man ever wore, a necklace made from a leather thong on which was strung a small bundle of black and turquoise feathers, the barely recognisable mummified remains of a Quetzal. Aside from Moctezuma himself, the high priest was the only man in Tenochtitlan who was permitted to wear the feathers of the sacred bird and the punishment for anyone found breaking this law was death.

‘We cannot allow things to continue as they are,’ warned the high priest. ‘Fifty two years ago, when the sacred fire was last relit, there was respect and discipline; there was rain and no-one went hungry.’

Feathered Darkness had heard the lament before and had resigned himself to hearing it several more times before the year was done. The high priest was growing increasingly irascible as the date for the New Fire approached, but then the portents were not good.

‘Have you summoned the others?’

‘I have My Lord. They should be here very soon.’ Light from the room’s single rectangular window was fading fast. ‘Shall I fetch some candles?’

‘And something to drink too,’ came the terse reply. ‘And the turkey is mine?’ added Cloud Face.

‘It is yours.’

Feathered Darkness bowed and left the room to organise the supplies. He found an acolyte in the main hall and dispatched him in search of something to drink while he located the store of candles and a taper. He returned to the room a short while later and set about lighting the half-dozen candles which threw the features of the room into stark relief. It was large and had a high ceiling, supported by a wall of ornately carved stone. The floor was made from interlocking slabs of grey stone, but inset at each adjoining corner was a highly polished, diamond shaped piece of jade. Two-hundred silver-plated skulls lined the room at head height, grinning gold teeth smiling at their brethren on the opposite side of the room. Two wooden mannequins stood smartly to attention either side of the entrance to the room each draped with ceremonial outfits of beads, shells and a coruscating forest of black and red feathers. Above the door he had just come through hung a tapestry of the finest cotton, richly embroidered with the city’s founding motif, an eagle perched upon a cactus, but the centrepiece of the room, set on the wall opposite the doorway, was a pictogram of the God of War and of the Sun that took up three panels of stone, each the high of a grown man. Cloud Face marvelled as he always did at the craftsmanship. Flickering yellow torchlight accentuated the shadows in the depths of the carving, which depicted the story of Huitzilopochtli's defeat of his sister Coyolxauhqui, and made the entire scene stand out from the wall and come alive. In the middle ground of the centre panel of the triptych stood the God of War, upon a hill. The god stood with one arm thrown protectively around his mother, portrayed still pregnant, as a device to illustrate that she had only just given birth to him.

The left-hand panel showed Huitzilopochtli’s vengeful sister. Coyolxauhqui was storming the hill with four hundred of her siblings, outraged at what she believed to be a preposterous story of their mother’s pregnancy. On hearing that a floating ball of feathers was the cause of her brother’s conception, Coyolxauhqui had vowed to cleanse her mother by violent means. The triptych was a breathtaking work of art.

‘It’s a fine piece, is it not?’ Cloud Face had seen Feathered Darkness staring at the image as he always did whenever he visited the room.

Feathered Darkness simply nodded his head. He had always known, with absolute certainty, that he had joined the right order of priests, but the first time he had been inside the Room of Souls and seen the huge stone tablets that told of Huitzilopochtli’s victory over his sister, he had been overcome and had very nearly

wept. Coyolxauhqui could have had no idea of the unimaginable power that her brother would possess as he emerged from his mother's womb, not only fully grown, but armed and ready to do battle. In his right hand, Huitzilopochtli held aloft the *Fire Serpent*, a devastating weapon that belched liquid fire. Coyolxauhqui had led her army into the very teeth of death and the right-hand panel showed her downfall. Her dismembered body and limbs, rolled to the base of the hill, cut down by the righteous wrath her newly born brother. Her army lay about her, the corpses of a thousand brave warriors, slashed and torn apart.

'...and then Huitzilopochtli did turn upon his sister and summoned the power of the heavens to tear her and her army into pieces,' spoke a new voice. Devine Cactus slouched into the room with an affable smile. Devine Cactus was the high priest of Tlaloc, a portly, middle-aged man with a ruddy complexion and a thinning straggle of jet black hair. Cactus was clearly used to the good living that the priesthood could offer, even in times of famine.

'I see Tlaloc is taking good care of you,' Cloud Face greeted him.

Devine Cactus put on a sad face. 'Mixayacatl, you know I would give up anything to see an end to the drought. Unfortunately Tlaloc does not share all his mysteries, even with me.'

Feathered Darkness saw his master suppressing his distaste to embrace Cactus around his generous girth. He needs all the allies he can get thought, Feathered Darkness.

'My assistant managed to procure a turkey and I thought of you,' said Cloud Face, stepping back and pointing at the bird.

'Oh how kind,' replied Cactus eagerly. If he noticed the insult, he covered it well. 'What a fine fowl! And so hard to come by these days. Surely you need feeding up more than I?' Cactus patted his stomach affectionately. 'I was worried about you before the famine began but now...' Cactus' voice trailed off.

'I want for nothing...of that you can be sure,' said Cloud Face waving the concern away with a bony arm.

Cactus' gaze wandered lazily about the room, as though taking in the surroundings for the first time. The man liked to play the fool and Feathered Darkness had to remind himself that Cactus had risen from the mire, through the cutthroat, political echelons of the order of Tlaloc without any obvious effort. He was not someone to underestimate.

The acolyte Feathered Darkness had sent for drinks put his head through the door and announced the arrival of Snake Eyes, the high priest of Xipe Totec. The

acolyte deposited a jug of fruit juice, keeping a watchful eye on the minister of the God of Flayed Flesh before scurrying out. Snake Eyes was an ancient, malodorous piece of scum who made little effort to conceal his use of poisons as the means by which he had effected his own inexorable rise through the priesthood. Feathered Darkness acknowledged that direct methods were sometimes necessary, but Snake Eyes was especially barbarous and was the kind of man who gave the priesthood a bad name. As Cloud Face often said though, it pays to keep the scum on your side.

‘What’s this about?’ demanded Snake Eyes, his tone hostile. His gaze darted warily between Cloud Face and Cactus, then without waiting for an answer, he darted into the room with a bird-like step and sniffed at the juice suspiciously. He was the eldest of the three with a deeply lined face most of which seemed to be sliding downwards to collect around his jaw, giving him a lugubrious look. His thinning, ragged, grey hair rested forlornly upon his wrinkled brow. For once, the priest of Xipe Totec was not caked in blood or festooned with the decomposing flesh of his victims but the stench of the man was still so overpowering that it was all Feathered Darkness could do to avoid gagging.

‘Come now, Snake Eyes. You are among friends here,’ assured Cloud Face.

The wizened priest glared back at him. ‘You want our help to get rid of Tlacaelel.’

‘We have spoken of Tlacaelel before,’ agreed Cloud Face. ‘He’s a scheming little shit who will have to be dealt with but I fear we have bigger problems.’

Cactus pursed his lips thoughtfully. ‘How much bigger? Are you sure you’re not overreacting?’ He sounded concerned. ‘After all, we all know what a strain you must be under. Are preparations for the ceremony in hand?’

‘Of course they are in-hand,’ snapped Cloud Face. ‘You need have no fear on that account!’ He gestured crossly at some wooden chairs. ‘Sit down. We have a lot to discuss. My assistant will serve drinks.’

They pulled the chairs in around a low wooden table while Feathered Darkness fetched three earthenware cups from an alcove and made a deliberate show of pouring the juice into them where the others could see him. It wasn’t enough for Snake Eyes who peered carefully at all three cups.

Feathered Darkness pretended not to notice and retired to stand by the door.

Cloud Face pulled his chair closer to the other two. ‘Tlacaelel is a dreamer and a heretic who hides behind his brother. Ever since Itzcoatl granted him the role of ‘Woman Snake’ and made him the tlatoani’s chief adviser he has been meddling in the affairs of state. Until then the tlatoani always consulted with the priests.’

‘Well, you actually,’ Cactus pointed out.

‘And my predecessors,’ corrected Cloud Face. ‘The point being that Huitzilopochtli is the god of war and it has always been his priests who have been the tlatoani’s advisers in matters of strategy and battle plans.’

Devine Cactus sighed theatrically. ‘Mixayacatl, we know the hierarchy of the gods, please continue with your explanation.’

‘Oh dear, Mixayacatl’s star is on the wane,’ Snake Eyes observed drily. He chose the cup furthest from him but waited for the others to drink before he put it to his own lips. It was now dark outside and the only light in the room came from the flickering yellow flames of the handful of tallow candles that reflected from the polished skulls on the walls and cast the corners of the wall into pitch-blackness. The shadows of the three priests lurched and wobbled on the walls around the room.

Feathered Darkness wondered if Snake Eyes had gone too far. Cloud Face was notoriously short tempered and the long pause suggested he was struggling to contain his anger.

‘You may think this has nothing to do with you,’ said the high priest of Huitzilopochtli in icy tones, ‘but I can assure you that it does, and what’s more, this is only the start!’ He paused to check that he still held their attention and took a small sip from his own cup. ‘Tlacaelel means to prevent us from carrying out sacrifices.’

‘What?!’ Snake Eyes jumped to his feet and even the placid Cactus started, knocked his own drink over.

‘He can’t do that,’ frowned Cactus. ‘We must make offerings to the gods!’

‘He has no power over us!’ cried Snake Eyes. ‘How would he achieve such a thing?’

‘Indeed, you are right. Tlacaelel has no direct power over us or our ceremonies, yet he does command the armies of the Triple Alliance and I have a spy in the Woman Snake’s staff who tells me that he is trying to persuade Moctezuma to call for a reduction in the number of captives we take.’ He raised his hands, appealing for the chance to continue. ‘Even now, he is redrawing the plans for our first fight with the Chalca with the express intention of reducing the number of captives taken.’

Cactus raised one eyebrow. ‘I have always thought Tlacaelel a reasonable man, but now I am not so sure! Does he want the Fifth World to come to an end?’

Snake Eyes banged his fist on the table. ‘Leave it to me!’ he croaked hoarsely. ‘I can arrange for him to get sick, the kind of sickness no one recovers from.’

‘Hold on a moment,’ Cloud Face eased them back to their seats with a wave of his hand. ‘We mustn’t act too hastily. As I already explained, it’s not just Tlacaelel

who is the problem. Tlacaelel's position is secure as long as these pestilential, godless clans continue to exert influence through the Council of Twelve.'

'The Calpullicalli?' Cactus said. 'What can we do about the House of Clans?'

Feathered Darkness listened to Cloud Face's explanation as he set it out for the other two priests. Since the founding of the city, the ruler of Tenochtitlan had come to the priests for advice, from advice on sacred events and the most auspicious dates for war with neighbouring states, from marriage guidance the city layout least likely to cause offence to the gods. As the city had grown though, so too had the need for administrators. Tax collectors, engineers, drainage experts, builders, wardens, legal advisors and a profusion of other ancillary posts had ballooned, a situation which had been resolved only by devolving more power to the clans who organised and ran their own districts.

'If we priests allow our power to be eroded anymore,' said Cloud Face, 'we'll be reduced to ceremonial roles; for aesthetic or entertainment purposes only.'

'You're a member of the High Council though,' Devine Cactus pointed out, referring to Moctezuma's inner circle of advisers that consisted of Cloud Face, Tlacaelel and two of Moctezuma's cousins. 'Can't you have the existing members of the Council of Twelve replaced?'

Cloud Face shook his head. 'Assuming we could find grounds to have them dismissed, the appointments are decided within the Calpullicalli so we'd be no better off. Anyway, I think we'd struggle to persuade Acamapichtli and Zipactonal to support any attempts to undermine the Council of Twelve, they're too giddy with the power their own positions in the Tlatocan gives them. You have given me an idea though. If we could make the Council of Twelve look weak, Moctezuma would look to the High Council on the key decisions. Then all we need to do is oust Tlacaelel and maybe even one of Moctezuma's cousins and have them replaced with priests...'

Cloud Face sat back, his hands steepled in front of him and his eyes closed. Devine Cactus slurped at his juice. Snake Eyes watched them both.

When Cloud Face spoke again, his eyes were like the darkest obsidian, glinting in the guttering light of the candles. He moved closer to the two other men and in a quiet voice that was cold and measured, he made his pitch. 'I believe I have a plan that might just work. I'll need your help, but understand that absolutely nothing must be traced back to us!'

Devine Cactus made a concerned noise and Snake Eyes grunted in agreement.

‘If we can turn Tlacaelel’s plans to our advantage, with a few supporting initiatives of our own, we may be able to get rid of him, greatly weaken the Council of Twelve and exert greater influence over whatever remains.’