

Prologue

Meztli

The night tasted like warm ash on Meztli's tongue as her mother's fingers caressed her face. She could see nothing when she opened her eyes—just the familiar darkness spreading its wings across her vision. It had always been like this since she was born. Her world consisted of blurred light and shadows, and she was known as a Princess to be pitied: to be mocked.

Being born on the day of two secrets, the year forty centipede, was an unfortunate one for Meztli. Despite being touched by the Gods with a gift of truth-seeking, it was unlucky to spring into the world in a year littered with great droughts, and the degradation of their Empire brought shame upon their royal family. Meztli's blindness was one of many omens that their power would inevitably fall, and by being shaken out of her tumultuous sleep by her strained mother in the middle of the night, she believed that, finally, the end was near.

“Meztli,” her mother murmured, tracing her trembling fingers across her brow. “The Gods have summoned Eleuia. We must be present.”

Meztli took a deep breath in, but even when fresh air encircled her lungs, all she could smell was ash. It was as if the Xib Empire itself was on fire.

Queen Quetzal led Meztli through the vast, stone hallways, their delicate footsteps reverberating against the walls like a distant song. Meztli could vaguely remember what her mother told her about the murals painted on these walls. Feathered serpents lined them, and painted in red was the history of the Xib people and the Long Journey—the four-year-long walk from their origins in the mountains to the current rainforest they called home. It was the Great

Storm that pushed their people out of the mountains, and so it began their quest to create an indestructible city: an Empire.

Meztli reluctantly reached her hand out to grope the jade etched into the stone, but before she could feel the rough stone scrape beneath her fingertips, the Queen was quick to pull her away.

When they stopped walking, the Queen's hand left hers, and a cold wind settled across her skin. A shiver trickled across her arms as she blinked hard at the opaque darkness, hoping one day she would catch a flicker of movement—her family's faces, the rustling rain forest, the temples and plazas—but only the dark offered her company. It was cruel.

Gentle footsteps returned, and the sound of her younger sister's rough voice cut through the air. "Sister," Anacaona said, her tone flat. "I didn't expect you'd come, too."

Meztli rolled her shoulder back, her placid expression twitching. "Why wouldn't I go?"

"Well, you don't usually attend father's meetings." Anacaona's fingers brushed Meztli's bangs to the side. "And even when you happen to be there on those rare occasions, you always retreat into silence. That's why I barely notice you."

A subtle surge of energy shot through her veins, her power awakened by Anacaona's words.

"That's a lie," Meztli said, tilting her head down to hide her face. Her voice grew small in her throat. "You do notice me."

"Anacaona," her mother's voice rang, though she didn't seem to overhear the two of them talking, "take your sister's hand and guide her to the meeting room for me. I need to inform Ollin of this, too. I'll be back."

With a small sigh, Anacaona slid her hand into Meztli's and tugged her forward.

From either side of Meztli's vision, the faint glow of several torches led the way down the hall. As they passed by, the warmth from the fires kissed her skin, though the smell of ash pervaded the air the closer they grew to the King's meeting room, where other priests were expected to be as well. Meztli swallowed. She hated being invited to those meetings, fearful that they were all judging her. It was too much pressure to be in a room of important people who all knew more than she did.

Anacaona slipped her hand out of Meztli's. "Your hand's all clammy," she said. "There's nothing to be nervous about. You don't even have to say anything."

Meztli's face flushed as she staggered forward. "I'm...I'm not nervous."

Anacaona clucked her tongue and pulled Meztli close before her arm brushed against the wall. "For someone who can detect lies, you're such a terrible liar. Just do what you always do and be silent."

Meztli tucked loose strands of hair behind her ear. Even as Anacaona walked beside her, she seemed to be nothing but a ghost. The two sisters were once close, but all she heard from Anacaona were either commands or insults.

Growing up, Meztli used to accompany her to the Glass Waterfall deep in the rainforest almost every day. While Meztli sat and listened to the birds or the rushing waters, Anacaona would play around or describe all the plants and animals to her in vivid detail. In a sense, Anacaona was her guard, always clinging close to her and making her laugh when Meztli felt isolated.

A heavy weight sank into Meztli's chest at the memory. Now, she was more lonely in her sister's presence. She couldn't discern why Anacaona had slowly drifted from her over time, though she couldn't help but think it was because of the fact that she was next in line for the

throne. If that's what it was truly about, Meztli would quickly abandon such power if it meant reconnecting with her sister—if it meant having a friend again—but she knew her parents would never allow it to happen.

“You know,” Meztli murmured, “lately, you seem so distant. It's like I barely know you.”

Silence sat between them, though Meztli didn't dare say anything. She focused on the nervous rise and fall of her breathing, the low thrum of the torches burning, and the way the conversation of the meeting seemed to be growing louder and louder. Nothing slipped from Anacaona's lips—not even a cold remark or some insult—though Meztli wished she would've said something. Silence didn't offer answers. Meztli sighed, her breath tainted by her grief. *What did I do to deserve this?*