

CHAPTER ONE

He never hated his magic until it compelled him to kill.

From the broken shadows of his temple, the priest watched an encroacher attempt to work his doomed magic. Brilliant ruby pooled in the pocked basin of the altar and overflowed, streaming across the hand-carved stone in vibrant filigree. The blood glowed like molten rock hot from the earth's heart, releasing magic into the night.

The once all-powerful priest shuddered, his skin crawling with the caress of power. His nostrils flared to catch the tantalizing scent of sweet copper. Such temptation. He tightened his grip on the starved jaguar pacing within him. Such power.

The city once known as the Mouth of Creation had kept his secrets for a thousand years. Now he must kill this man to protect that forbidden knowledge. Keeping to the shadows, the priest called out, "As Gatekeeper of Chi'Ch'ul, I command you to leave my city or die."

The man whirled and whipped the bloody heart behind his back. At least this one's victim had been a goat and not human. "Nobody else should know the name of my dig. Who are you working for?"

The priest stepped into the moonlight, and the other man recoiled. With the jaguar prowling the cage of his body, he knew all too well the image he made: eyes gleaming like golden lamps, jaguar spots dotting his arms

and blending with the tribal tattoos on his upper body, angular cheekbones and sharp forehead compounded by the stark topknot pulling his hair back from his face. The man had discovered the city, unburied it stone by stone. He could not help but recognize a priest of what had once been a grand and powerful nation. “My city has already been destroyed. Would you destroy the world as well?”

“I have powerful, rich friends,” the man said, backing away slowly. “Name your price.”

So be it. Small golden lights began buzzing around the priest and his bones throbbed with magic. “Nothing you can offer will stay my hand. As long as I live, these sacred waters shall lie still and silent. My curse demands your death. The Gates must remain locked until the Return.”

Ignoring his threats, the man smiled with elation. “We were right! I knew it. After all these years, I finally found the center of the world!”

The balls of light blazed brighter. A golden swirling wave obliterated his vision. Bones cracked and twisted. His scream of pain rumbled bass, a jaguar’s roar piercing the night.

Tail lashing, the jaguar crouched in a pile of torn denim. The sharp stink of his prey’s fear burned his nose. It had been a very long time since he’d hunted. The big cat knew his purpose. He was only called forth to kill.

The foolish man turned toward his modern equipment stationed on the nearby boulder, presenting his back to the jaguar. “Jaid, don’t come here! Don’t trust anybody and don’t let the codex out of your hands! Especially don’t give it to Venus Star!”

The jaguar growled a threat. If this person possessed

the codex, he must die too.

Whirling, the man ran up the peninsula that extended over Lake Atitlan. He slung the goat's heart out over the water and threw his weight off the side, angling toward the beach instead of the lake. Effortlessly, the jaguar leaped after him. The man gasped in pain and rolled away, narrowly escaping the slashing claws.

Wet with rain, a sudden gust of wind swept across the shore. Clouds boiled across the sky to hide the moon and stars. Thunder rolled through the night and the ground trembled. Lightning split the sky, winds increasing until the trees thrashed and waves whipped the surface of the lake.

A shape formed in the darkened waters. Thrashing, bulging outward, a hand rose from the depths. Water broke, cascading down the sceptered arm, which was white and blotched with spots of age and disease.

The jaguar clamped his ears and tail tight to his body and terror rippled through his fur. Oh, stupid human fool! Why had he opened Xibalba, with no wards to lock the demons beyond?

Shuddering with horror, the man whimpered. "Where are the golden plumes? The jade feathers? This isn't Great Feathered Serpent!"

The jaguar swiped at the man's abdomen. Jerking away, the man screamed and fell backward into the lake. He thrashed helplessly, then sank like a stone through the Gate as a Lord of Death crawled onto the beach with another demon right behind.

Snarling, the jaguar slammed into the first demon, trying to knock it back through the Gate. Even weak as a newborn babe, it refused to go back to the Place of Fright.

The other Death Lord crawled out of the lake clutching a small hunk of flesh. Cradling the now-cold heart to its mouth, the demon feasted, while the other sniffed the air. His gaze turned unerringly to the goat carcass above.

Every drop of blood would give them power. Power that could destroy the world.

Abandoning the shore, the jaguar scrambled up the obsidian outcropping to the altar. Back hunched, fur writhing, bones snapping in agony, he transformed back to the Gatekeeper. Shaking, he grabbed the edge of the stone altar and pulled himself upright. Desperation pulsed through him with every beat of his heart.

He picked up the blade left by the human. The sacrificial goat was cold, but the demons would still find power in it. They would find more power in him if he couldn't send them back. After all these centuries, he would not fail again.

Blowing out his breath to center himself, he drew the knife across his left palm and sprinkled blood on the altar. He raised the knife toward the glowing Eveningstar. "High Lord Sun, may you journey well and defeat the Lords of Death. Follow the White Road, paddle across the endless sky, and rise again on the morrow. The heart of your jaguar beats within my body. Your breath fills my lungs. My blood is yours. I call upon your power, Jaguar Night Sun, to cast the demons back to their caverns of death."

A rattling sound like wind through dead branches rustled through the night. "Enough, Priest. You cannot send us back. There is not enough blood in your body. If you give yourself, who will lock the Gate?"

The demon known as Blood Gatherer gave a mighty

leap and landed on the rocky outcrop. Corpse-white flesh locked onto the dead goat, and the demon shivered with ecstasy.

A cold rolling wave slammed into the priest. He stumbled. His vision darkened. His heart drummed, frantic and arrhythmic, answering the demon's call. Thick and hot, boiling toward the surface, blood fought his body's prison. Even fresh from the bowels of Xibalba, this demon possessed power to suck the spark of life out of his body without laying a single finger on him.

How could he possibly stop them?

"I have use for you, Priest." Blood Gatherer smiled, blood streaking his bleached jawbone. "Bring us sacrifices so we may grow in power, and we will give you every power beneath us. You will rule the goats of this time."

"No." The priest drew himself up, shoulders high and square. He raised the knife to his chest, directly over his heart. Wind clawed at his body, buffeting him in fury. Warm trickles down his cheeks confirmed his eyes and nose already bled at the demon's command. "I'll kill myself first."

Blood Gatherer laughed, a deep, painful sound like a boulder crushing flesh. "You can't die, Priest. Don't you think I know what my brothers did to you? You're tied to the Gates, always watching, doomed to kill anyone who dares use their precious magic. Yet you failed, for here I am, breathing and walking in flesh outside Xibalba."

He bowed his head, hiding his eyes so he could think. If he surrendered to them, they'd use him to slaughter innocents. Eventually, they'd gain enough power to open another Gate. They'd release all the demons of Xibalba to

walk this earth.

"Use your magic, Gatekeeper, and help me punish them. We'll lock my brothers in First Five Sky where they'll never be able to make their return. This earth will be ours to devour." Blood Gatherer lowered his voice to the croon of death, whispering, *Sleep, sleep forever*. "I can end your curse. I can give you exactly what you want, brave Priest. You crave death, eternal rest? I will even give you your twin and you can drag him to the bowels of Xibalba for me."

The priest jerked his head up, his face twisted into a snarl.

"Oh, yes," Blood Gatherer purred. "Fight me. Let me bleed you. Your sacrifice will be worth a lakeful of measly goat blood. I can sacrifice you again and again, an eternity of suffering. Think of the power you'll give me."

The other demon had already disappeared, too anxious to spread disease and blight upon the land to bother with him. Another demon hand reached for the night sky through the angry waters of the lake. *I must lock the Gate before they kill me.*

"Sacrifice me." He shrugged. "Eventually, Great Feathered Serpent will call me home if for no other reason than to deny you this power. Then whom shall you sacrifice? Who shall worship you? The people of this age have forgotten us. Our ways are too strange, too bloody, too terrible to consider. Even our names are unpronounceable to them."

The priest forced out a harsh laugh. "Do you know what they call me and my brother in this time? Because we're doomed to destruction, they simply call us Wrack and Ruin. Only my twin remembers the power we all used

to wield, and he blames me for the death of his beloved Butterfly Star. He hates me because I dragged him back from death. I seized him from out of your clutches and brought him back to life.”

The demon bared bloodstained teeth, red eyes blazing with fury. In a temper, he whirled and thrashed about, his voice raising the wind to hurricane strength. “He was mine! He died according to plan! You doomed an entire people by breaking your oath and using the Gate to save him!”

Gripping the stone altar with one hand to brace against the gale, the priest turned the stone circle to align the glyphs with his purpose. “I damned my entire city to save my brother. I broke my solemn oath to the gods. I walked the White Road alive and breathing to find his soul and drag him back. I am Ruin, cursed by the gods to never die until my debt has been paid.”

The smaller circle was easier to adjust. The stone clicked into place and the wind died.

Blood Gatherer turned his head, slowly, his mouth twisted into a parody of a smile. “His woman still suffers in the lowest level of Xibalba because of you. Do you think he will ever forgive you for that?”

Guilt tore into Ruin’s heart as viciously as jaguar claws. His brother would never forgive him, and the priest would never forgive himself. Yet he could not allow the demons to escape. He raised the knife and methodically sliced the locking glyph into his left forearm.

Power pulsed through the night, moonlight braiding with the magic in his blood to shine on the lake. Bubbling, swirling dark waters stilled to reflect the light of the moon once more.

The Lord of Death shrieked with fury. He lunged across the altar and seized Ruin around the neck, bony fingers crushing his windpipe. “What will they call you when I use your soul to destroy this world?”

“Dead at last,” he wheezed. “Kill me and end my misery. I welcome your torments in Xibalba.”

Blood Gatherer drew him close to his skeletal face. The stench of rotten, putrid flesh made him gag. “Not yet, Priest. You cheated me. Your brother was mine and you stole him. The greatest torment I can give you is to force you to watch while I destroy this world you’ve protected for centuries. Watch the pitiful humans die with plague, crippled with disease, maddened and corrupted by our power. Watch me raise up other priests and bathe in blood. Watch me claim your Gates one by one until I control the worlds within. Only when I reign below and above while the worlds are lost to utter darkness will I give you the death you deserve.”

The demon heaved him backward. Tumbling through the air, he slammed into a stone column. His skull cracked and his spine shattered. Pain exploded.

Then Blood Gatherer released the terrible magic for which he’d been named.

Ruin felt his blood leap eagerly from his body, called by the Lord of Death to strengthen him. Blood poured from every wound and orifice, spraying the demon with incredible strength.

Lost to darkness, he could only lie there and wait for his body to die. His heart thumped ever more awkwardly, trying to compensate for the trauma and only speeding his death. His lungs refused to draw air. He felt every pain, every horror of death, until his heart ceased beating.

Yet he knew he would rise up and walk again when
the gods refused him shade beneath the World Tree.

Please, let me die this time.