

DIRK VAN DEN BOOM

# THE EMPEROR'S MEN



STORMY  
HEAVENS

ATLANTIS

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HEAVENS

ATLANTIS

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# 1

Aritomo's right hand trembled. It was sticky with blood and stank. He had to make an effort not to drop the knife. The man in front of him gurgled. The blood poured out of the cut carotid artery with force, the metallic smell was numbing. The man winced again, his legs hit the ground, his heels scraped the dusty floor, then he lay still.

Aritomo dropped his right hand. Once again, a conscious decision was necessary not to let the knife's slippery handle fall out of your hand. The dead man in front of him had a contorted expression that relaxed slowly.

Steps from the outside. Then another man stood in the doorway. He did not attack, did not assault sleepers in the dark of the night, did not try to kill him with a murder instrument reminiscent of a garotte. One of the guards. One of the good guys. Aritomo felt the relief as it flowed through his body and finally washed the knife from his hand. It fell to the ground, and both men's eyes were on the corpse for a moment.

"My lord Aritomo Hara!"

"Here," said the latter in a weak voice and took a step back toward the place from where he'd just been brutally

woken. He wasn't feeling well. Not good at all.

"Are you unharmed?"

The Japanese involuntarily grabbed his neck and touched the thin graze. He was hurt, but it would heal. His quick reaction had saved him from worse. Death had to wait, at least tonight. His demise had come very, very close to him, however, and his cold breath made him shiver all over despite the warm night.

"I'm okay. Are there more?"

"He was the only one."

The Mayan warrior stood waiting in the room, looked down at the dead man again, whose outline could be seen well in the glow of the torch that the guard was holding in the air.

"I know this man. He is a servant of Xicoc, a man who belongs to the court. The King must know about it!"

A statement uttered without any significant emotion. As if he hadn't expected anything else. Aritomo looked at his right hand, drying red, and moved his fingers as if he had to find out whether they could still be moved despite the sticky covering.

"Yes," said Aritomo softly. "But he should be taken away."

"I will take care of that. My lord ..."

"What?"

Aritomo's response was more rash than expected, but the warrior didn't seem to take it badly.

"The security guard in front of the house ... your companion ... he's dead."

Aritomo took a deep breath. He had feared it. There was no other explanation for this incident. He didn't want to look

at the victim, but he had to.

“Show me.”

The warrior lead the way. Aritomo climbed over the body, felt his bare feet get wet with the blood, and followed outside. The house had been made available to the time travelers so that they could finally escape the tightness of the boat. They had organized security themselves, but apparently had not expected to be attacked on friendly ground just a week after their move.

Hubris was the right word for this. And as always, hubris was quickly punished.

Aritomo finally faced the dead man, and conflicting feelings tortured him. Of course, he knew the man by name, a sailor named Kato, a simple, an obedient soldier. His neck showed deep wounds where the garotte had overpowered him, his tongue hung out of his mouth, and his eyes were wide open. Aritomo leaned down and closed his eyelids. They were so few, so terribly few. Every dead crew member was an irreplaceable loss.

Aritomo also felt unfairly treated. An absurd, almost silly emotion, but yes – here in Mutal they were the honored guests who had saved the city from its enemies and who would increase it's might to an unprecedented level. And here an assassin sneaked in, just to kill him, Aritomo, in a very targeted manner. The man who continually tried to balance Captain Inugami, the man who perceived the Mayans as primitive savages, not as a civilization with which they had to come to terms, a man who did not want them to perish in the maelstrom of history.



Aritomo was the good one. He would not have been surprised to see an attack on Inugami.

But he. Why he? It was definitely not fair.

It also showed him that there was a significant difference in the way he saw himself and how he was seen from the outside. For this assassin here, he was just one of the messengers of the gods who unbalanced everything and questioned the traditional order and tradition – a dangerous course of action, since they would inevitably bring down the wrath of the gods on them, gods to whom these messengers did not seem to pray at all.

Aritomo hadn't noticed. He hadn't suspected anything. He had been carefree, stupid, naive, blinded, and thus of dangerous negligence, unworthy behavior for an officer in the Imperial Japanese fleet.

There must have been a change of mood, somewhere beneath the surface of submissive kindness, constant respect, the rush to fulfill the wishes of the visitors. It must have become too much for someone. Aritomo knew that this was the case with the King of Mutal, the young Chitam. But would he provoke someone, of all people, to kill him, the first officer of the strange boat – and with him the voice of reason that had so far been able to prevent decisions that were to the detriment of the Maya?

No, that made absolutely no sense. Someone else must have taken the initiative, a traditionalist who saw Chitam for no more than the puppet Inugami actually intended to make him. Someone who did not differentiate, but saw the threat equally manifest in all messengers. It had to be that way.

Other crew members of the boat were now awake, came outside, rubbed their eyes, asked questions loudly, then fell silent when they saw the body of their comrade and the first officer as he leaned over and stared into the void. The Mayan warriors also had gathered, somewhat apart, in their own group, and they looked guilty. However the assassin had managed to get so close to the messengers' quarters, it was quite likely that he had received help.

Probably with the involvement of one of the guards.

Aritomo looked up, glanced at the Mayan warriors, and felt suspicion and fear spread through him. He knew which way he would follow if he gave these feelings too much room. It was the path that would lead him firmly to Inugami's side, not just driven by fantasies of omnipotence and delusions of grandeur but by constant fear, the need for security, and the false assumption that more and more power would fulfill that desire.

It was an illusion, Aritomo was sure of that. Here, at this time, in all its apparent superiority, this fact had just been effectively demonstrated.

"Lord, we have sent a messenger to the King," one of the Maya said to him.

Aritomo nodded. "That's good," he said softly. He waved two more of his sailors, pointing to the dead body in front of them. "Take him with you. Clean his body and prepare him for a funeral. I'll conduct the ceremony myself."

Aritomo didn't even know if he could keep that promise. That was another point that they had never thought about before. The wealthy Maya, men and women of nobility and high priests, gained renown from elaborate tombs to entire

temple buildings for the kings. Simple Maya had to be content with simple burials, not for eternity but forgotten and lost as soon as their next of kin also found death.

But what precautions should one take for dead time travelers?

Aritomo would now have to deal with this question. He assumed that they would bury their own people the way they were used to at home. Everything else seemed absurd to him at the moment. A difficult topic, but one that was suddenly on the agenda.

And much earlier than he would have liked.

"We need to tighten security," said a voice next to him he knew well. It was the Briton Lengsley who had now appeared, looking at the men who were removing the soldier's body, and then lurking around, as if he was afraid of another attack at any moment.

"We could get back on the boat and nobody will attack us."

Aritomo said it but didn't believe it.

"That's true. But nobody can stand it anymore either. The men were overjoyed when they were finally allowed to move outside. We just shouldn't have accepted this house without dealing with all security issues ourselves. It worries me that Inugami is right, but we should move our camp to the training ground for his army. As soon as they are back, they offer us good protection, at least better than if we were targeted in the midst of the city proper."

"The slaves could kill us. After that they would be free," Aritomo said quietly.

Lengsley smiled cheerlessly.

“Inugami has them well under control. If they kill us, they are still slaves to Mutal. I’m not sure that would improve the situation for most of them.”

Aritomo said nothing, but silently agreed with the man. Inugami had led his Janissaries’ army on a campaign, and they hadn’t heard anything about the outcome of the attack – they didn’t even know if the captain himself was still alive. Aritomo knew that Inugami would not shy away from personal risk to gain respect beyond fear of the boat’s few guns, pistols and cannon.

A boat that was still completely immobile on the top of Chitam’s father’s tomb, a tomb he couldn’t even use, because the boat had to be removed from there first. Whenever that would be possible. If anytime at all. It didn’t look like it.

Aritomo watched the situation slowly calm. Some of his comrades returned to their rooms, their faces concerned, while others spoke quietly. Sleep was out of the question for him, as the excitement still dominated thinking and breathing. He had to clean himself, change clothes, eat something. A mug of chi would do him good now that the boat’s saké supplies had run out. Aritomo knew that Sarukazaki was experimenting with a still, and nobody was stopping him from spending his free time on this project. So far, however, it has been heard that the results have been of a rather unacceptable quality.

Now, at this minute, Aritomo wouldn’t have said no to the worst from the technician’s kitchen. But he was left only with chi, whose alcohol content was very low.

Aritomo didn’t want to drink tons of it.

He turned away. Servants cleaned his room. The dead man had been brought out, but the traces of the struggle were still obvious. The Japanese marched into the washroom, which the time travelers had built themselves, with a stone basin, only roughly hewn out of a rock, and a simple wooden pipe that provided water in four different places above the basin. There was a real drain that also could be closed. In theory, the pool was large enough to take a bath in, and building a proper bathhouse was one of the plans the Japanese have been pursuing since they moved in. They made themselves really comfortable. Their own rooms, kitchen, bathroom, a courtyard for sporting activities, their own guards and their own assassins, who chased you at night.

Aritomo opened the water inlet. The cool water came from a tank, filled three times a day by servants, who brought the water from a nearby reservoir. He washed the blood off his hands, then carefully cleaned his blade, which he had picked up from the floor and which had been strangely difficult to carry, as if the assassin's death tugged on the blade and pulled it down.

The steel was excellent and would not rust quickly, but there was no replacement for the foreseeable future. The knife had saved his life, and for that reason alone it deserved intensive care.

It also helped him collect his thoughts and calm down. When the blade was clean and dry, he felt a little more relaxed than a few minutes ago. The weapon was now easier in his hand, cleaned of the murderer's spirit. He missed a mirror in which he could look at his unshaven face.

The only real glass mirrors remained in the boat as a special treasure. The Maya knew polished metal, mostly silver, which the wealthy used as a mirror. It was an interesting thought that these were much more valuable than the Japanese specimens, if only because of the material used to produce them. He had one in his room from which he shaved.

Aritomo found himself thinking of his few remaining razor blades and what he would do when the stock ran out. It was by no means unusual for a naval officer to grow a beard, which was easier to prune with the local knives. Would that make his eternally childish full moon face more masculine?

And why should he waste unnecessary thoughts on it right now?

He finished his cleaning. When he stepped outside, it was still dark, although it wouldn't be too long before dawn. His blood pressure had calmed down, and he felt that he could actually lie down again, but the thought of returning to his tainted room filled him with reluctance.

He stepped into the courtyard. There were now only Mayan warriors and two Japanese, both armed, who had taken over the guard. They only nodded to Aritomo, and he waved it away. No need to make a report. They were good for the night.

He sat on a stone bench and looked into the crystal clear night sky. No one else seemed to share his restlessness. The noises of the night were clearly audible again. At dawn, the King would get an idea of the situation and, Aritomo suspected, warriors would visit the noble whose servant had been the assassin. Mayan justice was sometimes very quick,

and the punishments did not include too many gradations. Those who did not speak were tortured until they admitted everything, including that what they had never done.

This thought made Aritomo shiver that night.

## 2

Helmut Köhler felt the bile rise inside him. He clung to the railing, stared into the roaring abyss of the sea, felt his stomach crawl up his throat, as the *Gratianus* slid deep into the trough, and then the familiar gag came, and he opened his mouth. Almost nothing came of it, since he had completely sacrificed his stomach contents to Neptune an hour ago, but the violent, cramping nausea didn't want to subside. His desperate moan subsided in the roar of the storm, and when the cramp let off and he opened his eyes again, which he had tormentedly closed, he stopped trying to empty something that was long empty.

He took a deep breath, felt the current weakness ease somewhat. Köhler was not the only one on board the expedition fleet's flagship who fared so badly. This was the third day they were stuck in the storm, and even the most experienced sailor was beginning to push his limits. There was little sleep, and when he tried to find some, he was restless, always interrupted, in violently rocking hammocks that threw you against the comrade or the wall and sometimes with force on the floor. There was hardly anything to eat, and when there was, it was cold, often wet,



and those who felt sick hardly managed to eat anything solid anyway. Yesterday, Köhler had dipped ship rusks in thin wine and swallowed them somehow, but an hour later they came back up,

Everyone's strength was weakening. They all prayed for calm weather, if only a break in the constant romp and roar. The ship was in better shape than its crew. In any case, the *Gratianus* showed no signs of not being able to cope with the forces.

Köhler looked up and saw Navarch Langenhagen, who was standing on the bridge next to the gubernator, tied up like all of them, because it often happened that a breaker struck the rail with great power and tore an inattentive crew member with him. Screams, cries for help went down in the deafening rustle of wind and waves. But the tightly woven ropes that everyone had to secure himself with and which slid along the guide rails next to the railing had already saved many a life. It was still the case that most seafarers could not swim and deliberately did not want to learn it in order to exchange the torture of a slow death in the sea by drowning as quickly as possible.

Köhler was able to swim.

And he never wanted to give up either.

His stomach felt the same. He sensed another cramp coming. He straightened up, stuck his face into the spray, felt the cold dampness smack against his skin and an icy shiver run down his body. He was wet to the bone, no matter how much he tied the thick leather coat around his body. The masses of water that flowed down his collar were enough to soak him completely.

The nausea in his stomach subsided again. He closed and opened his eyes, wiped his wet face with his wet hand, which did nothing but feel like he had done something, a senseless gesture, expression of weak defiance. Then he felt someone pull on his arm.

Magister Aedilius stood next to him. The ship's doctor, he was one of the graduates of the Medical Academy of Ravenna, the forge for medical staff that the doctor of the *Saarbrücken* had founded and which trained the best healers in the world. Aedilius was no longer a young man but of strong stature and had served on many ships before being assigned to the expedition. His gray-brown beard was damp, and he was wearing a hat that encircled his bald head like a second skin.

He did not say anything. He should have screamed to make himself understood. But his eyes expressed concern and a little pity. Aedilius held out a leather bottle to Köhler, with the opening closed, and when he took it, he felt a pleasant warmth in his hand, refreshment enough without having to uncork it. Warmth and dryness. There was little that Köhler wanted more at the moment.

The medic nodded to him promptly. Köhler knew what was in the bottle—a perfidious herbal drink that everyone said was the most disgusting thing they had ever drunk. Köhler had had enough of disgust that he had so far successfully avoided the doctor's approaches. But now Aedilius had caught him.

There was no escape.

He grimaced and tried to shake his head one last time, but the doctor looked at him firmly and raised a warning

finger. Then he made a pouring gesture in front of his mouth. Aedilius was in command of everything related to health. He was even allowed to give orders to Langenhagen.

This was an order. Köhler was a soldier. He followed orders.

He lifted the cork, closed his eyes, and took a deep sip. Better to get it over with and die a dignified death, manly, without fear.

The burning, rotting liquid flowed down his throat. He felt his stomach rebel almost immediately. He didn't know which was worse, the utterly disgusting taste or the caustic feeling when the drink combined with his upset stomach acid. He immediately felt the gagging sensation start and put the bottle down, ready to do it all again ...

But nothing happened.

Köhler's eyes widened, and he listened to himself. A strange, numbing warmth had settled on his battered stomach, and the nausea was just a lurking feeling somewhere below, covered and anything but acute.

He was almost ... fine.

Aedilius looked at him knowingly, smiled, made another, pouring movement.

Köhler did not hesitate a second time.

He had been a fool.

He raised the bottle and took a deep sip. It was still an unspeakable brew, but now he drank it without fear and bad expectations. It made things easier. The warming, numbing feeling in his stomach was intensified and it pushed back the nausea until it was almost imperceptible.

He handed the bottle back to the doctor. Köhler could not gauge whether his expression was adequately communicating the gratitude he was feeling, but it seemed as if the message had arrived. Aedilius nodded to him, gave him a smile, and turned. A boatswain stood a few meters further and, in a high arc, put a meal that was not even slightly digested into the waves. The wind was unpredictable. With stoic calm, Köhler wiped a chewed chunk off his sleeve. Seconds later the spray had completely cleaned him.

Aedilius ran to the boatswain and presented him with the bottle. According to the facial expression of the sea sick, this candidate had previously also been rather reserved about the doctor's brew. A mistake, as Köhler was now ready to admit. He regarded with pleasure that the boatswain submitted to the doctor's request, and shortly afterwards the same pleasantly touched facial expression that Köhler had just shown was visible on his features as well. The man took another sip almost hastily.

Köhler now returned to his place next to the Navarch. Another senior officer, Adrianus Sextus Cabo, stood on the foredeck and gave the necessary orders. The night black sky and the spray roaring over the rail made it almost impossible to see from here what was happening in the front part of the ship. It was late afternoon, but the sun was only a faint glow behind the thick banks of clouds that a mighty wind was pushing across the sky. There was not much to issue orders for – almost all of the sails had been dropped, only a small storm sail hung from the front mast. The control of the ships was possible primarily because the steam

engine was running at full power, and thus gave the ship enough propulsion to actually influence the course with the rudder. The gubernator was a muscular man who was almost as tall as Köhler, although he did not descend from the generally taller time walkers. He clutched the rudder wheel with strong fists, despite the fact that it was currently tied. The storm came directly from the west, and they steered the fleet against the wind. Without the steam engines, this would be an extremely difficult undertaking. It was problematic enough. The ships were built robustly and had ridden the storm without problems. As always, it was the human factor that started to wear off.

Helmut Köhler could say this with some certainty, at least for himself.

“How are you?” Langenhagen shouted against the noise of the storm and turned his wet, shiny face to Köhler. Next to the rudder hung two storm lamps, which swayed to the left and right on short iron chains and undeterredly cast their pale light on the ship’s command deck.

“Aedilius!” Köhler shouted back. He waved in the direction of the medicus, who was just now giving his herbal drink to another sailor swaying like the storm lamps. Langenhagen grinned and nodded, having overcome his fear of the brew from the start and set a good example. In fact, Köhler had watched him eat ship’s biscuit, cheese, and hot wine without giving everything back.

Köhler decided to no longer unnecessarily question his trust in Aedilius.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“Far off course!” Langenhagen back. He pointed to the sky. “We won’t know until it clears up properly.”

“What’s your best guess?”

“Three days are over. The longest storm I’ve ever seen was five. I think we’ll be through soon.”

Langenhagen sounded confident and looked that way. Köhler nodded and clung to the railing that separated the quarterdeck from the rest of the ship. Only the most essential crew remained on deck. The Boatswain regularly checked that everything was lashed tight and counted whether all the people who were supposed to be there were onboard. The rest lingered inside the ship and did little more than wait for the torture to end.

Köhler remembered that the first two weeks of their trip had been absolutely trouble-free and peaceful. They had entered the Atlantic, and it seemed as if their expedition had started under a good star. Favorable winds had accelerated their progress, the ships had stayed together without any problems. The mood among the men had been excellent, full of curiosity, a great desire to explore and discover. When the skies closed and the storm announced itself, nobody had expected such a catastrophic and constant change in the weather. Nevertheless, they had endured it all with great confidence. Weren’t they the best seafarers in the Empire? Weren’t their ships the best of the entire fleet?

But now the mood began to change. Köhler hoped that Langenhagen – who actually had the rank of Navarch, but liked to see himself primarily as the captain of his ship – would be correct with his forecast.

“Go below deck!” Langenhagen shouted. “I want to know if everything is okay. And eat something. Aedilius’ drink really helps. You need strengthening. Hot wine, slightly diluted. Something solid on it.”

Köhler only nodded. Now that the herbal potion had taken effect, he felt a different kind of rumbling in his stomach. Hunger. Clearly recognizable desire for food for the first time in three days. He immediately followed the order.

He was grateful when he closed the companionway. It was a little quieter down there than on deck, the roar of the storm fading somewhat into the background. He saw sailors looking at him, nodding, often sitting tired against the wall or curled up in hammocks, in different phases of exhaustion, boredom or illness. But there was calm, a little fatalism, and only a few conversations. No dice game. No noise except the muffled roar from outside. A certain discipline in exhaustion. Good enough for Köhler, good enough for the ship.

He entered the galley. The ship’s cook, called Smutje in the language of the time-wanderers, looked at him expectantly. It was significant that the only man who was completely unaffected by the storm was of all people the master of supplies. He showed his gaps in his teeth when he grinned at Köhler and gestured at his supplies with a sweeping gesture. The man was his best customer and always chewed on something. Even now, his mouth moved not only according to his words, but also to work on food. This sight had recently made Köhler nauseated, but now it triggered something like anticipation in him.

“A fresh start, sir?” The man was dripping with hypocrisy.

“Still an iron stomach, Vitellius?”

“Bronze, like our brave machine. Some wine?”

“Water and rusks.”

“The very big risk, sir. You are a brave man, an ornament of the fleet, an image of Roman masculinity.”

“Stop talking rubbish.”

The Smutje grinned and handed him what he wanted and watched with a certain lurking look what was going to happen. He was genuinely impressed when Köhler ate the food with methodical chewing and then pecked some soaked crumbs off his coat. The Smutje smiled knowingly.

“Our dear Medicus’ herbal drink.”

“Clever man.”

“I swear on the stuff. Haven’t drunk anything of it yet.” The cook patted his stomach. “Bronze, as you know.”

Köhler gave the man a disparaging look, but was as happy as a child that the rusk in his stomach made no move to reappear.

“Are you all right down here?”

If anyone could answer that question, it was the Smutje. He was one of the few who still looked at everything with open eyes. And very much amused in most ways.

“With drawbacks. I think some are almost bored.”

“As soon as the wind subsides, we set sail again to save coal. Then there will be more than enough to do.”

“But that doesn’t apply to legionaries. Not only are they sick, they absolutely don’t know what to do with themselves.”

“There’s a lot of cleaning up to do upstairs. We will put together work details. They’re going to be busy, too.”



Vitellius nodded and scratched his ear. Apparently he found something, looked at it for a moment before immediately put it between his busy jaws. Köhler was reasonably certain that behavior like this couldn't be healthy.

"How long?"

"The Navarch thinks no more than two days."

"And are we heading further west?"

"Indeed. I prefer not to say anything about whether the storm has broken the fleet apart. We have had no contact with the other ships since the winds started. Only noise on the shortwave. We'll have to wait here too, and see what the end of the wind will bring us."

"Two days?"

Köhler smiled.

"Is it getting too much for you? Despite a bronze stomach?"

"I haven't cooked anything decent in three days. I am filled with pity and care for my starving comrades. They have to get some proper food between their teeth."

Köhler agreed. However, he assumed that the Smutje did consider primarily his own teeth with his remark.

"Just be patient."

Köhler raised his hand in greeting and turned away. A short passage below deck confirmed the cook's statement. Everything was quiet, as far as one could really speak of calm with these violent waves. He answered a few questions – roughly the same ones he had just discussed – and spread more confidence than he felt.

But he was an officer. Always smile and wave.

When he finally struggled back up, he closed his eyes, almost blinded. The beam of light that had briefly shone down on them through one of the thick cloud banks had disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared – but his heart leapt when he saw the light dancing over the violent waves.

A good sign.

Langenhagen nodded to him, grinning happily. Even the helmsman looked relaxed, although he was still clutching the steering wheel as tightly as when Köhler had last seen him.

The wind didn't let up. A deep wave trough made Köhler's stomach go up again, but this time everything was under control.

It got better.

Everything was getting better now.

# 3

Of course, he had to make an example.

It was no different.

The former king of Saclemacal was no longer very pleased. The main reason for this was that Inugami had separated the man's head from his torso with his sword, with a quick, targeted and powerful stroke of the exemplary sharpened weapon. The body had bled to death in a red pond, and the head from which the feather headdress had fallen rested a little further.

The man had behaved appropriately, and Inugami was able to show respect for that. When they had conquered the city – after a short but fierce struggle in which the defenders quickly realized the hopelessness of their situation –, the King had subjugated himself to the conquerors. Inugami didn't know if he had hoped for mercy. But he hadn't been in the mood to let this wonderful opportunity for a symbolic act pass away. He certainly didn't have to kill every king he got hold of, but it was a necessary, useful sacrifice at least for the first time.

So the head fell. The King had immediately recognized his fate and accepted the judgment without complaint.

Therefore Inugami had left him the headdress, the sign of his dignity. It had only made the act of killing stronger. The crowned head fell before the eyes of everyone, the conquered as the conquerors. The Mutalese cheers had been loud and contained real enthusiasm. For them, Saclemacal was a haven of treason. The just punishment had been pronounced and executed. The messenger of the gods had taken the King's head, and his wondrous sword had described such a beautiful, clear bow and had carried out his work so smoothly and quietly that the magic of this weapon had made the warriors' hearts beat faster.

A worthy deed. A necessary act.

Inugami turned, sword still raised. Next to him stood Chitam, the king of Mutal – a title that lost value every day, and this was not only the view of the Japanese. In fact, Inugami was in the process of contesting the power behind it. To be more precise, with the severed head of the inferior ruler, the captain had also cut off a lot of Chitam's power, and he waved his bloody sword like a scepter.

Finally he lowered his arm with the blade and left the top of the temple building on which he had carried out the execution. All sorts of rituals would follow that had to do with the Mayan religion and into which Inugami was disinterested. He sensed that he could not maintain this ignorance forever if he wanted to achieve Mayan loyalty on this spiritual level as well, if he wanted them to follow him with body and soul in all things. But he first had to reform the Mayan religion. The practices that did not help him had to go – human sacrifice, for example, the decision to wage wars according to the status of the stars and not when it

seemed strategically wise. He had to reinforce the religious aspects where they were useful to him, but everything had to be more efficient. From now on, every conquest would upset the military practices of this people. In former times, Saclemacal would have been conquered, one would have set an example – just as Inugami had just done –, and afterwards, Mutal would have left with a promise of tribute after installing a new ruler, someone, from whom it was hoped that he would not cause any trouble during his lifetime. Sometimes that worked and sometimes it didn't; indirect exercise of power depended heavily on the victor's enduring prestige and ability to maintain a permanent threat. As memory faded, it became more likely that the once defeated developed the opinion that their defeat should be seen as a historic event and that there were no political consequences involved anymore.

Inugami would not allow that. Saclemacal would not be free again. The smaller city and its outskirts were the first building block of his new empire. He would appoint a governor who would always do exactly what Mutal ordered him to do. The road between the two cities would be expanded, and he would set up a daily messenger service. The couriers would walk but would exchange the latest news and orders every day – orders that were supposed to be executed, otherwise the consequences would be felt immediately. A new state could not be erected on any non-binding agreements.

Saclemacal would thus remain firmly in the grip of Mutal. The city's warriors would fight alongside Inugami. The way was mapped. Other cities had taken part in the attack on

Mutal, and other royal heads had to detach themselves from their shoulders. The counterattacks were legitimate; no one in the neighborhood could blame Mutal.

Inugami had no illusions. As soon as word got around that the conquered cities would be firmly incorporated into the Mutal's dominion, resistance would increase. Then, he knew, the real war would begin, the war about absolute supremacy in Central America. Inugami knew the risks. It could, of course, go wrong. He needed the help of people who were fallible. But if he didn't try, he would throw away his life here in the distant past and live an undignified existence. Others might get used to it, get an Indian girl pregnant, and grow old and fat. Inugami was not ready for this.

He did great things.

He made history.

Or at least he would die trying.

He walked along the ranks of his warriors, silently taking their testimonies of honor. The men would be rewarded. That night was theirs. Inugami would let the reins slide, close his eyes. No looting, no rape – but everything was allowed up to this limit, and the city had to make the warriors feel good.

The good mood of his soldiers was in the interest of those who were controlled by them.

He disappeared into the palace of the King of Saclemacal and left the crowd behind. Here, in the chambers of the dead, only his bodyguard and the servants of the executed king awaited him, submissive and ready to carry out his orders.