

Chapter 1

The seventh sun waited just below the horizon, staining the sky in flaming hints of red and gold. Yemania of Pahtia drew in a breath of cool mountain air. Soon, back in the city of Tollan, the empress would use the divine power of her blood to bring back the sun from its daily trek through the underworld.

For even the darkest of nights could not hold back the dawn.

But unless Ochix did something and did it *quickly*, it was unlikely she'd live to see it rise again tomorrow. Yemania shifted her knees against the earth, her wrists chafing in their binds. Beside her knelt twenty or so other captives, mostly innocent farmers and peasants from the city-state of Millacatl. Their only crime had been living too close to the Miquitz Mountains and the death-worshipping empire that resided there. Now they would pay with their lives.

Not all death worshippers were the demons Yemania had always been taught. Ochix, one of their death princes, had stolen her heart and proven himself to be different.

So different, that a few weeks ago he'd earned a knife to the gut and a shove off the ledge of a waterfall—at the hands of his own father. The same father who presided as emperor of the Miquitz Empire and their head priest to the gods.

Yemania peeked up through her lashes. Ochix's father, Tzom, paced before the captives, his perfectly smooth head painted an eerie shade of white, black pigment outlining his eye sockets and stretching the corners of his mouth into a sickening smile. Black feathers cascaded down from his headdress and fluttered at his every movement, along with the rattling bones laced around his neck. Yemania suppressed a shudder. With his thin form and crazed eyes, the death priest resembled his ancestor, Cizin, god of death. Or at least what she imagined him to look like.

She'd never met the god of death himself... and she prayed she wouldn't have to meet him today.

"Welcome, dear brothers and sisters," Tzom chanted. He spread his arms wide as if to embrace the crowd gathered in the large stone amphitheater. Mist clung to the mountain peaks surrounding them like ethereal spirits. Hundreds of cheers rose in response.

"Today we celebrate our founding and offer our sacrifice to the god of death. For thousands of years, Cizin, my forefather, visited his descendants and their people when the layers between creation destabilized. Should he decide to emerge again, he will devour the first souls he encounters. He thirsts for them as a deer pants for water. And to relieve his thirst, we offer him a plethora of souls to choose from." He turned his skull-like face to the captives, his deadly smile spreading even wider. "And if he chooses to stay within his underworld realm until the next cycle, we will offer him souls in the more *traditional* manner."

Yemania's heart stammered. It didn't matter if the god of death stayed in his domain. The high priest would sacrifice them anyway. Ochix hadn't mentioned *that* part.

She and Ochix had been trying to sneak out of the palace, to make it somewhere safe until they figured out the Mother Goddess's purpose in bringing them to Miquitz's capital city. *Head for Omitl*, she'd told Yemania when she'd helped her escape from the holding cell in Tollan. *You will know what to do when you get there.*

But Yemania had no idea what to do next. All she knew was that it was no longer safe for her among her own people—the Chicome, Empire of the Sun. She was a child of light, now trapped among children of darkness.

She turned her head and scanned the mass of gathered faces behind her, the hungry eyes thirsting for her death. Seated in a great arc around the amphitheater, they all faced the main

attraction for the day's events—the cave entrance that led to Xibalba itself. Ochix might be different, but his people seemed as eager for bloodshed as their emperor priest.

Ochix had thought they'd be safe hiding in the city, but they'd never made it that far. The guards had caught up with them yesterday, and he'd had no choice but to continue his ruse as her captor.

"I will not let you be sacrificed," he'd whispered in her ear when the soldiers led her away. "I will find a way to get us out of this. I promise."

Such a different promise from that of her brother, of everyone else she'd known. With the exception of her friend Mayana, everyone else seemed to continually demand she sacrifice her divine blood to the gods. Yemania had studied the intensity in Ochix's dark eyes. The beautiful way his long hair framed the firm set of his squared jaw. The Mother goddess had trusted him, and Yemania trusted him too. "I believe you," she had said as the guards led her to the sacrificial holding chamber. Ochix had watched her go with heartbreak in his eyes. But that had been hours ago and he was still nowhere to be seen. Would he be brave enough to stand up against his father again? In front of the entire empire?

Pounding drums vibrated within her chest. The booming matched the intensity of her frantic heart. The excitement of the crowd rose along with the music.

A great rumbling sounded from within the depths of the cave. It gaped like the dark mouth of a growling beast, set into the side of the mountain. Yemania's throat went dry. Ochix had said the lord of death hadn't ascended to the land of the living in more than a hundred years. Surely her luck was not that cursed. He couldn't appear for the first time in over a century *now*. Several of the other captives beside her began to whimper.

Yemania narrowed her eyes at the dark hole. Something moved within its depths. *Gods, no.* A large misshapen form was crawling its way out of the underworld. Yemania thought Cizin was a skeletally thin figure, but perhaps the codex illustrations of him were mistaken. Or perhaps he brought a monster of nightmares along with him from Xibalba, the place of fear.

One of the captives beside her collapsed onto his side, fear getting the better of him. Yemania's hands began to shake even harder. *Where was Ochix?*

The seventh sun finally broke through the bonds of night—reborn to a new day. The stone amphitheater was bathed in glowing orange light. Just as the drums and rumbling within the mountain reached a crescendo, dust and rubble poured from the mouth of the cave along with... along with...

The crowd gasped. The drums ceased, and Yemania leapt to her feet. A guard standing beside her immediately shoved her back to her knees. She didn't care.

It was not the god of death that had emerged from the entrance to the underworld. No, it was Mayana. Mayana! She was alive! The princess of water and descendant of the goddess Atlacoya had somehow survived the journey through the underworld. But something was not right.

Her dearest friend's energy seemed exhausted. Her usually rich skin was marred with scars and bruises, angry red blotches and spots like the signs of a sickness. The long, dark hair that hung across her shoulders was limp and lifeless. Like her haunted eyes.

Her loincloth skirt was stained and ripped to tatters, exposing far more of her legs than Yemania knew she'd be comfortable with. But she looked far too thin and weak as Ahkin, prince of the sun and rightful emperor of the Chicome, supported her weight with his. He appeared equally as starved, beaten, and burdened of soul. His short dark hair glistened with sweat that

also coated the muscles of his bare chest. The once-white wrap around his waist was stained gray, brown... and red. They were coated in both dried and fresh blood.

They'd done it. *They'd survived.* Though barely, by the looks of them. Yemania's healer heart lurched. She needed to tend to them right away. They stumbled through the entrance of the underworld and collapsed onto the dirt floor of the amphitheater just as the cavern behind them crumbled into a mass of fallen stone and dust. Both gasped for breath as tear tracks glistened on their cheeks. The high priest's smile faltered and his eyebrows pulled together as he beheld the newcomers that were obviously not the god of death. He quickly regained his composure as realization washed over him. And something about the sick triumph dawning on his face made Yemania's stomach churn.

Mayana sat up and looked around, her eyes widening in horror. She scuttled toward Ahkin, clutching at a bleeding wound on her shoulder. Yemania tried to rise to her feet again, but the soldier shoved her back.

"Stay where you are," the soldier hissed. Rage boiled in Yemania's blood. She glanced up to glare at the soldier beneath the black cloak—and her rage fizzled like magma meeting the ocean. *It was Ochix.* He was posing as one of the guards. Apparently he did have some kind of plan after all.

He gave her a minute shake of his head. A warning to not give them away. Yemania could have cried with relief. He'd been beside her the entire time. His hand on her shoulder, to the rest of the world a soldier keeping a sacrifice victim in place, squeezed reassuringly before slipping back to his side.

Yemania released a breath, sending tremors of relief down her arms. She turned her attention back to Mayana and Ahkin. It took all her self-control to remain where she was.

Tzom stepped closer. “My dear prince of light,” he said. “Welcome to Omitl. I must admit we were not expecting you, but your timing could not be more divine. We are about to partake in one of our most sacred ceremonies.” He waved an arm toward Yemania and the other captives waiting on the raised stone platform.

Ahkin’s eyes turned shrewd, calculating. He pulled Mayana closer to him.

“After you threw yourself into Xibalba, my plans shifted to your sister, but the goddess has blessed the mission she entrusted to me. What fortune. She has brought you to me after all!”

Yemania’s heart twisted. *Of course*. The death priest was obsessed with his patron goddess, the goddess driving him to madness. The Obsidian Butterfly. Ochix had confronted his father about dealing with such a dangerous deity—a choice that had nearly cost him his life.

Sure enough, Ochix shifted uncomfortably beside her.

“What do you want with me?” Ahkin asked, his voice rough. His arms tightened around Mayana.

Tzom motioned to the guards beside him. “Secure our guests. I want to make sure they don’t miss this momentous occasion.”

Ahkin leapt to his feet. He reached for his knife, but a swift blow to the knees brought him down. Tzom cut his own hand and extended it, bloody palm out toward Mayana. Yemania watched with horror as the mist of possession clouded her friend’s eyes. Yemania had seen Ochix use his family’s divine abilities before, but it still unsettled her stomach. Mayana did not struggle as guards ripped her and Ahkin apart and pressed a bone blade to her throat.

“Leave her alone,” Ahkin roared. He struggled back to his feet, his own blade ready in his hand.

Tzom seemed to be enjoying himself. He leered at the prince of light. “Unless you want your companion’s blood needlessly spilled, I recommend you drop your weapon.”

Yemania’s chest heaved as her gaze darted between Tzom and Ahkin. She threw her prayers to the heavens. *Drop it, Ahkin. Please, drop it.*

His fingers loosened and the knife thudded into the dirt. Yemania sighed in relief.

Tzom inched closer. “Wonderful. You see, I need your blood, son of the sun. My goddess has promised me that it is the only way to save my people. I will help her bring about the darkness that will allow them to descend. They will feast on the flesh of sun-worshippers and in return for my service, spare the Miquitz.”

Ochix hissed. Terror washed through Yemania, cold and suffocating. *Oh my gods.* It all made sense. Tzom’s obsession with the Obsidian Butterfly, his determination to get to Ahkin’s sister, Metzi, after Ahkin fell into the underworld. He needed the blood of the sun god, the blood that ran in the veins of both of the royal twins. And the Obsidian Butterfly had already been manipulating Metzi. Had this been her ultimate goal? To get Metzi into Tzom’s hands somehow?

“What are you talking about?” Ahkin demanded. “Who will descend?”

But Yemania knew the answer before Tzom could say another word. He wanted to bring about a darkness that would allow the dreaded star demons of legend to descend and devour their world.

“The Tzitzimime. The star demons. The followers of the great Obsidian Butterfly.” Tzom looked positively gleeful at the prospect. “She will rule the new earth and spare us as her loyal servants. They can only descend during an eclipse, and now that I have the blood of one who controls the sun, I can ensure the eclipse will never end.” He paused, his manic eyes focusing on

Ahkin. “You will be my guest of honor, son of Huitzilopochtli, as we usher in the age of the *Eighth Sun!*”

A heavy silence hung in the air of the amphitheater. Ochix swore under his breath. Yemania risked a glance up at him. *Did you know?* she asked with her eyes. *Did you know this was your father’s plan?*

The fury and surprise on his face gave her the answer she needed, but he shook his head to confirm it.

Tzom clapped his hands toward the guards. “Take our new prisoners to the holding chamber beneath the temple. The eclipse is set to begin in two weeks, and we have to make sure our new guests do not miss it.” He sliced into his hand above the lit brazier and dripped crimson into the sizzling flames. It smoked black and then gray, finally turning an eerie shade of poisonous green. “Cizin is pleased with this new development,” he announced.

One of the guards stepped forward hesitantly. “Your majesty, what about the other captives?”

Tzom turned with a swish of his black ceremonial robes. The bones around his neck clattered against each other. His head tilted as he considered them. “Send them back to the holding chamber as well. Their souls will still meet the god of death, but we will make sure we time the gift wisely.” He turned toward the expectant crowd and threw his bloodied fist into the air. “My people, we must prepare! The new age shall be ushered in through blood and starlight!”