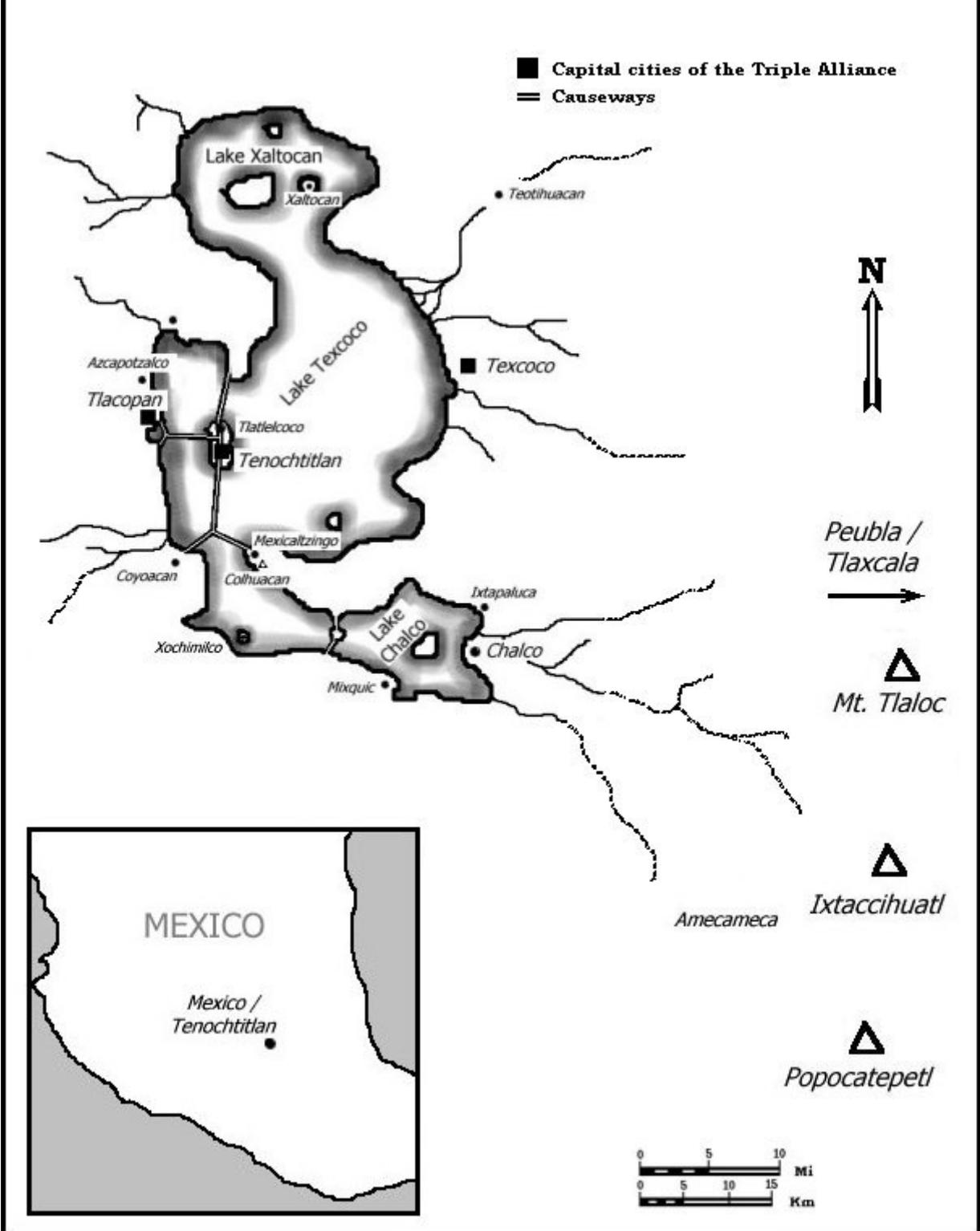


The Valley of Mexico, Circa 1455 AD



Prologue

In the 11th century AD, a nomadic tribe of warriors, who called themselves the Mexica, settled in a verdant valley at the apex of two massive mountain ranges in Central America.

For a long time the Mexica acted as servants to the powerful rulers in the area, lending their expertise in the art of war. But the Mexica were not trusted by the local people, so that when they asked for land to set up their own community, they were offered a small, rocky, snake infested island in Lake Texcoco in the hope that it would break them. Undaunted, the Mexica cleared the island and founded the city of Tenochtitlan in 1325 AD.

Through a series of clever deals with rival rulers, the Mexica then rose up and defeated their overlords. Within a few years, the Mexica city-state, together with neighbouring Tlacopan and Texcoco was at the head of the most powerful alliance in the area, which began to spread its tendrils of conquest in all directions.

These people were to become known as the Aztecs.

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 Totoncapán 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 ullamalizli 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 dusty floor that had been baking in sunlight all day long and were now pumping the 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 mayequés 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 mescal 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 of 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?’

‘That’s true. 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.’

Chapter 2 - Ehēcatl

Two Sign climbed the last flight of decaying stairs that led to Tlacaelel's apartments, his stomach grumbling at the lack of food. The commander of the Eagle Knights was used to pre-dawn starts but hadn't had time to find something to eat. He wondered if Tlacaelel would think to provide some breakfast but did not hold out much hope. The general didn't eat much. Two Sign looked at the once beautiful frescos that lined the stairwell, depicting a menagerie of animals in various poses. Fish leapt, snakes reared and deer pranced. All were cracked and faded, and the ancient limestone plaster they were painted on was dropping off in chunks. The stone steps themselves were kept clean, but they were worn and in desperate need of repair.

The big warrior shook his head. Tlacaelel could have the most fabulous living quarters in Tenochtitlan. Instead, Moctezuma's brother and right-hand man had chosen an old disused section of the royal palace to make his home, steadfastly refusing any offers to have the place refurbished.

The guard at the entrance recognised Two Sign and stood smartly to attention. Not many people in Tenochtitlan did not know or recognise the famous warrior Two Sign. He was dark and tall with a muscular torso and broad shoulders. He wore his hair long and tied back but with shorn sides in the traditional manner of the warriors. His nose had a squashed and tortured appearance as the result of being broken two or three times in battle. Two Sign raised a half-hand in friendly recognition of the guard. The two smallest fingers on his right hand were missing, cloven from his fist by a blow from a battle-mace years ago in combat deep inside Oaxaca.

Two Sign gave the guard a brief nod in acknowledgement and stepped into the Tlacaelel's private apartments. Two Sign knew the layout well. He was standing in the largest of eight rooms that had once been home to one of Chimalpopoca's concubines. Tlacaelel used this room as a reception area and meeting room. His servants and four personal bodyguards used the five rooms leading off it to the right, while the first room on the left was used by Tlacaelel as an office; beyond that was his bedchamber. By Tenochtitlan's standards, the arrangement was extremely frugal, and the stark, utilitarian nature of the furnishings served to illustrate Tlacaelel's contempt for frippery. The only items in the room were a map of the lake and its surroundings pinned to the far wall and four low stools arranged neatly in the centre of the tiled floor. The map was the only one of its kind that Two Sign had ever seen. It was the height of two men and almost as wide. Made of grey cotton – by design or as a result of ageing Two Sign could not tell - the contours of the lake were painted on in a

brown dye. A swathe of forest was stippled in green, stretching in a crescent from the north of the lake, through Teotihuacan to the east and on until it encircled Chalco to the south and beyond the forest, in the south east corner smoked the mighty, brooding volcano Popocatepetl.

‘Two Sign,’ called Tlacaelel from the doorway on the left. ‘Through here, I need your advice.’

Two Sign had to duck to walk through the opening. Tlacaelel’s office was well lit. It was on a corner of the building and had two windows that Tlacaelel had had enlarged so that the soft, early morning light streamed in. One looked out across the northern edge of the Moyotlan quarter and a portion of the temple precinct could just be seen through the other. Tlacaelel was sitting cross-legged on the floor examining a sheaf of parchments that lay spread out before him. Tlacaelel could read and write better than anyone Two Sign knew, and the general kept enormous quantities of notes. He kept details on every military campaign that he was involved in, claiming that the official records from The House of Ordered Progression were too sparse and consisted of nothing more than naked triumphalism. Apparently he also spent many hours each night recording things that he had seen or had heard during the day. The papers arranged on the floor meant little to Two Sign, but Tlacaelel was studying them with a fierce intensity. Above his bushy eyebrows his forehead was furrowed with lines of concentration, and he stroked the bridge of his nose thoughtfully. The downturn of his mouth was more pronounced than usual giving his gaunt features a sombre expression. Tlacaelel’s head was shaven in the same style as Two Sign’s and the hair on the top was grown out very long and tied in a queue that reached halfway down his back. Two Sign noticed that the general, normally deeply tanned because of the time he spent with his troops, looked pale and tired. Spare me from planning and politics thought Two Sign.

‘General. How may I help?’ he asked.

Tlacaelel bade him sit down. “The scouting parties have left?”

Two Sign nodded.

“Excellent,” exclaimed Tlacaelel with a twinkle in his eye. ‘I want to change the plans we’ve made for the battle after the New Fire and I need you to check I haven’t made any mistakes.’

‘I thought we already agreed these plans with the Tlatocan.’ said Two Sign.

‘We did,’ agreed Tlacaelel, looking up from his notes. ‘I wasn’t particularly happy then but I’ve been over several times and now I’m sure they’re wrong.’

‘What about Last Medicine My Lord? Shouldn’t he be part of this discussion?’ Two Sign wondered why the commander of the Jaguar Knights wasn’t present.

‘Ideally yes, but he’s too busy organising security for the Binding of the Years. I’ll find time to advise of any changes. I think he’ll trust your judgement.’

Tlacaelel was a brilliant strategist. Two Sign had learned much as his second-in-command and had no wish to disappoint his mentor so tried to recall the details. Tlacaelel found a parchment amongst the others at his feet. It was another map, made from the bark of the fig tree. Tenochtitlan and Lake Texcoco occupied the top left-hand corner and Chalco the bottom right-hand corner.

‘This is the area we’re talking about.’ Tlacaelel indicated an area the other side of Colhuacan roughly halfway between the two cities. ‘We all know this area well.’

Two Sign looked at the map. It was another work of art. Tlacaelel certainly liked his maps. ‘It’s a lightly wooded area with lots of cover. On one side we’d have the marshes on the northern edge of Lake Chalco.’ Two Sign’s attention drifted from the map and he turned his eyes to the ceiling as he recalled the area he knew so well. ‘We’d have an advantage as the land runs slightly downhill, away from Colhuacan. As I recall, that, and the cover afforded were the reasons why the council approved.’

‘Indeed,’ Tlacaelel acknowledged. He pulled gently at his lower lip. ‘And you agree with this?’

‘I would do,’ laughed Two Sign, ‘except that your gloomy expression and the tone of your voice suggest I do otherwise!’ He watched the general carefully for a moment before considering the map again. After a few minutes, Two Sign shrugged. ‘I give up. I see nothing unusual or worrying about this choice of site for the battle. We have fought the Chalca here before.’

‘That’s exactly what’s wrong with it,’ sighed Tlacaelel. ‘Tradition is going to be the death of us. More importantly, our line of retreat consists of just one causeway,’ he added. ‘If the Chalca every gain the upper hand, they might be able to turn a minor defeat into a catastrophic rout.’

‘That’s never happened though.’

‘Not yet,’ said Tlacaelel. He moved to the window where he stood for a while in stark silhouette against the morning light. The disc of the sun was incandescent above Mount Tlaloc.

‘Do you believe the gods protect us Two Sign?’

‘Yes My Lord.’

‘Do you believe the gods enjoy looking after those who make stupid mistakes?’

‘Ah, no My Lord.’ Two Sign could see the logic in that.

‘We need to be more careful Two Sign, and less arrogant. As the empire grows, we will be fighting further from home on territory which is less familiar to us. We must take more care to examine all the factors. Even small mistakes or flaws in our plans could have disastrous consequences. I do not think Huitzilopochtli has any interest in details like this do you?’

‘I understand Tlacaelel My Lord.’

‘How many of the warriors who trained alongside you are still alive Two Sign?’

‘I’m sorry, what was that?’

‘You heard me,’ insisted Tlacaelel. ‘How many of your friends from, what is it? ten, twelve years ago are left alive?’

Two Sign knew the answer but he’d locked it away deep inside him. These were memories that usually only surfaced in the small hours of the morning when his defences were down; memories of fights and battles, some triumphant and some less so. So many of the memories carried losses with them; another face that would never smile again, another friend who would never tell another joke.

‘Three,’ whispered Two Sign. ‘There were six of us I would have called good friends and five more who we knew well. Only three of us remain.’

Tlacaelel said nothing, simply staring out of the window for a long time.

‘What a waste!’ Tlacaelel said at last. The words caught in his throat. ‘We can’t keep throwing our good men away.’

‘But we have made extraordinary gains My Lord!’ Two Sign countered.

Tlacaelel gritted his teeth. ‘But not when we fight the Chalca! We must put a stop to this futile war.’

‘Huitzilopochtli demands more sacrifice,’ pointed out Two Sign. ‘The priests are adamant that we must increase our offering in order to end the famine.’

Tlacaelel turned on him, angry now. ‘Do you believe that? This time last year, they sacrificed eight-hundred brave warriors from Chalco, and to what effect?’

Tlacaelel paced round the room and waved in frustration at nothing in particular. ‘Meanwhile, in Chalco, three-hundred of our own men were put to death along with one-hundred and fifty from Texcoco, and still the drought continues, if anything worse than ever.’

Tlacaelel suddenly swept the map from the floor and spread it out on a stone table and beckoned to Two Sign. ‘Look here!’ He jabbed at an area of the map roughly eight miles directly north of Chalco. ‘I went to look at this plain yesterday. It’s flat and mostly covered with grasses. No scrub or wooded areas; no surprises.’

Tlacaelel turned to Two Sign. ‘With our superior numbers and training, how well do you think we will fare against Chalco in these conditions?’

The big warrior nodded, beginning to see what Tlacaelel was after.

‘The Chalca will have nowhere to hide if we fight in this location,’ continued Tlacaelel, ‘but it will be harder to take captives.’

Two Sign’s stomach loudly protested its emptiness again. He rushed into his reasoning, hoping to cover the noise. ‘I agree. This open ground will suit us better but the entire army will have to somehow coordinate the moment when the fighting is done and it’s time to take prisoners. Are you certain we don’t need captives?’

‘Of course we need to pay our respects to the gods, but how will we honour Huitzilopochtli if we become so weakened by the loss of our warriors that our empire crumbles?’ Tlacaelel picked the rest of his papers off the floor. ‘Anyway, I’m not suggesting we stop taking captives. I’m just determined that we crush Chalco first, that way we’ll have less trouble from them later.’

‘Will the tlatoani approve the change of plans?’ asked the big warrior.

Clutching his precious papers to his chest, the general approached Two Sign and poked him in the chest with one finger. ‘Moctezuma will love it!’ he exclaimed. ‘It’s a chance for him to put one over Amihuatzin, and if it all goes to plan, we should still be able to take plenty of captives which should keep that scheming madman Cloud Face and his cronies quiet!’

Two Sign didn’t share Tlacaelel’s dislike of the priests. His parents had instilled in him a deep respect for the gods and their servants. As with most people, Two Sign’s parents had consulted the priests regularly for guidance, especially when their son had been born exactly between the days Serpent and Death’s Head, neither of which was deemed sufficiently auspicious. Their family priest, Fire of the Earth, had proscribed the name Two Sign and bound the child to both days, thus avoiding any firm association with either.

‘What scheming do you suspect the high priest of?’ inquired Two Sign.

Tlacaelel gave the Eagle Knight a sorrowful look. ‘Come over here my friend.’ He drew the big man over to the window where their voices would not echo and lowered his voice. ‘The priests detest me. They believe I hold this post because my brother is the tlatoani. You know this much.’

Two Sign opened his mouth to speak but the general cut him short.

‘You know, of course, that we have a number of informants. You’re responsible for one or two of them yourself.’

‘Of course. “Information is everything,”’ said Two Sign, repeating one of Tlacaelel’s favourite sayings. “The rest is preparation.”’

Tlacaelel lowered his voice again. ‘Most of them are useless, a drain on our time and my brother’s purse, but there is one in particular who is close to Mixayacatl.’

‘Do you have any details?’ Two Sign frowned.

‘No. Just vague ideas at the moment, but I’m hoping to speak to him again soon.’

‘Have you discussed this with the tlatoani?’

Tlacaelel snorted. ‘I wouldn’t trouble him with this even I had more information. No, this is a personal matter, and running to my brother for help would only fuel the priests’ dislike of me.’

‘How is your son getting on anyway?’ asked Tlacaelel, suddenly changing the subject. I hear he looks set to make you very proud.’

‘Crocodile is doing very well My Lord, it’s very kind of you to ask. As you well know he is adopted so it has very little to do with me!’

Tlacaelel laughed warmly and reached up to pat Two Sign on the shoulder. ‘Typically modest my friend. We both know you work very hard to make up for the loss of his parents.’ With an entirely innocent look he added, ‘Have you eaten this morning?’

Two Sign said that he had not.

‘Very well then,’ Tlacaelel proposed, ‘let’s go and see if Moctezuma’s palace kitchens have opened for breakfast.’ The general deposited his documents on a table and headed for the door.

‘By the Skin of Xipe, slow down!’ called Crocodile, ducking to avoid an overhanging branch as he followed in Jaguar’s footsteps.

Jaguar could hear his friend’s breathing coming in ragged gasps. With his light and easy gait, Jaguar was having no trouble keeping pace with the pack ahead. Jaguar was lean and well toned because of the constant practice at the ball game. He reflected that this might be the only part of war in which he would ever excel over Crocodile. Jaguar decided that his friend was just one of those people with a solid build, no matter what they ate or what exercise they did. His frame was too solid and muscular to fall into the graceful rhythm of the chase, especially over the rough terrain and thick vegetation they found themselves in now. Crocodile was a fighter,

not a runner. Last summer, when Jaguar had captured his first enemy in a battle against the Tlaxcala, he had turned, triumphant, only to discover that Crocodile had increased his own tally by two.

Jaguar and Crocodile were at the rear of a twelve man scouting party sent to secure captives for the ceremony of the New Fire, and to stir up trouble with the Chalca. All of this was traditional in the run-up to a major battle, but this year the tensions were running especially high as the great cycle of the years was at an end.

The sun was already high in the sky as the scouting party made its way quickly up a valley to the east of Teotihuacan. In the distance rose the ghostly outline of Mount Tlaloc, a few wispy clouds clung to its peak, like fledgling birds uneasy at the thought of independent flight. Jaguar was glad he hadn't brought his cloak. The loin cloth and light battle tunic he was wearing were already drenched with sweat from the exertion of the run. The spring weather was hot for the fourth year in a row. For months on end there seemed to have been only sporadic, light showers that barely seemed to touch the ground before they stopped again.

Jaguar listened to the noise of the pursuit. Behind him, Crocodile was puffing and blowing, ahead, the rest of the pack were quieter so that Jaguar could hear the crackling of dry twigs and rustling of the long grasses as the warriors wove their way through the desiccated landscape.

The shallow valley narrowed and began to slope upwards to a saddle between two low peaks, leading Jaguar to conclude that their objective must be close. A short while ago, Magic River had spotted what looked like a platoon of Chalca in an adjacent valley, and was now leading his own men on an intercept course.

Up ahead, a mother quail and her mottled brown chicks scattered, squeaking through the clumps of bunchgrass. Their black and white faces made the chicks looked crestfallen as they fell over each other in their haste to escape the line of running warriors. The bunchgrass was thick here in the light shade of the valley, but the large tufts looked dry and brown, as though it was still mid-summer.

The valley floor climbed more steeply now. The oak that thrived in the valley basin gradually gave way to a mixture of pine and gnarled juniper trees. Large gaps in the canopy appeared, revealing a brilliant azure sky, set high above with stretched-thin clouds that crept quietly in the direction of Huexotzingo.

Magic River stopped his warriors before they reached the top of the rise and sent Archer Eagle ahead to reconnoitre. The others gathered round for some last minute instructions. Magic River's stocky frame was not ideally suited to running long distances. His face was puce and the sweat poured from his scarred face and

body. In spite of his discomfort, he stood bolt upright with his arms folded, his chest rising and falling quickly.

‘You wanted a fight,’ he growled, ‘and now you’ve got one! Any of you one changed your minds and wants to go home?’ He scanned the faces in front of him. The men stood, frozen into immobility, for fear that any movement, no matter how small would be interpreted as a sign of weakness.

‘Good!’ said Magic River. ‘We are Mexica!’ He made a fist and thumped his chest, sneering as he did. ‘Mexica do not turn from battle!’ He wiped the perspiration that beaded on his forehead.

‘Storm Light,’ Magic River called to the youngest warrior. ‘What is the most important weapon you have?’

Storm Light’s wiry frame, sallow complexion and the wispy hair reminded Jaguar of a wind damaged maize cob and he had to suppress the urge to laugh. He did not look like the warrior type, Jaguar decided.

‘You find this funny Jaguar?’

‘No My Lord!’

‘Let me ask you something,’ said Magic River with a stern expression. ‘Is it because your father is one of the Council of Twelve that you think you’re above all this?’

Jaguar hung his head. ‘No My Lord.’

‘Well then, perhaps you can answer for our friend Storm Light...’

‘My hands,’ Jaguar muttered.

‘I didn’t hear that! Again please.’

‘My hands, My Lord!’

‘And why is that?’ asked Magic River in a voice that echoed his severe looking scar.

‘Hands make gifts for gods,’ Jaguar replied, somewhat louder.

‘Good.’ Magic River nodded thoughtfully and addressed the rest of the party. ‘We must take as many captives as we can. Tlacaelel has put out a general call asking for more intelligence on what the Chalca are up to and as you all know, the New Fire approaches and the gods must have their tribute.’ He turned his face towards the sun, signalling a prayer.

‘Sturdy souls, once more we raise our arms in battle.’ He began in a solemn tone. ‘Huitzilopochtli, we call on you for courage O Lord! Send us the power of your rage and fire our souls with vengeance so that we may purge the world of our enemies!’ Magic River turned back to the warriors and addressed the younger

members of the party. 'Remember this as you pursue our enemies. Though we Mexica are the chosen people, protected by our gods, so must we honour them and return to them their portion. Therefore, secure your enemies and bring them forth, so that we may appease the guardians of Motion.'

A brief silence was interrupted by a clatter of stones as Archer Eagle returned.

'Magic River,' he puffed, drawing level with the group. 'The men we saw are Chalca.' Beads of sweat traced lines over the man's dusty pectoral muscles as he described what he had seen. 'Perhaps twenty warriors escorting two dignitaries, approaching from the West. I think they will pass beneath our position in a few minutes.'

'No doubt seeking military assistance from Tlaxcala,' Magic River spat through his cleft lip.

Several of the warriors shook their heads sadly at this cowardly behaviour.

'Is there a route down the other side?' Magic River asked, nodding at the crest.

'The path is steep,' Archer Eagle replied, 'but there is a ravine which will provide us cover on the descent.'

'Very well, we must be quick!' Magic River motioned the troops forward and then held his right hand in the shape the closed beak of a bird, requesting silence.

Jaguar crested the hill. The forest fell away sharply on this side, but was gouged by a sharp, V-shape, that cut precipitously down the slope. The trees on the edges leant in towards the middle of the ravine where their fanning branches met giving the appearance of a tunnel below.

The war party descended cautiously to avoid dislodging any scree. The few trees that grew in the shade of the fissure were thin and contorted. Their exposed roots writhed and twisted against the rocks that held them captive. Rivulets of clear water emerged from many places, pushed up from aquifers deep in the volcanic rock. Jaguar couldn't resist the temptation to brush one of the soft, furry clumps of bright green moss that thrived in the damp conditions but it did little to sooth his churning stomach. Clusters of drooping ferns trembled as the warriors pushed on downwards.

They all reached the bottom of the ravine with Crocodile and Jaguar still bringing up the rear as they had been ordered to. Magic River was listening for sounds of the approaching enemy. When he was sure they weren't close, he stepped out to survey the situation in more detail. The ravine ended on the floor of a narrow defile that was one of the less well known routes east towards the mountains. Aside from the route they had just come down, the only way in and out was along the sandy path. Elsewhere the walls were far too steep.

Magic River completed his assessment and picked out two warriors.

‘You two come with me,’ his voice was a harsh whisper. ‘The rest of you stay here with Archer Eagle and try and stay out of sight.’ He patted Archer Eagle on the shoulder. ‘Wait until they draw level with you. We will block their escape route.’ With that the stocky warrior strode off towards the approaching foe to look for a suitable hiding place.

Jaguar watched him go.

‘By the sacred skin!’ said a voice at his side. Storm Light was watching the three warriors depart. ‘He’s mad!’ the boy whispered, glancing at Jaguar. He stared, wide-eyed, looking paler than usual. ‘Three of them... against twenty Chalca!’

‘Nine of us attacking from this end,’ Jaguar pointed out.

‘What if they try to break out that way?’ Storm Light pointed at the three warriors as they disappeared from view round a jagged, rocky outcrop.

‘You haven’t seen Magic River in action yet have you?’

Storm Light shook his head.

Crocodile overheard the conversation and cut in. ‘He was a knight for ten years you know!’ Crocodile grinned, knowing the trouble that was in store for the Chalca.

‘What happened?’ asked the younger warrior.

‘He took that injury to his face’ said Crocodile in a whisper. ‘When he recovered, he quit the knights and went back to his family.’

‘So now he only fights with his clan?’

‘That’s right,’ replied Crocodile. ‘He says he’s done his bit for the tlatoani.’

Archer Eagle hissed at them to be quiet and waved everyone back into the shadows to wait. Several of the warriors used the opportunity to empty their bladders.

Jaguar felt nervous again. He always did. His hands were cold and they looked pale. He looked at Crocodile and was annoyed to see him looking relaxed. The threat of imminent violence didn’t seem to bother him. He gave off an air of indestructibility, as though his powerful frame was too big to suffer any serious damage. Jaguar thought there was some strange magic at work for Two Sign to have adopted Crocodile; they were so alike in looks and build.

When he was ten years old, Crocodile’s village had been wiped out by a retaliation strike by the people of Oaxaca. A dozen outlying Mexica villages were torched by the raiders and their people put to death or hauled away as slaves or sacrificial offerings in the great city of Oaxaca. When the news got back to Tenochtitlan, every unit of Eagle Knights and Jaguar Knights was dispatched to re-secure the area and search for survivors. Two Sign had been with the platoon that

found the last village and came upon the butchered and charred remains of the oldest and the youngest in the village, piled up on the communal fire. Two Sign had found the boy huddled in the burnt out remains of a hut, gently rocking, his knees pulled up under his chin. He had been out collecting firewood and returned to find his grandparents dead and parents missing. Two Sign took him back to Tenochtitlan and the frightened boy had refused to leave the big warrior's side. Seven years later and now a man himself, Crocodile had the same square jaw, thin lips and the same flat nose as Two Sign. It was in his eyes that Crocodile differed from the man who had taken him under his wing. Crocodile's large, friendly eyes rolled cheerfully beneath sparse eyebrows. The overall effect was to give Crocodile a benign look that had fooled many an adversary.

Jaguar watched his friend examine his sword, checking each of the blades in turn to make sure they were tight. He felt queasy and decided to check his own weapon in the hope that it would calm his nerves. He slung a bag from his shoulder and took out the shield and his own sword. Jaguar's was the traditional style, with none of the garish embellishments that most warriors favoured. Some carved the wooden hafts and tied colourful feathers to the head, but Jaguar's father had shown him that clean lines and unfussy design allowed a warrior to check the weapon for faults more easily. He turned it over in his hands a few times, feeling the balance. It was a beautiful piece of work by Achcauhtli, the clan's armourer. Six razor-sharp shards of polished obsidian gleamed even in the gloom of the ravine. The cutting stones were mounted in two rows of three, set on opposite sides to give a clean slicing action and to allow the weapon to be carried safely.

Jaguar cursed himself, irritated because of the fear that crawled over his skin.

Suddenly, Archer Eagle pulled back from the rift opening. He made a flattening motion with his hand and the warriors shrank back further into their hiding places. The enemy were close.

Jaguar unslung his wooden shield from his back and retreated behind a mossy branch. His stomach improvised new contortions and his throat felt dry.

All the warriors readied themselves, each offering up a silent prayer to Huitzilopochtli. The passing seconds slowed down until they dripped like the amber sap from a wounded pine tree. Now the sound of approaching feet could clearly be heard.

All of a sudden, the enemy came through the narrow gap and into the defile where the warriors lay in wait. Two abreast, the Chalca knights strode along the dusty track, their feathered headgear waving as they came. Jaguar held his breath as the

first twelve emerged, the last of whom were noblemen, dressed in long cloaks of richly woven fabric. One of the noblemen held a long spear, upon which a human skull was mounted. The snow-white cranial dome was decorated with gold studs and framed with Quetzal feathers.

Just as the noblemen cleared the gap in the defile, Archer Eagle leapt at the two men in front, a blood-curdling scream in his throat. He crashed into them and three people fell in a thrash of legs and arms and those behind them were forced to stop abruptly. As the Chalca came to a halt, Jaguar, Crocodile, Storm Light and the other Mexica warriors rose slowly to their feet.

The tableaux held for a fraction of a second and then the Chalca reached for their weapons. Action finally dispelled Jaguar's attack of nerves. Now that the trap was sprung, and he faced the enemy, it seemed as though raw fire coursed through his veins. He saw Crocodile throw himself over the struggling form of Archer Eagle at the next two Chalca and in the shatter-stop time of battle, Jaguar found himself beside his friend, sword raised high and yelling like the demons of the dead.

A yell from beyond the gap signalled that Magic River and his two warriors were engaging the enemy. From the corner of his eye, Jaguar saw Crocodile swing his sword and the nearest warrior raised his shield to parry the shot, suffering a jarring shock to his wrist in the process. Immediately, Crocodile began a reverse rotation of his right arm that should have disembowelled his foe.

Jaguar didn't see the outcome because he was forced to block a sweeping blow from his own opponent. The world slowed down and fragmented into a handful of scenes, frozen as though they were carved in stone like some legendary deed of old. Rather than stop the shot directly, Jaguar instinctively ducked and stepped in under the man's sword arm and hacked his own weapon across the man's bare stomach, peeling it to ribbons of flesh. The warrior sank to his knees with a groan as his entrails spilled out. Jaguar stepped over him to draw level with Crocodile, to prevent his friend's left flank from becoming exposed.

The next man confronting Jaguar was twice his age, muscular, and had the look of a seasoned warrior. They exchanged a quick succession of blows, sword on shield, sword to sword then shield against body, each successfully defending against the other's attack. Jaguar's arm began to tire so he stepped back to buy himself more time and slow the pace a little. As he stepped back, Jaguar tripped over the body of the first man he had dispatched. Unwilling to let go of his shield or sword, Jaguar fell heavily on his backside. He cried out in pain and, sensing victory, the Chalca warrior rushed forward with his club raised on high.

Jaguar could only look up at his opponent, silhouetted against brilliant green canopy of overhanging trees, sword poised to deliver the final blow. Scintillating motes of dust swirled above, caught in the shafts of sunlight that pierced the foliage. Through the sounds of battle, Jaguar thought he heard Crocodile shouting as though in the far distance. Jaguar tried to raise his shield to defend himself but a searing bolt of pain in his left shoulder prevented him from moving. Suddenly, a huge weight fell across him. As he struggled out from underneath it, he saw it was the body of his opponent. Blood poured in shockingly crimson gouts from the warrior's skull, mixed with slivers of white bone. In his haste to kill Jaguar, the man had forgotten the other six Mexica who stood waiting behind the battle line to get into the action.

Jaguar stood up, expecting to rejoin the fray, but another warrior had taken his position and there was no room in the confines of the rift for Jaguar to get to the front. He took advantage of the enforced rest, breathing deeply as the world slewed back into normal focus.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Storm Light.

‘Yes.’ Jaguar rubbed his shoulder. ‘Who took that big man down?’ He noticed Storm Light was trembling and a thought occurred to him. ‘Was it you?’

Storm Light nodded and managed a rueful smile.

‘Wow! Thanks,’ said Jaguar, eyeing the lad with new respect.

‘What’s it like in there?’ Storm Light agitated. His eyes kept flicking from Jaguar to the fight, perhaps worried that the enemy might break through.

‘Tight,’ was all Jaguar managed.

‘Did you see Magic River?’

Jaguar replied that he hadn’t.

Suddenly, a high-pitched scream rose above the general clangour. Jaguar tried to identify the source of the noise, but the scene was too chaotic. It looked as though another Mexica warrior had advanced to fill a gap up front. The fighting had retreated a small way down the gully, but it was impossible to tell whether it was due to Magic River retreating or whether it was caused by a contraction of the Chalca ranks. Jaguar thought he could just make out Crocodile’s sword, rising and falling amidst the flailing arms and weapons.

Storm Light and Jaguar moved closer to the rear of the action, ready in case the enemy should try and break through.

Just then a sharp command cut through the noise. The fighting stopped abruptly. Warily, the Mexica warriors lowered their weapons. Five Mexica stood alongside Crocodile. It wasn’t easy for Jaguar to get a clear view from the back, but

he thought he could see Archer Eagle lying sprawled, face up amongst the ferns to the right of the path. Another Mexica lay close by, slumped over a large boulder with a vicious looking war club embedded in his skull by its glistening blades. It was the boat builder's son.

Trapped in the narrow pass, seven Chalca warriors stood in a protective huddle around the two dignitaries. They were all liberally splashed with blood and they clutched their weapons and shields with fierce desperation.

Magic River stood beyond the huddle of Chalca, blocking the defile with his solid frame. His face and arms were splashed with gore and the front of his once-white tunic was now almost entirely red. In spite of this, he appeared to be unhurt. One of the warriors he had chosen to fight alongside him was still alive, his eyes blazing with savage intensity. A dozen corpses lay about them on the ground.

'What's happening?' Storm Light whispered to Jaguar.

Jaguar ignored him, annoyed at the interruption and intent upon the detail of the stand-off. The walls of the narrow pass made it impossible for the Chalca to escape, so unless they surrendered they would have to fight their way out, but Magic River had taken a huge gamble by calling a halt to the fighting so soon. With only two warriors standing between them and the way they had come, they might yet decide to try and break free.

Moctezuma's instructions were to take captives, so Island Home North's experienced captain intended to deliver. Jaguar checked the numbers. Ten of the Chalca lay dead, for a loss of three Mexica, leaving the two sides more evenly matched. If Magic River's timing was good and the enemy capitulated, the rewards would be extraordinary.

The pause continued as the Chalca weighed the situation up. Jaguar could see them trying to work out which route would offer the least resistance.

'Come on,' Jaguar urged Storm Light forward so the two of them could take up position between the others to block up the gaps. The other way out certainly looked easier at first glance, but there was something about Magic River's solid, implacable presence and his calm demeanour that whispered death. Looking at him and tangle of bodies that lay about the captain, even Jaguar had to suppress a shudder.

A ghastly moan broke the silence. Everyone turned and stared at Archer Eagle who was still alive. He had dragged himself out of the ferns and was trying to haul himself into a sitting position against a rocky outcrop. Dark, treacle-like blood lay in a sheen over his mangled shoulder while black dirt and leaf litter mingled with the pink froth that bubbled from a wound in his chest. The warrior's once-tanned skin

looked a deathly shade of grey and he struggled to draw breath. The standoff was momentarily forgotten as every warrior watched, transfixed by the dying man.

The broken warrior slowly raised one finger and pointed at the Chalca. ‘Do... not... choose... this,’ he breathed, barely audible. The smallest of smiles tugged briefly at the corners of his mouth. He dragged another shallow breath. ‘Choose surrender...’ Here Archer Eagle coughed weakly, drooling blood. His outstretched arm dropped to his lap and his eyes glazed over before refocusing again briefly.

‘Choose... immortality.’ Archer Eagle slowly looked to one and then the other, as though looking for something. Finally his head dropped to his chest and his bubbling wound fell still.

A shocked silence ensued but Magic River knew the moment had come to appeal to the enemy. ‘Worthy sons of Chalco,’ he said. ‘You heard our noble friend, Archer Eagle. There is no escape for you. Fight on and die here in agony or,’ he paused for effect. ‘Give yourselves up and live another day, fêted as the gods’ chosen ones.’

The two dignitaries stirred as though from a trance and they bent their feathered heads in conference. They whispered in short, staccato, as the one with the spear started jabbing at the others chest. His shorter colleague nodded frequently at first and then began shaking his head. Gradually, his voice got louder and then raised an octave. The one with the spear gesticulated at his colleague a couple of times and then slapped his face hard to shut him up. He waited a moment to see if he had made his point. When there was no response, he turned gracefully to face Magic River and bowed low.

‘Brave children of the Sun,’ began the dignitary, opening with a traditional compliment. ‘We have fought valiantly. We have hurled ourselves upon the might of our enemy with terrible ferocity and yet we have been repelled.’

Magic River nodded once, looking sternly through the blackening flecks of blood across his face.

‘You have fought valiantly,’ he replied, according them the respect they sought. ‘In truth, we were in fear of our lives, but now you are outnumbered.’ Magic River twisted the truth, allowing the Chalca to save face.

The Chalca representative gratefully acknowledged Magic River’s comments and formally surrendered.

‘We honourably lay down our weapons and place ourselves in the care of our fathers.’ So saying, the dignitary instructed his warriors to place their weapons on the ground. When they had done so, he addressed them again.

‘You have acquitted yourselves well in the name of your fathers and in the true spirit of your ancestors.’ He bowed to his warriors who now stood at ease, and passed between them. He presented himself before Magic River and knelt in front of him, submitting himself in the traditional manner. The proud noblemen prostrated himself upon the ground and placed three fingers to the ground at Magic River’s feet. He wiped his fingers in the dust and touched them to his lips.

‘Honourable father I am your son. Guide me until the will of the gods is known.’

His colleague followed suit, eating dirt at Crocodile’s feet. With Archer Eagle dead and Crocodile occupying a central position, the emissary from Chalco naturally assumed he was next in command. The Chalca each picked an opponent from amongst the Mexica and submitted one-by-one. The last two stepped up to Jaguar and Storm Light and knelt in the leaf litter.

‘Father, I am yours to guide’ they intoned.

‘Son of mine, henceforth you are also son of the Sun,’ recited their captors in time.

‘What is your name?’ Jaguar asked the man at his feet.

‘Sunshine of the Seven Hills,’ the man replied, his gaze fixed firmly on the dirt. Jaguar bade him stand and looked him up and down. He was a wiry individual, old enough to be Jaguar’s father. His face was nearly flat and he had high cheekbones that suggested Tarascan lineage, but he had the narrow slit eyes and dark skin of the lake dwellers. ‘You should call me Sunshine,’ he added. He scratched nervously at his thinning black hair and gave a watery smile.

‘Very well Sunshine,’ agreed Jaguar. ‘Are you injured?’ Jaguar looked at his captive’s leg which was bleeding from a wound in his thigh.

‘It’s not as bad as it looks,’ replied Sunshine, dabbing at the cut with the free end of his loin cloth. Although it didn’t look life threatening, the cut was deep enough to have sliced through muscle and the wound steadfastly refused to be staunched.

Just then, Crocodile came over. ‘You need to close that.’ He pulled a small fabric pouch from his waist and handed it to Jaguar. ‘Needle and thread.’

‘Right,’ said Jaguar as he extracted the contents delicately. He’d seen a wound sutured closed on the battlefield once before but his only real experience of stitching was the time his mother had been unwell and he’d helped out by repairing one of his father’s tunics that had been torn in battle, that and one lesson in the military school.

‘Sit down,’ he instructed Sunshine of the Seven Hills, pointing at the fallen tree trunk behind him. The Chalca did as he was told and Jaguar set to work as quickly as he could, talking all the while to allay his nerves. He took a bone needle and some thread made from the fibres of the agave plant out of the small pouch. He spat on the needle, wiped it clean on the fabric of the pouch and ran a thread through the eye. Jaguar tried to look confident as he pushed the needle through Sunshine’s skin, as though he’d done it many times.

‘You are my second captive,’ said Jaguar. ‘Two veterans helped me take my first captive.’ He tugged the thread and made a knot before beginning again. ‘That day we fought the Tlaxcalan army. They fought hard but in the end they turned in rout.’ Jaguar frowned as he concentrated on pulling a knot tight. ‘I managed to grab one of the warriors, but he was sweaty. He nearly wriggled out of my grasp but then one of the clan elders grabbed the man's other arm.’

Sunshine listened politely, wincing as the rough needle pierced his skin.

Jaguar remembered the thrill of taking his first captive. Another veteran had caught hold of the Tlaxcalan’s queue and wrenched him to the ground, whereupon the Tlaxcalan had submitted.

Jaguar finished the last stitch in silence and for the first time, he noticed the quiet after the battle, a ghostly silence that hung over the forest. He stood up and surveyed his handiwork. Half a dozen coarse knots crossed the gouge in the captive’s thigh. It looked ugly, but the blood seemed to have stopped. With luck it would hold during the long walk back to Tenochtitlan.

‘Mictlan’s bones,’ grinned Crocodile who had been watching. ‘I thought you were trying to save him, not finish him off!’

Jaguar gave a sour look. He was still trembling from the nerves and the effort of concentration as was in no mood for jocularity.

The solemn ritual of surrender was over so while Jaguar had been tending to his captive, Magic River had directed one of his men to collect the Chalca’s weapons into a pile against the wall of the defile and line the fallen warriors up neatly along the edge of the path, ready for carrying away. With this job completed Magic River addressed those present.

‘I know this path. There’s a cave to the west, not far away. We will take the dead there and give them a proper burial.’ Magic River made it clear that the Chalca would have to help. Even the captured dignitaries were pressed into service. ‘It’s going to take two trips to get everyone down there, so we’d better get going.’

‘Come on,’ Jaguar indicated the nearest body to Sunshine who stood up gingerly, testing his damaged leg. It oozed slightly but seemed to hold. They bent down to collect up the limbs of their chosen corpse and gathered it up awkwardly. Sunshine gripped under the dead man’s armpits and Jaguar hooked his elbows under the limp knee joints. Sunshine nodded his head in the direction they were supposed to be going. Jaguar was puzzled until Sunshine managed to free a hand and made circular motions with his index finger. Suddenly Jaguar caught on. Sheepishly, he manhandled his end of the load until he was facing the other way, realising that his captive had spared him from ridicule.

Jaguar and his captive fell in with the others, who were already making off down the defile with their loads. The procession moved in an ungainly fashion along the path in the direction that the Chalca had been going, leaving two bodies behind to be collected later.

The volcanic landscape in the area was pockmarked with numerous caves, especially in the high country. Over time, lava outpourings from ancient eruptions had become eroded into complex and sometimes grotesque shapes or fractured by earthquakes. In some places, ash and pumice deposits, sandwiched between layers of solidified rock, had become exposed to the elements and washed away, revealing flat roofed caves. Extensive systems of caverns formed where underground water courses cut through the softer volcanic residue. Through such caves the dead attained the afterlife. The spirits left their earthly flesh behind and wandered down the dripping sink holes, where they would eventually reunite with Mictlantecuhtli, the god of the underworld.

Sunshine’s composure was commendable, thought Jaguar. The little man had a strong hold on the body and was as committed to the task as any of the Mexica. Jaguar hoped that he would bring honour to his people if he was ever taken captive. In a recurring dream of his, he was taken by the Chalca or the Tlaxcalans – he couldn’t be sure which – who prepared him for sacrifice. Priests dressed Jaguar in the ceremonial costume, presenting him as the living image of Tezcatlipoca, the god of drought, famine and of plagues. His memories of the dream were mostly hazy, but many details remained etched in Jaguar’s mind. First the priests painted his body black and placed a crown of quail feathers upon his head. Next came the red mantle, decorated with a skull and crossed bones. In his left hand they placed a white shield and four, pure-white arrows. In his right hand they placed the atlatl, the throwing spear. Jaguar could recall no sound from the dream, but the wide-open mouths of the priests and the crowd rang in his head like a condemnation. He knew he must be

brave and turn to face the altar, but each time he had tried, the dream ended and Jaguar awoke to find himself awash with sweat.

Jaguar shuddered and tried to concentrate on the task in hand, shifting the weight of the dead man to relieve his aching shoulders. Up ahead, others were having trouble with their loads too. The pair in front stopped to adjust their grip allowing Jaguar and Sunshine to slip past and catch up with Crocodile. Crocodile had been in the thick of the fray for the whole battle. He must have been exhausted, but Jaguar could only detect the faintest signs that he was struggling. He was bringing up the rear of his team so Jaguar got close enough to land a kick on his backside.

‘Hey worm! You’re too slow!’ cried Jaguar. ‘Hurry up or we’ll be forced to tread on you!’

Crocodile turned his head and caught sight of the mischievous grin on his friend's face.

‘At least I didn’t shirk the fight by playing dead!’ he retorted.

‘Pah! Mictlan take you!’ laughed Jaguar. He kicked Crocodile again for good measure, glad that his friend chose to fight alongside Island Home North. Technically, because Crocodile had been adopted by Two Sign, his clan was *They Who Hold Back the Water*, but since Two Sign wasn’t married, he’d spent very little time with the warrior’s family so he’d been given leave to fight with Jaguar’s clan instead.

The two had met at telpochcalli, when Jaguar became old enough to attend the military school. Not long after Jaguar joined, he was accosted by Crocodile who, in the short time he had been there, had developed a reputation as something of a bully. An argument had broken out over the ownership of an unfortunate toad which had been waddling dejectedly around the recreational area. Jaguar had taken pity on the creature, and was about to release it in the street outside the compound, from where it would be able to make its way to the canal. At that moment, Crocodile made an accusation of theft and within a matter of seconds was pushing Jaguar repeatedly on the chest. Crocodile's regular victims winced, recognising Jaguar's mounting frustration, but were secretly pleased that Crocodile had found someone new to pick on. Everyone who witnessed the event was convinced the Jaguar would flee or cower in humiliation, probably bawling his eyes out. At that fourteen, Crocodile was already larger than his contemporaries and he certainly had a weight advantage over the Jaguar.

Jaguar staggered back from another shove. He looked up from the toad in a detached way. Crocodile narrowly missed treading on the creature several times.

Jaguar imagined the split skin and squashed entrails that would result. Crocodile's sneering face swan into view, and his fatuous expression angered Jaguar. Suddenly he snapped. Spinning with lightning speed, Jaguar smashed the heel of his open palm directly into Crocodile's nose. The astonished antagonist fell backwards and sat down heavily. Black drops formed curious sooty pellets in the dust, and Jaguar tried to work out where they had come from, until he saw Crocodile's broken nose, gushing blood into his cupped hands.

From that day on Jaguar had Crocodile's respect and it wasn't long before the two became firm friends. They could often be seen together, out in search of trouble. With a co-conspirator in the high jinks of adolescence, Crocodile's exploitation of his fellow schoolmates stopped, as Jaguar found more creative means of entertainment. On one occasion they stole a fisherman's canoe, intent on paddling it clear across to Texcoco, until they accidentally overturned it in the middle of the lake, forcing them to swim for almost half an hour to regain the shore.

'There it is,' called a voice from ahead, bringing Jaguar's attention back to the present. The convoy had at last reached the cave. Jaguar and Sunshine lowered the dead warrior to the ground and arched their backs, trying to ease the cramp. At this point in the defile, the path began to slope back downhill quite steeply, and the dirt path disappeared among haphazard steps of broken rock. A massive slab of Tezontle jutted out from the right-hand cliff-face, similar to the black basalt used for the sacrificial altar of the Great Temple. The slab lay at an angle, its far end lay on a level with the path, but the nearer end was propped up on a large boulder, forming a gaping horizontal crack. Yellow-green creepers festooned the sides of the dark slab, and a gnarled juniper tree grew out from above it. The tree's branches pointed up the rift, combed by the channelled winter winds into a rough and threadbare alignment.

The gap beneath the slab was wide enough for two people to lie across it, but it was very low.

'The entrance isn't big enough!' exclaimed Crocodile.

'Perhaps not for a fat pig like you,' scoffed Jaguar. 'I could easily get in there.'

Just then Magic River made his way to the head of the convoy and overheard the exchange.

'You two,' he said, beckoning to Jaguar and Crocodile. He wiped at the sweat and blood that caked his forehead with a corner of his tunic. 'You seem keen to try out the cave. Get in there and check it out?'

'What, get inside?' asked Crocodile.

‘Crocodile, I’ve got no time for your idiocies,’ said Magic River, a note of exasperation creeping into his voice. ‘There are two more bodies to bring down here and we’re a long way from home, so get in there and make sure it’s a worthy burial place for these men.’

‘What are we looking for?’ Jaguar asked sincerely.

‘Just...’ Magic River waved them away. ‘You’ll know when you get in there!’ With that he began arranging for collection of the remaining corpses.

Jaguar and Crocodile bent down beneath the overhanging slab to inspect the entrance to the cave. Beyond the mouth itself, the darkness was profound. Jaguar could just make out a drop down to the floor.

‘Move aside blubber boy.’ Jaguar prodded Crocodile’s muscled torso and backed towards the ledge. He lowered himself into the opening, gingerly extending his right leg until he felt it touch solid ground. Very little light penetrated the wedge shaped aperture. While Jaguar waited for his eyes to adjust, Crocodile wriggled through the gap and eased himself down to the floor of the cave. The basalt roof of the cave continued unbroken into the depths for two or three paces until it vanished into the inky blackness.

‘How far in do you think it goes?’ said Crocodile.

Jaguar shrugged.

‘Let’s find out,’ he suggested and crept further into the cave. He strained his eyes into the darkness, trying to see the ground, the walls, ceiling or any discernible feature. People disappeared in caves like this and Jaguar didn’t want to add his name to the list. Jaguar became nervous. There was a fracture in the stone roof that seemed to run across the width of the cave, but Jaguar could see nothing of the floor. It had a curious velvety quality of black that he didn’t like at all and the air had a pungent, earthy smell. As Crocodile drew level with him, Jaguar put out a hand to stop his friend going any further.

‘Wait Crocodile, I think there’s a hole.’

Jaguar stooped and reached down to touch the floor. He stretched out a little further and the floor disappeared. Jaguar groped about until he found a stone and lobbed it into the inky darkness so that it would land a few paces in front of where they stood.

Silence.

For a second, Jaguar doubted that he’d thrown the stone at all. The almost total sensory deprivation in the cave made it hard to trust the little information coming in

from his surroundings. A moment later there was a distant, muffled clank of stone bouncing off stone, a brief clatter and then silence.

‘By the shredded Skin of Xipe! It is a hole,’ exclaimed Crocodile. ‘I wonder how close we are to the edge? It must go down all the way to the Land of the Dead.’

‘No,’ said Jaguar, unsure. ‘I heard it hit the bottom.’

‘That wasn’t the bottom. It just bounced off a wall and then carried on down. We’d better get out of here in case it lands on Mictlantecuhtli’s head. He won’t be very pleased.’

Jaguar knew Crocodile was joking, but he still didn’t like it. The Lord of the Underworld presided over a grim realm, where the mayeque, the peasants went when they died. Also, those unfortunate enough not to die in combat or upon the sacrificial altar, made the arduous journey through nine levels of infernal torture until they reached the Land of the Dead. The thought of Mictlantecuhtli’s skeletal features rising from the depths to see who had disturbed him made Jaguar apprehensive.

A sudden draught of damp air blew up from the abyss, like the foetid exhalation of a dying man. Jaguar’s skin went cold and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. His flesh crawled and he stood rooted to the spot.

‘Let’s get out of here!’ cried Crocodile and turned on his heel.

Jaguar whirled, stumbled to the entrance, and leapt through the narrow opening, out into the dazzling sunlight. Crocodile was just behind him.

‘What’s wrong with you two?’ asked Storm Light. He looked down at the boys who lay gasping on the warm earthen path. ‘You’re both as white as axolotl.’

‘Did you see a snake in there?’ Sunshine asked politely.

‘More likely they just met the spirits of their ancestors,’ laughed a Mexica.

In the warmth of the defile, Jaguar quickly regained his composure.

‘No! But we did nearly fall down a huge hole,’ he replied. ‘It’s the perfect place to put these warriors, but we’ll have to stay away from the back of the cave. It’s too dangerous.’

While they waited for Magic River to return with the last of the bodies, Jaguar and Crocodile described the cave to the others. When all of the bodies had been ferried to the mouth of the cave, Magic River instructed Jaguar and Crocodile to get back inside so there would be someone to pass the corpses to.

‘Any of you Chalca know the burial rights?’ asked Magic River, unwilling to send more of his own men into the cave.

Sunshine volunteered.

'I spent two years studying to become a priest,' he explained as he followed Jaguar under the stone slab.

Those still outside placed the bodies on the lip of the drop into the cave. From there, Jaguar, Crocodile and Sunshine could drag them in and set them against the left-hand wall. Jaguar recognised Archer Eagle's body as it was handed down, but just as he and Crocodile caught hold of the warrior's legs, his damaged shoulder tore free. Magic River lowered their comrade down by his other arm then passed the other limb to Jaguar. Somehow the severed arm was more gruesome than its lifeless owner. Ragged strips of flesh hung about the remains of the joint and although the weight of the thing surprised Jaguar, the realisation that it was still warm was even more unsettling. He was glad to dispose of it alongside Archer Eagle's body.

Soon they were finished, and thirteen warriors lay in a row, barely visible in the gloom. Sunshine said a short prayer to Huitzilopochtli, commending the souls of the dead to him and earnestly requesting that they be spared from an eternity in Mictlan's realms.

Jaguar and Crocodile helped Sunshine out of the cave. The sun had passed its zenith, casting the floor of the rift into shadow. A solemn silence descended over the scouting party and its captives as they set out for Tenochtitlan.

Chapter 3 - Calli

Two dozen priests were hard at work cleaning the platform at the top of the great pyramid of Tenochtitlan. Although the sun would soon be dipping below the western cordilleras, the stone of the sacrificial altar and twin shrines of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc were baking hot. The stone radiated an intense heat that had been captured during the day.

From his place by one of the huge buttresses that flanked the top of the steps, Feathered Darkness looked up briefly and drank in the surroundings that gave such meaning to his life. He cast a critical eye over the three men who had been tasked with scrubbing bloodstains from the chacmool. More priests were working their way down the two vertiginous stairways, scraping and sluicing as they went, rivulets of black water cascading down to the base of the stepped pyramid ahead of them.

The chacmool was a statue of a recumbent figure wearing a breechcloth, headpiece and splendid halter that were painted alternate colours of red, cobalt blue and brilliant white. Placed on the figure's stomach and cradled gently in his hands was the ceremonial bowl. The exterior of the receptacle was painted red while the interior was lined with beaten gold and shone like the sun itself.

Behind the sacrificial altar sat the two shrines. The buildings tapered as they rose, ending in flat roofs fully twenty feet above the level of the sacrificial platform. Each had a single square entrance at the front. On the left was the shrine of Tlaloc, the God of Rain. The upper fascia of Tlaloc's shrine above the doorway was inset with four rectangular panels inset with gold. By contrast, the upper fascia of Huitzilopochtli's shrine had a single large recessed panel, from which square bricks protruded in a rectilinear pattern and around which danced myriad miniature warriors in relief.

The power of the gods was manifest to Feathered Darkness in this glorious structure. Its height, rising majestically as it did, above Lake Texcoco and its surroundings, imbued Feathered Darkness with wonder. To him, it was the most remarkable creation of the human race and at the same time, a reminder of the fragility of people, when it was compared with the vastness of the cosmos created by the gods.

A commotion behind Feathered Darkness alerted him to the arrival of

Cloud Face. Feathered Darkness glanced down the steps. Cloud Face was shouting at the priests who were now halfway down. Two of the priests climbed back

up a few steps and bent to tackle some unseen stain while the remainder resumed their scrubbing with renewed vigour.

Feathered Darkness checked the altar and chacmool again and was relieved to see that it was spotless. As Cloud Face reached the platform, Feathered Darkness dispatched the acolytes to help clean the steps. As always, Feathered Darkness felt a mix of trepidation and awe in the presence of the high priest.

The many hours spent cleaning the chacmool seemed to have paid off. For once, Cloud Face had no criticism to offer. 'Are you done here?' he said.

'Yes My Lord.'

'Good. I need your help.'

Feathered Darkness nodded, hiding his surprise. Cloud Face never honoured him by asking for his advice. Cloud Face walked towards the western edge of the temple that looked out over the oldest part of the city and on the far bank, beyond it, the burgeoning district of Tlatocan.

'People are forgetting the old ways,' Cloud Face said bitterly.

Feathered Darkness was well aware of the high priest's dismay over the waning power of the priests but was wise enough to let Cloud Face work his own way round to the point. Feathered Darkness' veneration of the old man had not blinded him to Cloud Face's dangerous nature. The irascible high-priest was, he decided long ago, the perfect mouthpiece on earth for the God of War and Fire.

'When I was a young man,' continued the Cloud Face, 'our ruler sought guidance from the gods.' He turned to check that his second in command was paying attention and then set off along the edge of the platform at a leisurely pace.

'The tlatoani at that time, Chimalpopoca, was a simple man, but true to spirits of our ancestors. He understood that his power derived from the supreme authority bestowed on him by Huitzilopochtli, and so his council, in all matters, was the high priest.'

Cloud Face fell silent for a moment as the two of them turned onto the northern edge of the platform. He appeared to be deep in thought, staring at his feet as they padded along the precipitous edge of the temple, and then at last he spoke again.

'Feathered Darkness,' he began.

'Yes My Lord?'

'I'm sure you consider yourself as a candidate to replace me when the time comes?' Cloud Face's tone was that of an idle muse.

'I had not given it much thought My Lord,' lied Feathered Darkness smoothly. 'That time must still be a long way off.'

‘I think we must both pray that it is,’ snapped Cloud Face. ‘I have yet to see you realise the potential I thought you had.’

Feathered Darkness tried to quell a growing anxiety at the direction this conversation was heading, and of his proximity to the steep edge of the pyramid that plunged a hundred feet to the ground below. Cloud Face’s last assistant was disembowelled five years ago as punishment for fainting at a sacrificial ceremony and the high priest had not mellowed much since.

‘How have I failed you?’ asked Feathered Darkness, trying to keep his voice from catching.

Cloud Face stopped and turned, poised confidently at the platform’s edge and fixed the younger man with eyes as black as fathomless as the night. ‘You,’ he said, ‘are supposed to be my eyes and my ears! Your spies have provided no useful information to me.’

‘My Lord!’ exclaimed Feathered Darkness, ‘That information about Tlacaoel...’

‘What of it? Where is the detail...where is the follow up?’

The wide expanse of Lake Texcoco spread out behind the high priest was such a beautiful sight from way up on top of the temple, its surface sparkling and dancing. Feathered Darkness loved that view. Born on the day Four-Water, his horoscope preordained a life of priesthood, but from the moment he had stood between the twin shrines on the temple top and looked out across that vista, Feathered Darkness had known with utter certainty that he was a servant of the gods. Remembering this, Feathered Darkness found his centre and grew calm.

‘My Lord,’ he began again. ‘I have gleaned many fragments of information, but you would not wish me to waste your time with idle gossip and half truths.’

‘You will just have to try harder. There are a number of priests who would gladly take your place. Don’t give me a reason to try them out. That would put you in a precarious position wouldn’t it?’ Cloud Face glanced at the ground below before continuing, ‘This plan depends upon digging up some dirt we can pin on one or more clan elders! Snake Eyes and Devine Cactus have rallied to the cause, but we must show them we can make progress.’

‘I understand My Lord.’ Feathered Darkness’ tone was placatory. ‘It’s just a matter of time...’

‘We don’t have time!’ exploded Cloud Face. ‘That “Snake Woman” Tlacaoel is practically in charge already! Moctezuma seems to just grin and nod his head to everything his brother says.’

‘Alright,’ said Feathered Darkness seriously. ‘We’ll redouble our efforts. I may have to make an example of one of my informers to inspire the others.’

‘See that you do!’ sneered Cloud Face. ‘Your future depends upon it.’ With that, Cloud Face stalked off back to the steps, his black robes fluttering to keep up.

Without the high priest to keep him there, Feathered Darkness moved away from the edge but continued the route around the four sides of the temple-top, thinking as he walked. He was not afraid. It was an irritating fix though. His heart was true and Huitzilopochtli would be his guide and judge, whatever happened. Feathered Darkness ran a hand through his long, well groomed hair. Based in their tight-knit local communities, the clans were hard to infiltrate. It was nigh-on impossible for an outsider to gain their confidence, so the trick was to turn one of them on a minor misdemeanour and use them to uncover something to control another, more important member of the clan. The trouble was that after nearly three months of trying, they still had nothing to go on. As for the threat of replacement, Feathered Darkness wasn’t convinced there was a long list of applicants for the post of Cloud Face’s right-hand man. Still, it couldn’t be ruled out entirely.

Dusk was falling by the time the scouting party secured passage to Ecatepec by canoe. The sky was clear and cold air from the mountains was seeping down to the valley floor. On the way back, Magic River’s band of men had been joined by two more groups. They journeyed on together and recounted the events of the day. In all, the newcomers had taken five captives in contrast to the twelve that Magic River’s group had taken. They listened in awe to the tale of the skirmish in the narrow pass.

Several hundred people turned out onto the streets of Tepeyacac to see the warriors. Magic River commandeered water and fruit from the town’s elders and there were a great many questions from the townsfolk about the captives and how they had been taken. After a brief rest, the tired warriors set out onto the raised road that cut south over Lake Texcoco to Tenochtitlan. In spite of the gathering darkness, the Chalca looked keenly at everything around them. None of them had ever been this close to Tenochtitlan before.

‘So this is one of the famous causeways,’ exclaimed Jaguar’s captive. ‘How long ago were they built?’

‘There have always been paths through the marsh,’ replied Jaguar. ‘Since our ancestors moved to the island though, each tlatoani in turn has carried out building

work to improve access to the city.’ In spite of his exhaustion, Jaguar felt a surge of pride. Tenochtitlan was the centre of the world and the envy of all who set eyes on her and the magnificent engineering works of the Mexica. The causeway they were travelling was wide enough for twenty warriors to walk abreast, purposely rebuilt to move an army on and off the island quickly.

Sunshine piped up again as they approached a bridge. ‘Is this one of those defences that can be dismantled or dropped into the lake at a moment’s notice?’

Magic River overheard and cut in. ‘We will give no answer to that question. You should not believe everything that you have heard from merchants and travellers.’

The captives dismissed Magic River’s words and there was a general murmur of appreciative noises as they crossed the bridge and marvelled at the stout wooden trusses and a central section that was looked as though it was built to hinge down on one side.

A bright moon shone above Texcoco to the east, providing light for the last part of their journey. Over the black expanse of Lake Texcoco, a stripe of blue-white light made a shimmering pathway to the far shore while either side, motes of brilliant silver winked in and out of existence as moonlight danced upon the ripples of the lake.

It seemed impossible to Jaguar that all this might end in five days time. The end of the fifty-two year calendar was imminent and was preying on everyone’s minds. When it was discussed, it was in hushed voices. Some dismissed it as a minor obstacle, something the priests would easily put right with a well conducted ceremony. Yet if the ‘Binding of the Years’ failed and the priests could not light the New Fire, then some great cataclysm would surely follow. This was where the priests and the elders were unable to shed any light. Would the end come quickly in a sudden blaze or would it come slowly? Perhaps this prolonged drought would worsen until the world was full of desiccated corpses.

Jaguar sighed and tried to put it out of his head. Ahead he could see Tenochtitlan, standing proud of the lagoon that surrounded it. The moonlight caught the edges of the darkened buildings, giving them an ethereal glow, and towering above the dwellings in the centre of the island was the Great Temple itself. Seeing it, Jaguar made a silent prayer to Huitzilopochtli.

The evening air was still and quiet. The barefoot warriors made very little noise as they walked along the causeway. The only sound was the low chattering of a disgruntled duck among the chinampa.

‘No frogs,’ said Sunshine of the Seven Hills suddenly.

‘What?’ chorused a few of the warriors.

‘It’s the mating season,’ said Jaguar’s captive, shrugging his shoulders.

‘Oh yes,’ Crocodile acknowledged, looking over his shoulder. ‘This time of year, they should be croaking loud enough to wake the dead!’

Bringing up the rear, Magic River overheard the comment. ‘Are there any at your end of the lake?’

‘None!’ This time, one of the dignitaries from Chalco spoke up.

Despite the low water level of the lake, the frogs should have been in full song. ‘No,’ continued Magic River. ‘The famine is so bad you can’t even get them at the market anymore. Since the famine started everyone’s been out catching what they can to feed their families; now even the frogs are gone!’

Finally, the warriors reached the outskirts of the city. Here the ditches, cultivated banks and the occasional farmer’s house gave way to firmer ground, where the causeway joined the island in the quarter of Cuepopan. Torches burned on all the major street intersections.

At the sound of the approaching footfall, people crowded out of their houses to cheer the brave soldiers home. Men lit more reed torches to help light the way. Women craned their necks to see if their husbands were among the returning heroes, and children bounced excitedly up and down, trying to catch a glimpse of the captured enemy. One young girl shrieked as she caught sight of the Chalca and ran to her mother’s side, wailing in abject terror.

The Chalca walked in single file, flanked by their captors. They held their heads up high and tried to make a good impression. They were fierce, proud warriors. By displaying their strength, they brought glory upon their captors, and therefore upon themselves as well.

Soon the Serpent Wall was visible, and rising behind it, the towering apex of the Great Temple, silent and forbidding.

Once the warriors were inside the temple complex they could see the whole magnificent stone edifice. Jaguar gazed up in wonder at the temple. It always left him feeling breathless.

‘Welcome to you brother’ boomed Moctezuma.

Tlacaelel raised an arm in salute at his brother who reclined on the far side of the great hall with several courtiers and a dozen women. Queen Chichimecacihuatzin

wasn't present, presumably already retired to her bedchamber. A dozen torches added their smoky, orange light to the white moonlight that lanced in from the three large windows on the left-hand side of the hall.

'Have you been working late again?' called the tlatoani.

'Yes My Lord,' replied Tlacaelel. As he approached his brother, Tlacaelel was careful to keep his eyes on the floor.

'Come now Tlacaelel!' Moctezuma chided. 'How many times must I remind you that we are brothers?'

Tlacaelel loved his brother. He was not in thrall to the man, but the notion that they were equals was absurd. Moctezuma was a tall, charismatic leader of men and the people adored him as much as they worshipped the god he represented. Tlacaelel felt that if the people had not chosen his brother to rule Tenochtitlan, Huitzilopochtli himself would have blazed a fiery trail down from the heavens to correct their error.

Moctezuma put an arm around his brother's shoulder and led him out of the hall and into the wide expanse of the Emerald Garden. The moon was bright enough to make out the paths that criss-crossed through the tlatoani's garden. This recent project of Moctezuma's was beginning to take shape. What had begun as a large and dusty courtyard now had a number of large saplings and cactus. Tlacaelel admired a particularly healthy blood-spine cactus whose five thigh-thick, ribbed trunks were covered in the most vicious looking needles that Tlacaelel had ever seen.

'My gardeners brought that all the way from Otumba,' said Moctezuma noticing his brother's gaze. 'I've decided not to plant too many water-loving trees from the lowland forests or my gardeners will spend their entire time running backwards and forwards with buckets of water. Perhaps if the rains return...' Moctezuma's voice trailed off.

'A wise decision My Lord,' nodded Tlacaelel. 'There are so many beautiful plants from the highlands that will thrive here whatever the weather.'

The two men walked a broad avenue of ahuehuete saplings that Tlacaelel felt sure would require a monumental effort to keep alive in this drought.

'You wanted to speak to me brother?' asked Moctezuma. Here, he turned towards a carved stone bench and sat down, gesturing for his brother to follow suit. 'Is it about the New Fire?'

'No tlatoani, it is not.' The stone bench was cold and the night time dew had made it slightly damp. 'Of course I am as concerned as everyone else that the ceremony proceeds without a hitch.'

Moctezuma laughed softly ‘And there was I thinking you had come to complain again about the number of sacrifices!’

‘Well there is some relevance with what I wish to discuss.’

Here Moctezuma turned sharply to his brother. Although it was too dark to make out any features on his face, it was clear that he was not happy.

‘I’ve warned you before,’ said Moctezuma. ‘The priests will not countenance your plans. The gods must be honoured in the proper way!’

Not far off in the city, two dogs barked in a demented conversation of their own. Above the tallest trees in the garden, bats swooped and jinked, briefly silhouetted against the almost-full moon. Moctezuma showed no sign of continuing, so Tlacaelel began again, certain now that his brother would hear him out.

‘Our people have done extraordinary things.’ Tlacaelel pointed out. ‘Our exodus from Aztlan, the creation of this city, the forging of the Triple Alliance...’ The stone bench still felt cold.

‘Brother, we still have a long way to go. Our people could make their mark. History will tell of the Mexica who conquered the world from east coast to west. First Chalco, then Tlaxcala and beyond. Think of it! With the name of Moctezuma on their lips, the Jaguar Knights and Eagle Knights can take enlightenment back to the barbaric northern lands from whence our ancestors emerged. You could be remembered for spreading our civilisation far to the south where it is said that mountains rise ten times higher than Popocatepetl from a never ending forest.’

‘Brother you forget yourself.’ There was a cautionary edge to Moctezuma’s voice, but it was clear that he was interested.

‘You know as well as I do that we cannot feed our people now. We rely upon the lowlands for our food and they demand such prices that we can barely pay! We can take them for ourselves but we need more men, better trained and more experienced,’ continued Tlacaelel. ‘I have no problem with fighting the Chalca, but if we must do it, let us crush them and put an end to it.’

‘But we will not succeed without Huitzilopochtli. Balance is what we need. Sacrifices must be made.’

‘Mixayacatl is a menace. Are you just repeating what he says?’

‘Yes, and with good reason. You know that I am Huitzilopochtli’s chosen one and that means I have certain responsibilities.’ Moctezuma’s voice had a hard edge to it so Tlacaelel knew that he would have to choose his next words carefully.

‘Balance was your word brother and I agree with that.’ Tlacaelel watched the silhouette for a change but there was none. ‘What I am suggesting is not that we stop

taking captives, in fact it is to the contrary. If you gave our warriors free reign against our enemies, I believe we would take more captives, not fewer, but more importantly, we would lose many fewer of our own people!’

‘What has that to do with balance?’ asked Moctezuma.

‘Right now, the balance is wrong.’ Tlacaelel shrugged. ‘Our army is constrained by the choice of enemy and battlefield.’

‘How so?’

‘If we field all of our forces and choose a different location, we could end this ceremonial war against Chalco that costs us so many men.’ There, it was said. Tlacaelel breathed a little easier now that he had aired the main argument. He watched as the ruler of Tenochtitlan gazed at the moon.

‘I think I’m beginning to understand the sweep of your ambition dear brother,’ said Moctezuma after a while. ‘And you believe that enemies further afield will provide for our gods?’

‘I do.’

Here Moctezuma stood up and Tlacaelel was pleased to follow suit as his backside had almost gone completely numb sitting on the frigid granite bench.

‘It seems I have underestimated you again Tlacaelel. Do you have a plan?’

‘Two Sign and I have redrawn the plans for the coming battle with Chalco,’ explained Tlacaelel as the two headed back for the warmth of the palace.

‘And you want me to help you get these approved at tomorrow’s Great Council?’

Tlacaelel nodded and here his brother laughed aloud, surprising him with the warmth of his voice and by putting an arm round his shoulder.

‘You know what’s funny?’ asked Moctezuma and continued without waiting for an answer. ‘There you are thinking big, serious thoughts about world domination, all of which I heartily approve of, but what appeals to me most is putting one over that pompous idiot Amihuatzin! Yes, let’s teach the ruler of Chalco a lesson he won’t forget in a long time,’ added Moctezuma with a twinkle in his eye. ‘After that, we’ll see about the rest of our troublesome neighbours!’

Tlacaelel gave a wan smile, still too cold to enjoy his brother’s mirth.

‘What?’ exclaimed Moctezuma, misunderstanding. He burst out laughing again. ‘You think I enjoy that arrogant upstart sitting in his foetid palace a few leagues from here and sending his ill-mannered envoys to me with their demands and their petty threats?’

The two men reached the outer hall where two Grey Privy Knights stood guard.

‘Go make your plans brother. I’ll support you at the council meeting but you must bring me victory.’

Moctezuma winked as Tlacaelel took his leave.

News of the returning warriors preceded them so that Feathered Darkness had time to assemble an appropriate reception party of priests. Two dozen raiding parties had already returned before nightfall and a rumour had begun to circulate that the remainder had been captured, so there was widespread relief when they were seen crossing the causeway to Tlatleloco. The temple precinct was mostly unlit so Feathered Darkness dispatched four priests to set up torches around the central courtyard to light the proceedings. The yellow flames guttered unenthusiastically, and lent a sickly colour to the priests’ pale skin. Their cinnamon-coloured garments looked black in the feeble light.

In the centre of the courtyard and directly opposite the Great Temple stood Tizoc’s stone, and behind that stood the skull-rack. As the flickering torches added to the flat, grey light of the moon, the skull-rack seemed to come alive. The skull rack was a rectangular stone plinth, about thirty feet long that stood about four feet high. It was finely carved and decorated, the main motif of the carvings being that of a skeletal face. Row-upon-row of tall wooden poles, set six feet apart, pointed up at the night sky from the top of the plinth like a palisade. Hundreds of tiny holes were drilled at regular intervals up the poles, through which thin rods were threaded horizontally, and suspended from the rods in their thousands were human skulls, the heads of sacrificial victims. Ten layers deep, suspended from the wooden rods by a pair of matching holes in each temple, the grinning skulls shone coldly in the moonlight, their empty eye-sockets the colour of the night sky. Feathered Darkness was delighted with the effect that the recent cleaning of the temple had had on this structure.

There wasn’t a lot to do but wait for the warriors to arrive and for a while, Feathered Darkness caught himself listening to a couple of the priests, one of whom was new to the priesthood and clearly obsessed with the minutia and the proper running of things.

‘The overriding problem,’ said the acolyte at one point, ‘seems to be due to poor calculation and implementation of proportional tribute to the gods which, quite naturally, has resulted in the unfavourable weather and poor crop yields.’

‘You’ve explained this to me already,’ said the second man. He was a dour looking man, who was attending to one of the torches that was reluctant to stay alight. He was clearly unimpressed with his new charge.

‘Yes, but unless we start acting on the natural balance, we won’t be able to bring back the rains. Tlaloc is under-represented.’

‘Give it a rest,’ said the other. ‘You’ve been on about theological balance all day.’

‘It’s very important’ retorted the acolyte, clearly hurt. ‘Anyway, it’s Proportional Pantheistic Attribution not theological balance!’

‘Hmph!’ said his mentor, prodding at the end of the torch with doubtful expression.

‘As I was saying,’ said the acolyte, his enthusiasm undiminished. ‘The multitude of deities who protect and control every aspect of our lives must see a fair and even handed apportioning of the dues which we have to offer, based on seniority, time of year and other relevant circumstances.’

Feathered Darkness could see the older man nodding casually, evidently hoping the gloom would mask his indifference. The eager acolyte showed no signs of drawing his monologue to any immediate conclusion. The younger members of the priesthood could always be counted on to latch onto new ideas.

‘It should be clear that a problem of this complexity can only be handled with any degree of competence by persons fully trained in such matters...’

Feathered Darkness stopped listening when he noticed an armed guard of warrior-priests entered the courtyard. They began to form two lines leading out to the holding cells where the captives would be kept until the ceremony. They had just sorted themselves out when the warriors entered from the opposite side.

Of the returning warriors, Feathered Darkness recognised very few. In truth, it wasn’t very easy to distinguish one from the other, so blackened were they with blood and dust. A thick-set, ugly looking man separated from the group and walked over to the priest. There was no mistaking Magic River. The leader of each of the other two scouting parties followed the big man to begin the formal handover. Feathered Darkness greeted the warriors and asked each of them how many captives their respective groups had taken.

Then it was Magic River’s turn. ‘Twelve,’ he answered.

‘No,’ said Feathered Darkness as though to a child. ‘Just for your group.’

‘Twelve My Lord,’ Magic River repeated.

Feathered Darkness shook his head. ‘Extraordinary!’ He looked at ring of warriors who stood encircling the Chalca. ‘Nine of you took twelve captive?’

‘That’s right My Lord. It was an unusual encounter.’

Feathered Darkness congratulated Magic River and began the formal proceedings to accept the captives.

‘Brave warriors we greet your safe return with joy.’

‘Your humble servants bring these gifts O Lord!’ responded Magic River gesturing behind him.

Here Feathered Darkness summoned three of the attendant priests, one each from the major deities of Tlaloc, Xipe Totec and Mictlantecuhtli. He noticed that one of them was the one who had been arguing with the young acolyte. At least with the ceremony underway he had been able to escape the tyrannical theorising of his young charge.

‘In the name of the Lord of War and of Fire and of the God of Water and of Rain and in the name of ‘He of the Flayed Flesh’ and of the Lord of the Underworld, we accept your gifts and name them “Sacrifice”.’

‘We place our charges into your care,’ replied Magic River in a serious tone.

Feathered Darkness and the other three priests now pushed back the long sleeves of their robes to expose their upper arms. Each of them then produced in their other hand, as if by magic, a long bone needle.

‘Accept this offering of ours as a promise upon the lives of these captives,’ intoned all four priests. As the final words were uttered, each priest plunged the needle smoothly through the crook of his own his elbow under the tendon. Staring fixedly at Magic River, who had by default become the undisputed leader of all three raiding parties, the priests worked the needles back and forth until the blood ran freely from the wound. Each then withdrew the needle, cleaned it with the hem of their robes and hid them away.

Now Feathered Darkness summoned for the captives to be brought forward. One after another, the warriors presented their captives. Each was named and blessed in turn.

‘Now is the parting of the ways.’ chanted the priests as each was introduced.

One after another, their captors recited The Severance.

‘Treasured Son, now you are one with our gods!’

Here the captive could respond if he spoke nahuatl and knew the words. All these captives were from Chalco and knew the ceremony.

‘Honoured Father, may the Gods watch over you.’

Two of the warrior-priests then escorted the captives to the armed guard that led from the courtyard.

Feathered Darkness breathed a sigh of contentment and rubbed his arm where he had pushed the bone needle through. It hurt more than usual but that was no bad thing. The act of auto-sacrifice gave Feathered Darkness a strong sense of being in control of himself and it always left him feeling calm.

No more warriors were expected that evening so the priests' duties were over. These late additions to the number of captives being prepared for the ceremony of the Binding of the Years brought the total to six-hundred and fifteen, a figure that Feathered Darkness was very pleased with. Cloud Face had set him the target of five-hundred and twenty, exactly two for each day in the calendar year, so they were well past that. Perhaps, if the ceremony was successful they would set some free as a gesture of goodwill.

Feathered Darkness watched as the warriors filed out of the courtyard. It was only then that he recognised one of them by his gait. The street outside was too dark to be able to make out their features, but this young man's movement was powerful yet distinctively fluid. Feathered Darkness was not a great lover of the ball game, it seemed a frivolous distraction from the more important things in life, but there were few people in Tenochtitlan who had not heard of Ocelotyotl, Heart of the Jaguar. Feathered Darkness had even seen him play once and remembered a drunken nobleman amongst the spectators telling him that Jaguar was the youngest and best exponent of the ball game in Tenochtitlan.

The priests who had assisted with the reception were collecting the torches and preparing to leave. The warriors had made it out of the courtyard where, freed from the constraints imposed by religious decorum in the temple complex, they were chattering excitedly amongst themselves, congratulating each other. There were even one or two whoops of joy.

Feathered Darkness smiled. He turned and was about to leave when he remembered something else the nobleman had said in slurred words, something about the young man being the son of a commoner and a clan leader. Without any real volition of his own, he found himself drifting over to the gates through which the warriors had left, from where he could hear what they were saying.

'Two more!' said a solid looking young warrior, slapping Heart of the Jaguar on the back. 'You only need to take two more captives and you will be eligible to join the knights.'

Magic River said something, but Feathered Darkness couldn't make it out. Whatever he said it had to have been funny as the warriors all laughed.

'Never mind me,' replied Jaguar. 'What about Crocodile? After today's haul, he's already eligible to sign up with the knights!'

One of the young men piped up, 'How old are you Crocodile?' There was some more conversation that was too faint to hear and then same man exclaimed in astonishment. 'No, no one that young!'

Feathered Darkness pretended to check the walls for torches and got a bit closer just as the warriors were beginning to disband and head for home. No one noticed the priest with black hair and dark robes in an unlit passageway.

Jaguar and the one he called Crocodile were slower than the others to move off. Feathered Darkness heard something about a girl called 'Precious Flower' and Jaguar mentioned the name 'Two Sign'. The priest wondered why the commander of the Eagle Knights had been mentioned. At last the two young men finally moved off and all Feathered Darkness heard as they departed was something to do with 'Island Home'.

Feathered Darkness thought that the one called 'Crocodile' looked very young to have taken his fifth captive but there was no reason to doubt the story, especially as he had handed over two captives just this evening. If it was true, it would be all over the city tomorrow. There was enough in the tale of a small raiding party of a dozen warriors returning with an equal number of captives to report back to Cloud Face but Feathered Darkness decided he would do some investigation. A tight feeling at the base of his stomach told him that there was more to know about these two warriors.