



## CHAPTER ONE

*Mid-January 2010*

The old man had watched the snow soften on the branches of the custard apple trees in the valley, a little at a time, as its drops moistened the earth. Odd time of the year in Guatemala for snow, given it was the middle of the dry season. But in the confusion of a changing cosmos filled with climatic upheavals, he had learned to expect anything to happen at any time.

He pulled his blanket more tightly about his shoulders. Scents of burning copal, resin, and myrrh escaped his cave and were a sharp contrast to the cold air of the surrounding glade. They brought sensual peace and healing to the soul and were, in fact, a bridge to the gods. It was late, the sun shot low jabs through the trees and would soon slip farther along its warming day path to let the earth rest. Little of the light was visible in the cave at this hour. Until tomorrow when it should all begin again.

But tomorrow would be different.

U'امتl went over his plans with the day god, Eznab, and reflected on what an excellent choice this day was to commune with the gods on the future. He would move swiftly, like the knife Eznab represented, and slash into Xarantu's little world, ripping it to pieces. It was U'امتl's destiny to bring the Maya to glory, to change the world and rule it, not Xarantu's.

His wrinkled, weathered face and eyes were unreadable as he thought of the bustling activities of his people across Central America and throughout

the world, healing and cleansing themselves in preparation for the new age. Monuments and temples everywhere were in various stages of rededication and reactivation. Ritual after ritual took place in caves such as this one, passageways between the heavens and the earth. Then anger clouded his eyes as he contemplated Ixabal, the city of the new calendar, the future, hidden outside a little town called Peruvia in rural California. Didn't they know who he was? Did they think Ua'metl could be ignored?

News of the three sacrifices in that region had reached him. What were they thinking? He had studied the texts, as had his father and those before him. Xarantu was a pretender! He was acting like a king—what absurdity. To think he could orchestrate all the predicted events until the end of the calendar and then let his family line take over was nonsense. Ua'metl would show them who should be there.

Ua'metl would show them.

He outstretched his arms to the gods and leaned to inhale more of the incense. Sprinkled grains of sugar on the floor of the cave encircled the clay burner with its hand-carved images of two gods, a burner in his family for centuries. The history spoke that it was a gift from the gods themselves to his lineage, an opportunity for them to give homage and ensure their royalty and eventual divinity. It sat on a flattened ceremonial stone used for healing, cleansing, and fertility rituals. He knelt carefully not to disturb the sugar or its lines to the north, south, east, and west, the pathways to the ends of the earth and all knowledge.

Bitterness filled his spirit. His heightened mental state assured him of his rightness, his support from the gods, the justice he had planned. The Sixth World would be his, as it was destined to be from the beginning when the first humans walked, prayed, and fasted. He was a direct descendant of the first of the Quitzé lords on this earth, Bright Jaguar, first to know the sun and the moon. Marxan's son, the child pretender Umoxtl who lived in California, would never be the one to rejoin the cosmos into one, nor would he live to see the throne. Not in Ua'metl's plan.

He ran his hands over the dried kernels of corn that lay on the stone beside the burner. His eyes were shut as his fingers pushed the kernels into various configurations of four, five, and six or more. Then he touched each group, felt its shape, divined its meaning, as the incense swirled in his head.

The answers came to him. It was his right to be the one to rejoin the earth forces with the divine ones, bringing the new world, the one cosmos. Knowledge would return to man on earth, all the knowledge of the gods from the past and into the future. What a glorious day it would be when the sun rose on the new calendar. What power he would have—and all the gold as well. He felt this promise in the grains and looked forward with anticipation to becoming one with the gods.

U'ámetl lit an oil lamp in the darkening twilight and scooped more copal into the burner, adding the Eastern myrrh and a touch of crushed vanilla bean. For the jaguar, of course. Everyone knew the jaguar's sweet breath drew its prey to an unsuspecting death.

Just as he would draw Xarantu to his.