



Chapter 1

The Wandering God

11 Bak'tun 14 K'atun 11 Tun 0 Uinal 18 K'in

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Two boys trudged down a well-worn path and teetered on the edge of manhood. From time to time one or the other paused and glanced wistfully at a distant ridgeline. Viewed from where they walked, the arid jungle along its crest trembled with the apparent promise of a cooling breeze. The young men recognized the deceitful shimmers as tricks of the heat; nevertheless, the false illusion made their trek all the more oppressive. Each boy was burdened with a huge bundle of sticks. The sun beat down from a cloudless sky and the trail they followed through the scrub sweltered in a stifling stillness. Their bodies glistened with sweat and the heavier of the two huffed noticeably with each breath.

“Okib, I need to stop. Let’s rest.”

Okib looked back at his friend. No doubt about it, Naum was overweight.

“Not yet, the bee shrine is just a little farther. We’ll stop there.”

“Let’s stop now, I’m hungry.”

“That’s just the problem, you eat too much. Besides, there’s no shade here. We’ll stop at the shrine and rest inside. Come on.”

Naum looked sullen but followed his best friend down the trail. Truth be told, Okib was also tired, but he kept it to himself. For some reason that he could never quite explain, he always felt driven to outdo Naum. Whether they were collecting firewood, hunting birds, playing ball, or gambling with beans, he always had to win. He always had to be first. If easy-going Naum was aware that they competed, he never let on. And, for some reason, that made Okib only want to compete all the harder. The smaller boy hitched up his bundle of wood, squared his shoulders, and set off at an even faster pace.

Naum made a valiant effort to keep up and though still huffing and breathing heavily, he was right on Okib's heels when together they spied the shrine. The isolated stone building squatted like a hoary toad at the edge of the path. The ground around its walls formed a small island in the scrub, packed and flattened by countless generations of bare and sandal-shod feet. The building was a simple square with walls that flared slightly outward as they rose from the baked earth. Each wall was pierced by a short doorway and around the top of the small shrine ran a frieze of tiny columns. In a niche facing the path was a badly worn carving of the bee god, "Ah Muzencab."

His shrine was old and enigmatic. Built by dwarves in the time of magic, it was already a resting place for travelers long before the coming of the Lords of Itzá. In its youth, the building was brightly painted and if one looked closely, one could still make out the faded images of snakes, sun, rain, and maize that adorned its walls.

Gratefully, the boys cast aside their heavy bundles and ducked through the low doorway into the shadows and relative cool of the small interior.

"Just in time," said Naum. "How do you manage to walk so fast?"

"I'm not fast. You're just slow," laughed Okib.

"Maybe, but each time we collect wood, we have to go a little farther from the village. I'm not built for distance."

"I agree with that. Next time, let's try a different direction."

"Sure, but for now let's eat. I'm starved."

From pouches tied at their waists, the boys each pulled small gourd bowls and balls of half-cooked maize. Naum also produced a sweet potato. They broke the maize into their bowls and Okib added water from their drinking gourd. A quick stir dissolved the maize into nourishing liquor. With thirst and gusto they drank off the liquid and then used sweaty fingers to scrape up the tasty sediments. In short order, the maize was gone, the sweet potato divided and devoured, and Naum stared wistfully at his empty bowl.

"What's the matter," asked Okib, "didn't get enough?"

"I'm alright, I guess, but a bite or two more wouldn't have hurt. Collecting wood is hungry work."

"Right you are my friend, so have I got a surprise for you. In honor of Ah Muzencab and his commodious shrine ..." With a flourish and a mischievous grin; Okib pulled a leaf wrapped packet from his pouch and placed it before Naum. Curious and a bit wary, Naum undid the bundle. Hidden safely

inside, sat two substantial chunks of honeycomb. Naum looked suspiciously at the gooey sweet and then at his grinning friend.

“Where did you get that?”

“I was tending the bees and no one else was around.”

“You stole it! Your mother is going to punish you when she finds out.”

Okib shrugged, “If she finds out. I’ll eat your piece if you’re scared.”

Naum snatched up one of the combs. “I’ll take my chances. Besides you’re the one she’ll take the stick to.”

With that, Naum broke off a chunk and popped it into his mouth. Okib had just done the same when he happened to glance out a door. Up the trail a man was approaching.

“Naum; look someone’s coming!”

Naum and Okib both stared intently. The trail was heavily used and it wasn’t the least unusual to encounter other people from the village or even the occasional merchant from another village. The man who approached was clearly from farther afield.

In his youth the traveler may have stood tall and vigorous, but now he stooped and walked with a shuffle. On his back rode a large woven hamper; supported by a tumpline over his head. In his left hand, doing double duty as a walking-stick was a long flint-tipped spear.

The boys both knew that it was impolite to stare but as the stranger drew near they found it impossible to look away. The man was not black but his sunbaked skin was among the darkest they’d ever seen. His eyes were ringed with even darker circles and his lower lip protruded and hung down, weighted with a heavy jade pendant. His hair was braided with colored bands and then wound around behind his head in a sort of queue. Worn gauntlets of beaded jaguar pelt guarded his wrists and ankles, and the loincloth around his waist, dyed in yellows and reds, was hung with mysterious bulging pouches. The whole of the stranger was covered in a layer of fine gray dust that gave him an impression of immense age.

As the man drew abreast of the shrine Okib and Naum drew back into the shadows suddenly shy of this strange apparition.

“Ba’ax ka wa’alik? (Hello),” said the old man through the door. “How are you young gentlemen on this fine day?”

“Malob oqin” (Good afternoon) “Grandfather,” they replied making the proper response.

“My journey has been long. Might I share your shade?”

Looking uneasily at each other the boys edged back. “Of course you are welcome grandfather,” croaked Okib.

The old man set his hamper down next to the bundles of wood and spear first he clambered through a door. Once inside, he turned a couple of times like an old dog and finally made himself comfortable across from the boys.

“This is cozy,” he said, “but I often wish the dwarves had built things a little larger.” Grinning, the stranger gave them a wide lopsided smile that plainly highlighted his sole remaining tooth. Neither boy knew how to respond. Ignoring their obvious discomfort the old man continued on. “Traveling alone as I do, I look forward to passing the time with those I meet. You two are collecting wood. What village are you from?”

“K’optela Grandfather,” said Naum.

“Ah, K’optela,” sighed the dark man as if remembering a pleasant but long forgotten friendship. “Tell me about K’optela. How many live there these days and is old Hub-tun (Conch Stone) still nacon (war chief)? Water is precious. How are this year’s crops? These are dangerous times. Does K’optela have enough holcánob (warriors) to defend it from bandits? They do; how many? And, who are your chilánob (priests)?” The questions went on and on. The boys began to fidget. They didn’t want to be rude to an elder but they were anxious to be on their way. Also, the strangeness and intensity of their unexpected companion were a little frightening.

In mid-sentence, the old man suddenly stopped and pointed at the boys’ hands. All four were sticky with honey and still held bits of comb.

“Boys, boys, you’ve let me ramble on, and here I see I’ve interrupted your devotions to Muzencab. Please excuse a garrulous old fool. Perhaps you would like to join me in prayer; the bee god always appreciates those who pay him heed.”

So saying, he reached into one of his pouches and withdrew a small plate and three flat stones. He set the plate and stones in front of him and carefully adjusted their positions. When he was satisfied with their arrangement, he took incense from another pouch and placed a pinch on each stone. On the plate he prepared to kindle a flame.

“Grandfather, we really must go,” said Okib

“We’re expected with our wood,” added Naum, “besides our devotions were already finished.”

“Just so,” said the dark man suddenly disinterested, “don’t let me keep you.”

With a distracted wave of his hand he sent the boys scuttling out a side door. Outside, Okib and Naum grabbed their bundles of wood and ran toward home as fast as their legs could carry them. Once well away from the bee god's shrine and with both of them wheezing and puffing, the boys slowed to a walk.

"You know who that was, don't you?" said Okib. "That was no man. That was Ekchuah, the merchant, the black war chief!"

"Do you really think so?" huffed Naum.

"I tell you, it was him! It was the Wandering God. Did you see that spear and his one tooth? We're lucky that we got away."

"I hope we didn't offend him by not joining his prayer. Do you think we should have offered him food?"

"How should I know?" said Okib "Let's just forget it and go home."

"Forget it? He might have cursed us! I think we should tell the chilánob."

"Are you crazy Naum? Do you feel cursed? I don't feel cursed. If you tell the priests, we'll only get in trouble. Besides, do you think I want na (mother) to find out about the honey?"

"Well, I guess we can keep it to ourselves, but I better not wake up tomorrow as a chic (coatimundi) or all covered with warts."

Okib smiled, "Come on then pick up your pace." He always liked it when Naum agreed.

Back at the bee shrine, the dark man finished burning his incense and emerged into the sun. Like Okib, he was also smiling. If there had been anyone to see him they might have noted that many of his years had fallen away and that he now stood rather proud and mostly erect. He no longer appeared as a decrepit withered old man leaning on his staff but rather as an elder only slightly past his prime, his flint lance suddenly more weapon than walking stick.

Ah-cambal smiled because yet again his Ekchuah disguise had served him well. His skin darkened with dye, his teeth blackened, a few props, and a little acting was all that he needed to move easily from place to place gathering valuable information. The ruse might not hold up under the scrutiny of a crowd of nobles or priests, but the spy was a cautious man. Ah-cambal avoided villages and towns and picked his encounters with great care. Lone wayfarers, pilgrims, lowly merchants, and boys collecting firewood were easily overawed and talkative in Ekchuah's presence. If they told others of their encounter with the Wandering God, well so be it. Ekchuah was the patron of wanderers and merchants. What was more natural than that he should appear to his chosen? Ah-cambal said a silent prayer, thanking the

Wandering God once again for his continued protection, and promised that at dusk he would again burn copal in his honor.

The spy of course already knew that the nearby settlement was K'optela. For the past three days he'd stolen silently about its outskirts watching and observing; something that he'd done many times in the past. Information gleaned from the two youthful wood cutters was merely a finishing touch, a capstone that crowned his observations.

Ah-cambal prided himself on being thorough. K'optela was strong, its modest holcánob (militia) alert, and the town continued its allegiance and support of nearby Sotuta.

Two uinal (20 day months) had slipped away since Ah-cambal walked from his home on the Bay of Chectumal. The days had run swiftly and he'd seen and learned much. Wandering from place to place as Ekchuah or as an itinerant trader of sea shells and salt, he'd taken the measure of the fluid loyalties and conflicts that twisted and swirled around the borders of his brother's modest chiefdom.

From his seat at Ichpaatún, Ah-cambal's brother, Nachan Can, and his people acted as a conduit for trade goods passing to and from the busy river port of Lamanai and other communities to their south. Blessed with a rare and valuable commercial position, but bordered by powerful aggressive neighbors, Nachan Can, faced a constant struggle to keep Ichpaatún prosperous and secure.

K'optela and its surroundings were the last of the areas that Ah-cambal had set out to scrutinize. With the boys' information added to what he already knew, he was well satisfied that he understood the current political situation and was ready to report back to his brother.

More than at any previous time in Ah-cambal's memory, the glowing embers of many long-smoldering animosities were fanned and nurtured by the growing dryness and scarcity of the land. The constant bickering and intermittent warfare regularly interfered with Ichpaatún's trade and was a continual worry to Nachan Can and others not directly involved.

Travelers and traders regularly brought news from the rest of Ulumil cuz yetel ceh (The Land of the Turkey and the Deer / Yucatán) to the province of Chectumal, but as cacique (chief), Nachan Can couldn't trust the prosperity and security of his people solely to hearsay and rumor. Ah-cambal served as his brother's spy, his eyes and ears. The information that Ah-cambal gathered on his wanderings was firsthand. It was valuable information on which his brother could rely; information that Nachan Can used to hold his borders, and that provided forewarnings for the people of Chectumal before dangers or strife spilled across their land.

After the shade of the shrine, Ah-cambal squinted in the glare of the late afternoon sun. K'inich Ajaw (the sun-faced lord) was more than three quarters of the way through his daily journey, yet still he burned fiercely. Ah-cambal shouldered his woven hamper and headed in the same direction taken by Okib and Naum.

After a few hundred strides, he turned away from the wide dusty trail and struck out into the arid jungle. For a time his passage was slow and difficult. A profusion of life hindered his every step as he scrambled and pushed his way through the scrub and thorn. Lush when wet and blooming with orchids, bromeliads, and other exotic plants, the landscape was now well into a long dry season of drought. Everywhere life had taken on a harsher edge, jealously conserving and defending its moisture. Eventually, his feet began to trace a lesser path. The twisting ribbon was little more than a game trail but its way opened before him and his progress grew somewhat easier.

Until he reached his own lands, Ah-cambal planned to avoid other people and their possible questions. He would stick to the wilds.

As the day plodded steadily into dusk, he pushed harder toward the distant ridge. Except for a low range of karst hills that runs along the peninsula's northwest, Yucatán is a flat land with little that catches the eye. Ah-cambal loved the Puuc (hills). Their gradual crests rose like the tops of the mighty pyramids at Chichén Itza and Coba. When he stood on one of their summits the world spread out below him and stretched far into the distance. He felt he could almost touch the sky. Moreover, the soil, in the Puuc's valleys, was deep and fertile. The people who lived there grew vegetables, fruits, and herbs of many varieties. The hard won abundance was such that their crops provided not only for themselves but also usually fueled lively trade with surrounding communities.

The only drawback was the area's lack of water. Each time Ah-cambal passed through, the hills and valleys were a little dryer and the existence of their people a little more precarious. This season, the drought plaguing the land was making their subsistence even more uncertain. Life in the Puuc was gradually becoming untenable and even with its aguadas (seasonal ponds or small lakes) and the laborious construction of large numbers of chultunes (cisterns for the collection and storage of rainwater), people were slowly drifting away.

A long afternoon of constant climbing at last brought Ah-cambal to a suitable stopping place. Atop the ridge slowly returning to the earth reclined a small enclosure of ancient and weathered stone, an abandoned and forgotten watch post of once mighty Óoxmáal. Tired but satisfied with his day's work, he set down his hamper and spear, and turned to watch the drama playing out below.

As far as his eyes could see, mottled purple shadows crawled across the jungle. K'inich Ajaw had begun his descent into Metnal (Xibalba, the underworld) and soon the land would fall into darkness. In Metnal the sun faced lord would take on the form of Balam, the fearful jaguar god, and in that form do battle with the lords of night that he might prevail and again bring the day.

Ah-cambal made his promised devotion to Ekchuah, and for good measure also a small offering to the rain god Chaac. Afterwards, he ate a simple meal of dried meat and fruit, and settled with his back against the low wall to watch the dance of moon and stars across the sky. Sometime later, he awoke cold and a little stiff. The stars still wheeled overhead but something had changed. Something had disturbed his slumber.

Instantly alert, Ah-cambal stared intently into the darkness. Ix Chel (the moon goddess) no longer bathed the world with her radiance and the surrounding gloom was complete. He couldn't see anything or hear anything, but all his instincts screamed that he wasn't alone. An inch at a time he carefully reached for his spear and slowly drew it to him. As he watched and waited the silence grew oppressive. Small hairs stood up on his body and a prickly sensation tickled his neck and back. Without understanding its origin, he felt a primordial knot of fear form in his stomach. Ah-cambal frowned. As a well-seasoned traveler and veteran warrior he rarely encountered the emotions of fear and doubt.

The low chuff came from nearby, almost at hand. Then he saw the eyes, bright cold, and staring. Only yards away barely visible in the faint starlight stood Lord Balam. Jaguars were common enough but Ah-cambal needed only one glimpse to tell that the creature he faced was no ordinary animal. Lord Balam was huge and almost the color of the night itself. As the god stood motionless before him, Ah-cambal was overcome with a need to speak.

"Fearsome Lord, I am your servant," he said as he laid aside his spear.

If the god Balam had come to carry him away, Ah-cambal was prepared to go. His life had been a good one blessed with challenge and prosperity. The Jaguar Lord inched closer, ever staring but saying nothing.

"Why have you come, oh Lord?" asked Ah-cambal.

Surely, if Balam saw fit to forsake Metnal and stand before him, something momentous was at hand. The huge jaguar walked forward until the two were almost nose to nose. He sniffed at the man before him and another almost inaudible growl rumbled in his throat.

"You stand at the crossing of two paths," heard Ah-cambal. "One path leads to an uncertain future, the other to oblivion. You must choose."

“What paths my Lord, I see nothing?”

“You must choose.”

When Ah-cambal awoke, he was alone. Lord Balam had defeated the lords of night and once again in the guise of K'inich Ajaw he was rising in the east. Above the ridge the sky lingered gossamer purple and a rare pre-summer chill pervaded the deep shadows of the small stone enclosure. Ah-cambal shivered and pulled tighter the edges of his well-worn travel cloak. For the first time in many uinal he felt the icy grip of advancing age. His hands were stiff and his knees creaked as he stood. In the cool before the new dawn he felt nearer to the shambling old man he so often portrayed.

He searched the ground, but not a broken twig or so much as a scuffed patch of earth betrayed the truth of the jaguar god's visit. Perhaps Lord Balam came to him in a dream. Ah-cambal wasn't sure, but he knew the visitation meant something important. Such an encounter, real or dream, was a powerful omen, a forceful portent discounted or ignored at one's peril.

Ah-cambal gathered dry sticks and twigs and built a small bright smokeless fire. Kneeling within its tiny circle of warmth and light, he unrolled a weathered but cunningly ornamented square of deer hide. Smoothing it onto the ground he then selected one of his many pouches. Inside rattled 260 reddish brown tzintè (coral tree) seeds. Ah-cambal lowered his head, chanted the proper devotions, and quickly scattered the kidney-shaped seeds onto the hide.

Casting the seeds was a divination, a cleromancy, that when performed correctly revealed the will of the gods. The 260 seeds reflected the 260 days of the sacred Tzolk'in, the great wheel of the moon calendar that connects the energy of heaven with the earth below. The seeds' apparently haphazard pattern was complex, but far from random. For someone like Ah-cambal who could read their secrets, the scattered tzintè seeds mirrored the actions of the gods. They answered questions. They foretold the future.

Stunned and uncertain, the spy stared at the swirled array. Three times he cast the seeds and three times they aligned themselves into an identical configuration. Each time, the story they told was the same; all the once great houses of Mayapán would bow before a strange people. The strangers would preach a new god and the virtue of a vahom-ché (an uplifted wood) of great power. Large deer would come into the land and the worship of the gods would cease! What could such a prophecy mean? The gods' message confused and dismayed Ah-cambal, but never in all his years had he seen the seeds deliver one with equal force.

The spy shouldered his few belongings. The gods had given him a message and it was time to return home and share what he'd learned.

The sacred Tzolk'in had turned and the day was 5 Kawak, the time of storm and change.

.....Continued in Chapter 2.....

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