

Chapter One



Temple Ball

Altun Ha

899 AD

Sweat mixed with blood ran down Ma'xu's forehead and dripped into his eyes. The salty, burning sensation made the long rectangular playing field difficult to see. A hot midafternoon sun scorched the players and added to their battle fatigue. The mental and physical rigor of Temple Ball would challenge every ounce of willpower the players could muster. The annual match would, in any ordinary year, dictate who went on the village hunts. This, however, was no ordinary year. This year, the village would welcome its newest warrior. The two captains, Ma'xu and Kanul, were vying for the right to take the village offering to Tikal. The winner of this year's match would meet the gods in Tikal and the loser would meet the gods in paradise. One way or the other, each of their destinies would be fulfilled this day.

Jul'bul gasped for air as he tried to counsel his leader, "Ma'xu, I don't know how much longer we can go. Kanul's team has the will of a panther. Some of our teammates can hardly walk."

“I know; we need to make one final push,” Ma’xu said, patting Jul’bul on the shoulder and taking a deep breath himself. “Get B’aku and tell him to be ready for our play. The next run we make may be our last,” Ma’xu warned.

Surveying the large playing field, Ma’xu locked his sights onto the stone ring suspended ten feet in the air. The ring at the end of the field represented both victory and death. His legs, tight from an entire day of fighting, were starting to cramp. He sensed an end to the game was drawing near. At some point, one of the teams would be forced to concede.

Bloodied and bruised, Ma’xu and Kanul fought each other as if their lives depended on it, because it did. Their forearms and elbows swung fiercely as they fought for the ball. What Ma’xu gave up in size to Kanul, he more than made up for in speed and agility. With one swift move, he stole the ball from Kanul and made his way up the field. Ma’xu’s speed created distance from Kanul. Ma’xu watched as B’aku raced ahead of him on his right toward the ring.

“Ma’xu, pass it!” B’aku shouted.

Instead of passing the rubber ball to his teammate, Ma’xu shuffled the ball across the field with his feet. He weaved in and out of Kanul’s players as if they were standing still. One after another, players from Kanul’s team tried in vain to knock Ma’xu out of the match. One by one, they failed.

Ma’xu slowed down and angled for a shot at the ring. His mind raced as he anticipated his shot. I’m still too far away, but I must try. I must not fail. I cannot shame my father. Ma’xu could feel his heart pump like a hunted jaguar running for its life.

He focused on the ring and pulled his right foot back. His eyes grew wide. His face tensed. With his mouth open, his foot came forward to kick the ball. Before his foot could make contact, Kanul caught up and planted a forearm into Ma’xu’s back, knocking him to the ground.

When Ma’xu stopped rolling, he noticed blood pouring out of his nose. He looked up and met his father’s eyes watching from the throne on the side of the field. He could see the disappointment in the king’s face and fear in the queen’s. Ma’xu looked down in shame. He knew he had missed his chance. He quickly realized the wise choice would have been to pass to

B'aku. Before he could get up, defenders from Kanul's team descended on top of Ma'xu, pummeling him further into the ground. One by one, they made sure Ma'xu would not get another shot at the ring.

Unable to expand his lungs, Ma'xu gasped for air at the bottom of the pile. With each warrior piling on top of him, a commensurate amount of air was forced out of his lungs until every bit was gone. A rush of panic overcame him. He opened his mouth, but couldn't make any sounds. He couldn't call for help. He couldn't move. His chest began to convulse trying to get air. The weight was too much.

He teetered between this world and the next. His eyes fluttered. His stomach tightened. A sharp pain suddenly penetrated his chest. His eyes slowly closed. Calm, peaceful sleep approached. His body ceased all instinctual efforts to sustain life. What will the other side be like? would be his final thought.

As his life force evacuated his body, the weight on top of him became lighter. His lungs, not yet asleep, expanded with air. With every mouthful of air, he could feel life return to his body. As the last player from Kanul's team was thrown off Ma'xu, he could see his friend towering over him.

"Ma'xu, I don't know about you, but I don't feel like having you sacrificed today; get up," Jul'bul said, pulling Ma'xu up by his arm.

"Thank you, Jul'bul, I thought I was on my way to the underworld." His gasping breaths rhythmically matched his rebounding heartbeat. He shook life back into his legs and arms. Ma'xu's senses returned. The smell of hot, humid, salty air never smelled so good. His lungs were alive again, his erratic respirations recovered.

"I don't know if we can beat them, they're too big," Jul'bul said with desperation.

Escaping death rejuvenated Ma'xu. His eyes glistened with fury. Ma'xu found the resolve he needed.

"Indeed, Kanul's team may be bigger, but we're faster. Remember, Jul'bul, the larger and stronger tapir doesn't hunt the jaguar, the jaguar hunts the tapir."

Ma'xu looked down the field. Some of his teammates were on the ground and some were being beaten by Kanul's team. Ma'xu felt born again. A rush of energy flowed through Ma'xu's body. Like his teammates', Ma'xu's leather-hide chest protector and arm pads were torn and covered in blood and sweat.

"We need to finish this game, Jul'bul," Ma'xu said as a crooked grin crept across his face. His eyes grew wide as if possessed by the god of pain himself. With a crazed look, Ma'xu took off in pursuit of Kanul. Ma'xu tackled Kanul and threw him to the ground, but not before Kanul kicked the ball at the suspended ring. The ball sailed through the air. For the first time that day, the players stopped in their tracks. Silence enveloped the three thousand-plus villagers watching the match.

The queen dug her fingernails into the king's arm as they watched the ball heading straight for the ring. A score would end the game, and her son's life. The ball hit the inner edge of the ring and circled the rim. Time stopped while everyone waited and watched. Would it fall through or not?

"Stay out, stay out . . ." Ma'xu whispered from his knees, clenching his fists.

"Come on, come on," Kanul said, fanning the air as if trying to help blow the ball through the ring. Everybody waited. The ball finally slowed down. Half of the spectators let out a moan, while the other half cheered as the ball fell back into the playing field.

"You can let go of my arm, my queen," the king said, pulling the queen's fingernails out of his forearm.

"Sorry, that was close," she replied, wiping the king's blood from her hand onto her tan hide dress.

"Yes, too close."

Kanul's team was dumbfounded. They stared at the ring in disbelief. It was as if they had fished all day and lost their catch.

Ma'xu's heart pounded again. It's not over, he thought. He couldn't let Kanul's team take another shot. He jumped up, ran to the ball, and kicked it out toward the opposite side of the field. Ma'xu's enthusiasm was contagious. His team found their second wind and pursued the ball. The game continued.

“Get them and kill them!” Kanul ordered his team, now in pursuit of Ma’xu’s team. The game turned into war.

“Jul’bul! Keep them back,” Ma’xu called out.

Jul’bul used his massive arms to knock the players from Kanul’s team down, while Ma’xu moved the ball up the field with his feet. He fought off attacks from Kanul’s team. Ma’xu delivered a crushing elbow to a player trying to steal the ball; trying to steal his honor; trying to steal his destiny. Not this year, he thought. This year was special. There was far too much at stake.

“Ma’xu, pass!” B’aku said as he ran up the side of the field. This time, Ma’xu passed the ball without hesitation. Kanul’s team swarmed B’aku like a swarm of killer wasps. Ma’xu broke to the center of the field and called out to Jul’bul.

“Now!” Ma’xu yelled.

Jul’bul nodded and ran to the center of the field. He positioned himself in front of the ring. Hunched over, he placed his hands on his knees and braced himself.

Kanul’s team descended on B’aku and crushed him, but not before he was able to center the ball back to where Jul’bul was hunched over waiting for Ma’xu. Kanul’s team stopped, turned, and followed the ball’s trajectory high above the playing field. They realized that in their angst at Ma’xu’s team, no one was guarding their ring. A strategic mistake; a potentially deadly mistake.

Kanul and his team watched in disbelief as Ma’xu ran up the back of Jul’bul and leapt from his shoulders. The crowd went silent for the second time of the day. Ma’xu was fifteen feet in the air laid out horizontally. Sailing fast and straight, the ball showed no sign of coming down to earth. Ma’xu flew through the air to intercept the ball. He let out an ear-piercing battle cry and with one swift motion he punted the ball, redirecting its path toward the ring. The ball never touched the edges as it soared through. A perfect shot. The game was over.

The crowd let out a thunderous applause as Ma'xu's team mauled him in celebration. Kanul's team dropped their heads. They knew what defeat meant.

Moments later, standing at an altar positioned in front of the king's throne on the north side of the field, a straight-faced high priest shook a collection of bones that let out a haunting dull pitch. Silence quelled the celebration. Kanul and Ma'xu knew the tradition and walked up to the altar.

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