

Chapter One

Tenochtitlan

Acalan stood on a high outcropping looking out over the burnt forests around Tenochtitlan. The smoke had long since drifted away, but his nose still bristled. Whatever the strangers had used to burn their lands, it was as foul as them. Everything in the valley around their great city had been set aflame. It looked almost as though Huitzilopochtli had turned the invaders away by blasting them from every direction, his own breath an overpowering inferno.

But that hadn't happened. Other than the small group with him and those with Chimalli, everyone had been slaughtered. All of his people, gone, and with all his training as a commander of men, he didn't know what to do. The path hadn't been opened to his eyes; he'd received no wisdom from his gods, if they even existed anymore. Perhaps the strangers had brought their own and overwhelmed them as well.

He scanned the city also, looking for any sign of life, anything that might warn him to stay away or ease his worries and allow him to lead the people back to their homes. For over an hour he'd stared, covering every canal, every shop, every temple. One thing he felt certain about, none of the strange men that had attacked his people remained. He saw nothing that would make him believe otherwise. A few remnants of the battle lay

strewn about, a steel helmet here, an iron chest plate there, but the men had hurried away, called back to the ocean by their leader.

Acalan had seen the dragons filling the sky as they battled the soldiers and their ships. His heart shattered when he saw so many fall. Even as far away as he stood, he could hear their cries and the rough sound of the water when one of the massive creatures crashed into the lagoon. He wondered again what sort of weapons the strangers used to fight an army of flying, fire spitting monsters.

Blinking his eyes, he wondered again about the dragon and the boy who commanded him. He remembered the first time he saw the black god. He'd been afraid in battle, but never had he seen his life flash before his eyes. If the dragon had opened his mouth, he could have walked in standing to his full height. It could have snapped him in two easily, and Acalan remembered seeing the boy jump to his shoulders and ride as though he'd been perched there since the day he was born. He didn't know if they'd died, he couldn't know about any of them, but he felt a connection with the young man and his powerful companion. They hadn't returned, and Acalan had been a warrior long enough to know that that meant injury or death in battle. He repeated his silent prayer, asking again for their safety.

He turned and looked at the great mountain Popocatepetl. He wondered if Chimalli had reached the halfway point of his journey. He knew Chimalli possessed good hunting skills, with a few of the other warriors they would keep the people fed. There would be enough water, but Acalan hoped the collective spirit of the group would not falter. Even he felt defeated, physically and emotionally drained, but he would never show that face to the group he led. He knew Chimalli wouldn't either, but when the people got frustrated, would he be able to rally them?

"Acalan," said a delicate voice behind him.

He turned and saw Izel, a wise woman from the inner circle and mother to one of the warriors that ran with Chimalli. He glanced down at her knee, scraped and bleeding, as was her wrist.

"Izel," he said, jumping from his lookout point to the rock where she stood. "You're injured."

"It is nothing," said Izel, "an old woman's inability to keep her balance during the climb."

"Please, sit," said Acalan. "Let me tend to your wounds."

"With what, a rock, or some dust blowing up the cliff face from below? There is little left with which to heal ourselves."

Acalan again felt the sting of shame, an overwhelming sense that he'd let his people down. He tried to hold eye contact with Izel, but found he couldn't. His chin fell. "I am sorry."

"You have saved all of us, Acalan. Take pride in that and stay strong. If you falter, where will we be then?"

"Our people, Izel, all slaughtered. And Moctezhuma, killed like an animal along with the nobles and priests."

Acalan raised his head to look at Izel. A single tear traveled passed his nose, over his cheek, halfway to his trembling jawbone.

Izel reached out but did not wipe away the tear. Instead, she cradled Acalan's head in her soft but strong hand, as a mother would do to her son. "What's happened is truly horrible, but let us not allow our pain to consume us. We that remain are important, both here and at Popocatépetl. We must make for the mountain and join Chimalli and the rest of our people. We'll build a new city somewhere, after we're sure that the evil that descended upon Tenochtitlan is gone forever."

Acalan mashed his palm against his cheek, pressing the tear away. He held it in his hand for a moment, a reminder of what he'd seen and felt. He had to lead his group to the great mountain of fire. If they could find Chimalli, perhaps a new life could be forged. The woman's words rang true.

"Thank you, Izel," he said. "You have found my missing strength and returned it to me. Let's go tend to your knee and wrist. Then we'll talk about following Chimalli to Popocatépetl."

Acalan picked the woman up, carrying her as he would his mother. Izel protested, but when she realized the warrior would not be put off, she relaxed in his strong arms. Carefully, he hopped from rock to rock, making his way down the hill.

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"Another day at least," said Chimalli to his small pack of hunters. "We'll need a dozen more kills tonight and tomorrow to keep our people fed."

"The pace keeps everyone hungry, Chimalli," said Matlal. "Perhaps if we slowed, took three days to cover the remaining distance instead of one. We're pushing too hard."

"Matlal speaks wisely," said Tochtli. "If we are tired and sore, think of how much pain our elders feel."

"What do you think, Iztli," said Chimalli, "should we keep running, or should we slow our pace so the others can rest?"

Iztli stood, looking back in the direction of Tenochtitlan. He wrinkled his nose as if he could still smell the stinking flames that raged through their beautiful forests. His eyes showed every speck of fear and anguish tearing at his soul. They never blinked, even when he turned back to look at his friends.

The four of them had scouted every step of the way for the people that ran with them. Any one of them could have led the group, but Chimalli had been chosen by Acalan, and that's all the rest needed to see. Matlal, Tochtli, and Iztli followed his

commands without question. They hunted in parties of three, always giving one a chance to rest during the night.

"Iztli," said Chimalli. "Tell us what you think."

"The gods have left us to die," he said. "Our temples have gone dark, our people are scattered, and we run to a place that may or may not be safe."

"Should we continue to run?"

"If I were alone," said Itzli, "I would never stop running. The strangers who came and attacked us, they did not act like normal men. Their eyes showed uncontrollable rage, and they never tired, no matter how many of our people they killed. They seemed to grow stronger as the battle wore on. We need to reach the mountain and seek Popocatépetl's guidance. Perhaps Huitzilopochtli will be there with him, plotting to avenge his people. The god of war and sun is the only one who can defeat the strangers' wicked magic."

"Matlal?" asked Chimalli.

"Run."

"Tochtli?"

"I agree. Let's feed the people and rouse them for another day of travel."

"Thank you, my brothers," said Chimalli, "your counsel means much to me."

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Acalan set Izel down gently next to a healer in their group. The woman immediately began attending to the sores, humming softly as she washed the wounds. She glanced once at Acalan, a signal he could go about his business without concerning himself with Izel.

The warrior turned and walked among his small group of fifty or sixty people. He asked two of the stronger men to craft a stretcher in order to carry Izel. She would need to stay still for a few days to recover.

"Hear me," he said to the others. "I have spent much time looking at our city and I believe no life exists there. No one moves within the borders of the canals. I see no sign of any spirit either, but I don't believe it's dead, or that it has left Tenochtitlan.

"I know you're all tired, as am I, but we must eat what we can and make our way to Coatepec."

"Why Coatepec?" asked one of the hunters. "We should run to Popocatepetl and join with Chimalli. If the strangers follow us there, surely the god of the mountain will bury them in liquid fire."

"A wise plan, Quauhtli," said Acalan. "It is good to know that belief in our gods still remains strong. But we must not join with Chimalli, not yet anyway. Until we can be absolutely

certain our enemy has left our lands, we cannot give him a single target to strike."

"We hear your words, Acalan, but if that is your plan, then splitting our group again might be wise. Let me take all who would travel to Popocatepetl with me, while you protect the rest on your way to Coatepec."

"I lead our people only as a servant, Quauhtli. If it is your wish to find Chimalli, I won't stop you. But I warn you, if the dark spirit remains in Tenochtitlan and it senses you on your way, we might lose all but a handful of our people."

The two hunters stared at each other without emotion, without envy or hatred, their eyes searching for ways to convince each other that theirs was the correct choice.

"Please stay, Quauhtli," said Acalan. "I beg you. We need your hunting skills, and I need your help. If we get to Coatepec and find a safe place to conceal ourselves, then you may go with my blessing. I leave it up to you, my friend."

Quauhtli looked at Izel, and at the healer's gentle hands. His eyes moved from person to person, and he saw how lost they felt.

"I'm sorry, Acalan. I acted selfishly. We will all travel to Coatepec together. The safety of our people is all that matters."

Acalan walked over to Quauhtli and grabbed the man's strong shoulder. He shook it, smiling. "I am glad, Quauhtli. Let us hunt together now and bring a fine feast for our people."

Quauhtli nodded once. The two warriors grabbed their bows and spears and trotted into the brush.

Chapter Two

The Forest of Forever

Diego stared into the golden eyes of the giant cougar. He couldn't believe Conor stood so calmly within a group of giant cats. The smallest of them, the smiling cheetah, could rip him in half with one blindingly fast swipe of his hardened claws. The lion stood stone still, a gigantic monolith pressing the broad-leafed ferns aside with his massive bulk.

Conor stepped forward and crouched, holding a hand out to his friend. "C'mon, Diego, get up and I'll introduce you to Ajur's friends. They're wild cats, but they can talk, and they all wield powerful magic. They're from a different dimension called the Crossworlds."

He grabbed Conor's hand. As he felt himself rising from the ground, he looked at the jaguar. Ajur stared blankly, giving no indication of his feelings. He had rescued Diego, brought him to safety on a different world, but Diego couldn't tell what the cat's next move might be.

"Diego," said Conor as he grabbed the cheetah's ear and shook it, "this is Eha."

"Hiya," said Eha, stepping forward and pressing his forehead into Diego's chest. He rubbed a little too hard, causing Diego to stumble backwards.

Conor grabbed Eha around his shoulders and held on. "Lay off, you big dope. At least let him get used to you before you start goofing arou..."

Eha rolled over before Conor finished his sentence. Clutching him with all four paws, he licked Conor's ears and tickled his belly with his hind legs.

"Stop i..." Conor tried to protest, but fell into fits of laughter along with Eha.

"Quite a disgusting display if you ask me," said Surmitang, a stunning Sumatran tiger, his British accent highlighting the comment. "Not dignified in the least."

"Entertaining, though," said Therion. "Under different circumstances, we might all join in the fun."

"Yes, under different circumstances," called a voice within the brush. The leaves parted and a wise looking, large black and white tabby housecat walked into the middle of the group. He stood upon ferns, moss, and thick brush flattened by the giant paws of the big cats. Therion busily rubbed a scruffy tree, ridding himself of a nasty itch. Bark and burl, raked off the trunk by his movements, flew everywhere.

Eha immediately righted himself. Conor stood, brushing himself off as quickly as he could. "Maya," he said, bowing slightly. "I had no idea you'd followed us."

The Lord of the Crossworlds champions ignored Conor. He looked at Diego, as if sizing him up for a battle against one of his cats. Finally, he sat, sphinx-like. Instantly, the other cats took their protective stances around him.

"The Lady of the Light is not happy with our decision, Conor," said Maya, still gazing at Diego. "The first warrior has disappeared. The creators are quite alarmed."

Maya sat quietly for a while, daring Diego to speak. When he didn't, Maya knew they'd made the right decision. He peered deeply into the boy's soul. He found important qualities, similar to those they'd seen in Conor.

"We've come to help you, Diego, if we can. Your enemy is powerful, perhaps more powerful than all of us combined. But we're going to find Magnifico, and if he's alive, we'll do our best to see that you're both reunited with Sol."