

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 food stuffs 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 was tall for his age, with a long reach, but Clawfoot had used all his speed and cunning to beat him in a fight and 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 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! Catchers!’ 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.