

The Maya Gateway

by Wim Coleman & Pat Perrin

Prologue

Itzam-Yeh surges upward, lifting his body toward a hot noon sky. The great macaw tilts his head, watching familiar patterns above him with his left eye, and then the right. Innumerable leathery coils float in the thick, hot air—coils without visible beginning or end, snaking in circles and spirals from the zenith down to the hard stones below.

The Vision Serpent.

The Placenta of Heaven.

The serpent is a tether, an umbilicus, and also a gateway between the Otherworld and the world of mortals. Itzam-Yeh has often passed through its gaping jaws on his own ecstatic journey toward the gods. Now he feels privileged to share the sky with this entity—but even so, he must get on with his duties . . .

The heart sacrifice.

He folds his wings and drops lightly onto the ceremonial platform in front of the temple. The coils spiral around him. He closes his gold-ringed eyes and mentally rehearses the ceremony.

The warrior will be fully prepared, lying peacefully, eyes closed, inhaling and exhaling slowly, calmly, his ribs pulsating slightly from his steady, unhurried heartbeat. The macaw will touch his own chest, and his own calm breath, his own steady pulse, will match perfectly the rhythms of his honored guest. The warrior will make no sound during the entire heart extraction. In fact, his heart itself may well have ceased its own beating, submissively but quite deliberately, even before the macaw so much as touches the warrior's flesh. This ritual has been enacted throughout all the *katuns* as the most solemn offering to the gods. The macaw himself has carried out this sacrifice before.

But why has it not begun?

The macaw begins to feel a slight impatience. He turns and tilts his head and twirls his fiery gold eyes, looking for his awaited guest. He clicks his beak and darts his dry, conical tongue.

He starts as a voice hisses, "Hypocrite! No one will receive me in Xibalbá."

Itzam-Yeh is shocked to feel a hand snatch at his thigh. The dark coils of the Vision Serpent withdraw, revealing the captive warrior's wound-scarred body, naked except for the loincloth around his waist. Two men hold the prisoner down as he strains to rise from the altar, pain and fear in his eyes.

"Don't you think I know?" the prisoner snarls through bruised lips. "Even your own people know! The gods no longer speak to you!"

One of the guards clamps his hand over the prisoner's mouth. Dazed, the macaw glances around. The coiled Vision Serpent is gone. It was never really there. It was an illusion produced by wreaths of smoke rising from *pom* that burns in shallow indentations on all the stone faces of the god.

Incense.

The coals produce a sharp, musky odor in the scorching hot air. The macaw realizes that he is sweating tremendously. He clutches his head in his hands. But it's not his head at all. He blinks his eyes—human eyes, not those of a great bird. And his eyes peer out from far behind the eye-holes of a mask. Suddenly, it is hard to see through these tiny holes, hard to perceive his entire situation. Nevertheless, he doesn't dare remove the parrot mask, doesn't dare reveal to his companions what he now knows to be true . . .

Myuay—myuay has fled.

I am not Itzam-Yeh.

I am Bohol Caan.

The king.

A man.

But the sacrifice *must* be carried out by his *uay*—not by his mortal self. Otherwise, it will be no sacrifice at all. It will be . . .

What?

What is the name for it?

Bohol Caan looks at his prisoner. The warrior's wretched struggles, his terrified eyes, fill Caan with a new, disagreeable sensation. It is centered in his mouth, upon the very tip of his tongue. It's exactly the same feeling that comes from trying to eat a piece of uncooked, rotting food.

Distaste. Vile, sickened revulsion.

He has never seen a sacrificial victim afraid of death before. It makes no sense. It's absurd. It would be comical if it weren't so ugly, so repulsive. But at least this disgust gives Bohol Caan renewed resolve. He can carry out his task, even in the absence of his *uay*.

He raises a jagged, highly polished obsidian blade, refracting yellow-orange rays of sunlight and sprinkling them in shards across the prisoner. Caan hesitates again.

But isn't this a profanation? To pretend to be my uay? To kill out of rage and disgust, without shared exultation?

There is no time to stop and think it through. He pushes his blade into the tender place below his victim's ribs. The two guards struggle to hold the victim still and silent.

Blood oozes from the wound. The blade hasn't entered all the way. Caan pushes again, and the victim pushes back, his torso heaving, trying to free itself from the assault. This time, the blade enters to the hilt. Blood flows more freely.

Caan pulls the sharp edge toward the victim's navel, but meets considerable resistance from the victim's stomach muscles. Caan slices and yanks, and at last carves an opening large enough to accommodate a fist. Or so it appears to Caan. It is hard to see through the steady fountain of blood pouring across the victim's belly and chest. Caan puts down the blade and pushes his fist through the narrow opening.

Now a rasping gasp. It doesn't come from the victim. It comes from one of the guards. The victim has bitten the guard who was covering his mouth. He has gnawed the thumb halfway off at the lower joint.

Did the people hear? Can they tell what's happening?

Caan can't stop to help the guard as he forages through the victim's insides. He has reached too low. His hand is entangled in the wet, slippery, worm-like cords of the victim's bowels. He pulls away, then reaches in again, aiming higher into the torso this time, pushing through slabs of wet, soft tissue, then using his fingernails to rip through the membranous sac that he knows encloses the victim's heart.

He takes hold of the heart.

It is beating.

Caan shudders. He has never grasped a still-beating heart before. He did, however, once extract a living thing out of another living body—a body he had sliced open much like this one . . .

Ix Kalem . . .

. . . my bride . . .

. . . my beloved lost queen.

Caan pulls the heart toward him, but it resists him. The victim has lost consciousness, but he will not give up his heart.

Caan grips the weakly fluttering thing with his left hand as he probes with the blade and finds the four thick tubes attaching the heart to the inside of the victim's body. One by one, Caan saws

through the tubes. At last, the heart is free. Caan pulls it out through the opening and holds the dripping, four-chambered mass above the body. It doesn't beat any more.

Not like an infant child at all.

Not like Hol Tun Mo, Caan's infant son and heir.

The victim's body lies motionless, staring blankly at the sky, blood dripping from his ghastly yellow teeth and puddling in the cavern of his body. Both of the guards are staring at the corpse in horror, one holding his nearly severed thumb in place. Caan can't hide the truth from them—that he has committed some unheard-of crime, not a sacrifice.

They know.

They saw.

Did the people below see, too?

Surely not. Surely not.

Caan must proceed with the motions of the ritual, sham though they may be. He must continue to play the role of his *uay*, the macaw. He has no idea what else to do. He kneels beside a bed of glowing *pom*.

"Into the hands of the Lords of Death," he murmurs hypocritically.

It sickens him. To the best of his knowledge, he has never lied before. In fact, he always thought that lies were just some superstition of his commoners. Surely, he thought, only the *truth* can really exist. But now he knows lies to be real. It's an astounding, awful, soul-searing paradox.

He sets the heart down among the coals. Were his *uay*, the macaw, to do this, flames would erupt all around the heart, incinerating it almost in an instant. But that's not what happens now. Blood dripping from the heart raises a hiss of steam and smoke and the ugly stench of death, almost extinguishing the coals.

Caan turns toward the hollowed-out body, which lies limply on the stone. He stoops down and picks the body up, cradling its head against his shoulder like a sleeping child. It's not hard for him to feign respect, even affection, because he envies the corpse its shameless oblivion.

Carrying the corpse, Caan walks through the clouds of steam and incense toward the edge of the ceremonial platform. His dumbfounded guards follow him, always dutiful.

At least they lie out of obedience.

Their lies are smaller than mine—and less shameful.

For the first time, he looks down, far down, his eyes avoiding the great stone stela that bears Ix Kalem's image, scanning instead the faces of hundreds of nobles and commoners who gaze back up at him expectantly. They are arrayed around the great, rectangular courtyard with the green-painted stone pavement.

But it's not supposed to be stone.

It's supposed to be a sea.

The surface of the Primordial Sea leading into Xibalbá.

In the distance, between the brightly painted temples and palaces, he glimpses the vast forest plain, all black and brown from the unending drought. He has heard that distant cities perished long ago from droughts such as this.

I've also heard that they perished from their lies . . .

. . . that the people in the south all fled from their homes because of lies.

He glances back at the many faces of Chac on the temple behind him.

Will the god accept a sacrifice such as this? Will rain come?

All the images of the god with the protruding, trunk-like nose glare at him in fury. Caan's heart sinks. Chac has not been mollified by anything he has done. In fact, neither Chac nor any of the other gods or Father-Mothers have spoken to him for a very long time. Xibalbá itself seems to have long since forgotten him.

Where is my uay to help me?

Where are our ancient gods and Father-Mothers?

And where—where is my beloved Ix Kalem?

What if my people learn that I have no gods . . .

The king staggers dizzily, almost collapsing under the weight of the victim's body. The world swims drunkenly around him—changed now, deteriorated, devastated.

Caan sees a ruined city, empty of human souls. Many of the temples and palaces are crumbling and half-consumed by the encroaching, low-lying jungle. Some have been reduced to piles of rubble as serpentine vines tug and pull at loose boulders and stones. Others have vanished altogether beneath the vegetation and the earth itself.

My city gone.

My people gone

And I, myself, a ghost in my own world.

His dizziness increases until he is on the verge of blacking out. He closes his eyes tightly and struggles to hold himself upright. When he opens them again, he feels more rooted on his feet. Normality has returned. The plaza is filled with people, and the temples and palaces are all intact, unviolated by the forest. But even so, he understands that what he has just glimpsed is inevitable.

More than inevitable.

In a sense, it has happened already.

In a sense, it has been happening always.

Now Bohol Caan must finish his charade. He hurls the body from the platform, its arms and legs swinging wildly, comically, like those of an actor in a ritual farce. The body strikes the steep stone steps, bounces away from them, then strikes the steps again before rolling in an unsightly, broken heap upon the courtyard pavement.

The hundreds of watchers stare at the corpse for an astonished moment. Then they look up at Caan, gazing into his eyes . . .

Gazing into the heart of my lies.

Caan raises up his arms in a mockery of triumph.

“It is done!” Caan shouts to his people.

And this, at least, is true.

The Puuc hills in the Mexican state of Yucatán are totally devoid of rivers and lakes. Even cenotes, the natural openings to underground aquifers, are largely nonexistent. The people of a land so lacking in water would naturally take a religious interest in a rain deity, and a technological interest in the development of cisterns. I always wonder whether it was their technology or their religion that failed.
—*Milpa Spirits*

Chapter One

12.19.12.5.18

Damned Puuc Scribes

“De prisa, my dear. Don’t dawdle,” Julio Escalante urged his companion.

“What’s your hurry?” Lydia Rosenstrom asked sharply, still poring over the newly-exposed stone monolith lying among the ruins of Pakabtún.

“Look at the sky.”

Lydia looked up from the lighted surface into the darkness straight above her.

“I can’t see the sky,” she said.

“Exactly my point,” Julio replied. “And that’s why I say *de prisa, de prisa*—unless you want us both to get soaked.”

“A little summer drizzle never hurt anybody.”

“I’m not talking about a little summer drizzle, and you know it.”

Lydia growled softly under her breath. Her old friend and co-worker was undoubtedly right. The air felt heavy and damp, and in another few moments they would be caught in a roaring downpour. But she wasn’t ready to leave. She might be sixty, but she wasn’t going to let the threat of rain drive her away from an incredible discovery like this.

Julio and his archeological team had started excavating the central courtyard area just this morning, while Lydia was on one of her rare shopping trips to the city of Mérida. They’d found the remarkable stela and worked feverishly to uncover it. Upon Lydia’s return, Julio had greeted her with the news, and she had rushed to the site to see it.

The nine-foot tall stone was majestic, even lying in the mud and rubble, lit only by their powerful flashlights. Lydia was glad that it was dark. Paradoxically, daytime didn’t provide the best illumination for studying Maya inscriptions—particularly ones as eroded as these. In the searing June sunlight, such faint impressions would look fuzzy and indistinct. Artificial light could be carefully directed to reveal the ancient images.

Lydia crouched in the newly-dug earth beside the stela, holding her flashlight above the carvings, shining its beam across them at a long, almost horizontal angle to accentuate the shadows. In the center of the rectangular composition was a weathered but splendid bas-relief of a human figure in a reclining position, with knees raised and arms stretched skyward.

“What a wonderful, elegant carving,” Lydia gasped.

The figure was a regally-dressed woman with the traditional sloping forehead. Her image was suspended in front of a towering, almost Christian-looking cross with a macaw perched on its summit and a double-headed serpent draped across its horizontal bar.

“Oh, Julio,” Lydia exclaimed. “This must be her! This must be Ix Kalem, the queen of Pakabtún!”

“Do you really think so?”

“It just *has* to be! And this scene symbolizes her death! See her position—as though she’s tumbling head over heels. And that’s the World Tree—the *Wacah Chan*—behind her. This is Ix Kalem falling down the World Tree into the maw of Xibalbá!”

The queen’s full lips were parted as if in an expression of mild surprise. She reached out with

her hands in what appeared to be a gesture of childlike curiosity. She struck Lydia as remarkably self-possessed and dignified for somebody who was falling to her death.

“Take a look at the glyphs,” Julio suggested.

Lydia turned her flashlight on the symbols that flowed beside and beneath the falling woman. She could barely hold the torch in her shaking fingers. This was the find that she had hoped for, prayed for, even held a few shamanic rituals for.