

THE
SHADOW
CROSSER

J. C. CERVANTES



RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS

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Dear Reader,

You were probably expecting this letter to be from Zane Obispo, our young hero. But this book is different from the other two. Zane, a worthy scribe, could not write the introduction this time. There is a reason—one you may or may not like, depending on the type of narrative you prefer.

I, for one, did not enjoy parts of this account—neither the tragedy and sorrow, nor the terror and darkness. Like the other Maya gods, I was ripped from my life and thrown into the middle of this twisted, sordid tale. Sadly, none of us saw the end coming. I doubt you will, either.

Nevertheless, like all stories, this one must be recorded and preserved. By reading it, you are giving energy to the words on the page and feeding a much greater magic for all storytellers everywhere. Thank you for doing your part. Truly, I am sorry for what you are about to experience.

Yours in story,

Itzamna

1



My life pretty much tanked the night I left home with a two-thousand-year-old demon.

Wait. *Tanked* isn't the right word. It was more of a slow unraveling, like a thread that comes loose in an old sweater and can never be fixed, no matter how hard you try. All you can do is wait for the dumb hole to get bigger one centimeter at a time.

I should have seen the signs, but in my defense, I was distracted. You would have been, too, if you had spent the last three months, two days, and sixteen hours sleeping in fleabag motels, eating cardboard hamburgers and soggy tater tots, and catching nasty whiffs of Iktan's demon breath. For the record, demons don't brush their fangs. And two thousand years is a long time to go without Colgate!

As if that weren't bad enough, my mom had told me that, regardless of the fact that I was godborn-hunting, I had to do all my distance education homework, which meant hours hunched over my iPad. I had also spent way more time than I wanted to admit looking over my shoulder, expecting Camazotz (Mr. Bat God) to appear out of a trail of black fog so he could rip off my head with his iron claws. I was pretty sure he had dreamed of nothing else since our battle in the junkyard.

So, yeah, I was ready to go home. Back to Isla Holbox, where everything was sun and sea and safety. I was *so* close, I felt like I could practically fall over the finish line. Because, tonight, Iktan had tracked down the very last godborn I was trying to find: lucky number sixty-four.

The night had started like this:

I tumbled headfirst out of a gateway into a dark alley littered with aluminum cans, Chinese-food take-out boxes, and a sofa hemorrhaging its stuffing. The air was thick and muggy. "Just this once," I groaned to Ik, "could you make a gateway that doesn't spin me on extra high and smell like leftover death?"

Tonight, the demon had taken the form of an eleven-year-old human girl with a gap-toothed smile and braided reddish hair. She wore denim overalls and a shirt patterned with little red hearts. But I knew what lay underneath all that.

A green neon sign on the wall above us gave her a sickly glow. If I looked super close, I could see her natural blue pallor underneath the fake human one. Iktan altered her appearance as quickly as someone might change a mask, constantly seeking a disguise that wouldn't make her itch all over, which was never going to happen, because she was allergic to human flesh. The best part of her allergy? She couldn't eat humans.

"Death is an acquired smell, Zane," Ik said, scratching her dimpled chin. "Urgh. Human skin is like poison ivy. What a stupid invention."

"Skin, or poison ivy?" And, technically, neither is an invention, but I wasn't about to have *that* convo right then.

She growled. "Both!"

Whatever. Nothing was going to put me in a bad mood. If all went as planned, in a couple of hours I would be rid of Itchy Ik and her reeking, churning gateways. I grunted, getting to my feet with the help of Fuego, my cane/spear. I was born with a limp—one leg is shorter than the other—and my cane helps me bolt when I need to, like if I'm about to be sliced open by some bloodthirsty monster. Fuego also conveniently turns into a spear when I have to defend myself against said monster. It was a present from my dad, the Maya god Hurakan.

"So, where are we?" I asked.

"Hell's Kitchen. *Hardly* hellish, if you ask me." Ik gave a hard grunt. "To be more specific, New York City."

"*This* is New York?" I stabbed a wedge of discarded Styrofoam with my cane, thinking that this dark, seedy alley looked like none of the pictures I'd ever seen of the shining city.

Iktan kicked an empty soda can under the sofa with a huff. "I know. How could a place this nice be Murderers' Row? What a big fat disappointment."

"At least we won't be here long," I said.

Tugging on a braid, Ik said, "Anything to eat in this place? I'm starving."

"We ate, like, ten minutes ago."

"Yeah, well, you don't have a demon's appetite, do you? And I'd hardly call chicken fingers eating. No blood, no bones..." She scrunched up her face in disgust. "And why do they call them chicken fingers, anyway? Chickens don't even *have* fingers! Only tasty, crunchy feet..."

"I think it's because we eat them with our fingers?"

Just then, Ik's head snapped up, her eyes burning red, a snarl curling her lips. *Crap!* I knew that look—she was getting ready to hunt. My stomach squeezed tight.

A white cat leaped off a rusty dumpster and zipped down the alley. My arm shot out to prevent the demon from following, but I wasn't fast enough.

Ik streaked toward the cat like a tornado.

"No!" I shouted.

A few seconds later, I reached the demon at the dead end of the alley. She was hunched over with her back to me. Breathless groans erupted from her throat, and I swallowed hard. I did *not* want to see matted cat fur stuck between her teeth. I'd seen it before, and believe me, it was *muy* disgusting. But when she turned around, she was empty-handed.

My very first thought was: *Yay! No blood anywhere.*

"It disappeared." She panted, and her pupils expanded so big her eyes looked black. I wished hard that she wouldn't dress up like a kid. It was seriously disturbing.

I looked around. How had the cat escaped?

She pushed her bangs off her big forehead. "It must have fallen into a gateway."

"Cats don't just fall into gateways," I argued. Heck, *nothing* accidentally tumbles into the magical portals that gods and sobrenaturals use.

"It's happened once or twice," she said with a huff.

I had a hard time believing her. She was probably trying to save face for failing to catch a skinny gatito.

"I don't make the gateways. They're all around us." She

let out a forced laugh. "Oh, that's right—you can't see them, because you're not as powerful as I am."

I ignored her 183rd insult and, since I'd never met a demon who knew how to kid around, asked, "Really? People and animals can just, like, disappear into them?"

"It's rare." She glanced up like she was trying to recall something. "Everything has to align just right. Something about angles, rising planets, unflossed teeth, and other stuff. I never paid attention, because I don't really care what happens to humans. It's depressing enough that I have to hang out with you."

"So that's how you've been getting us everywhere so fast." I'd always wondered how come Iktan never needed a gateway map like the one my friend Brooks and I once had to use.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Ik growled. "Demons are superior to godborns."

Sure, okay. Like I said, nothing was going to ruin my almost-home good mood. Not even an egotistical itchy demon. But there was something different about Iktan tonight—something I couldn't name. "Come on," I said. "Let's go find this godborn."

"I still don't understand why we've had to go to all this trouble for a few pathetic half-breeds," she grumbled, falling into step with me. "And please do not bore me again by telling me about your vow to Ixtab."

I'd promised the queen of the underworld that I would find all the remaining godborn children who were still out there. They deserved to know the truth about who they really were.

"Let's hurry up and get this over with," Ik went on. She

might have looked like a little kid, but she sounded like a mean army sergeant. "You know the drill. We establish visual contact, assess the situation, then—"

"I make my move."

"I was going to say 'go in for the kill.'"

"Enough with the kill stuff, okay?"

"Such a killjoy," she muttered before asking, "So, do you feel anything?"

"Yeah," I said. "Nausea from your death gateway."

"Focus harder! You never see me taking this long to do *my* job," she whined. "Like I said, superior."

Her only job was to track the godborns. The rest was up to me.

And my blood.

That's right. I'd had to make a deposit (half a pint, to be exact) into the craptastic Blood Bank of Ik, so she could learn the "stink" we godborns share. Ever since she'd sniffed my blood from a cup, she could pick up a godborn's odor from miles away. Demons don't have very sensitive noses (unless their prey is right in front of them, like the cat); instead, they have these little scent receptors that pop out of their necks (it's way beyond gross) like tentacles. Iktan could follow a single godborn trail, laid down more than forty-eight hours before, even in a crowd as big as ten thousand.

But Ixtab, being a meticulous goddess, had added an extra layer of security. Ik could only get me within half a mile of the godborn before the demon would lose the trace. I had to do the rest, using what I call my GPS—godborn positioning system. Whenever I got close to a godborn, I'd feel this kind

of cold pull in my gut. I experienced it for the first time when my bruja friend, Ren, washed up on the shore of Holbox. Since then, all my time on the road had only made my skill stronger. Or, as Ixtab said, *fine-tuned*.

"It's this way," I said, leading Ik out of the alley and around the corner. The neighborhood was pretty sketchy at this time of night, with drunks staggering around, lost-looking tourists rolling their suitcases behind them, and a few homeless people hunkering down in shuttered doorways.

Ik looked around. "So where is the little beast?"

I turned in a slow circle, waiting for the connection to grow, to tell me which direction to take, but it was like something was jamming the frequency.

Or *someone*.

2



“Well?” Ik barked.

“Could you be quiet? I’m concentrating.” The signal was weak, but I cut right and headed down West Forty-Sixth Street. Stopping midway down the block, I turned around. “You’re sure this is the right area?”

Ik pressed her lips together like a curse word was wedged in the corner of her mouth. “Listen, Fire Boy, demons have the most sophisticated tracking ability in the universe, and all you godborns have the same stinky blood.” Dozens of three-inch blue spikes popped out of her neck, wiggling like worms on a hook. “We must be getting real close now, ‘cause I’m comin’ up empty.”

“Could you *not* do that whole creepy tentacle thing in public?” Chills ran up my spine.

“Someone sounds *jealous*,” she hissed, stretching the last s for way too long.

“Uh-huh. I’ve already done this sixty-three times,” I reminded her, scanning the street.

Ik rubbed her forehead impatiently. “Then be the pro you think you are and find the mutt.”

Long, lean shadows stretched across the asphalt. A cab rolled by slowly. Lights blinked off in the apartments above.

A slow-burn fire began to rise in my blood. "Something isn't right."

"I have an idea," Ik said semi-brightly. "Let's go over what you're going to say. Loosen you up."

"No thanks." I kept moving.

"Do you just walk up to the godborns and say, 'Hey, you're part Maya god. Come with me or else?'"

"Not exactly."

Up until now, I hadn't let Ik stick around for any of the encounters. Lowering the godborn boom on the kids was enough of a shock—I didn't feel like also explaining that I was hanging with a demon in disguise. Plus, two to one always makes a person feel ganged up on.

I focused on the connection that was getting stronger with each step. "I also tell them about the World Tree, where they can learn about their abilities and get trained in how to use them."

"Okay. Then, after all that, do you tell them that Camazotz wants to feed their hearts to the Mexica gods?"

"Keep your voice down!" For half a second, I imagined burning off Ik's eyebrows with a single spark from my fingertip. Instead, I whispered, "If you have to know, yes. I tell them about Zotz's plan to use godborns to resurrect the Mexica gods and how it *failed*. They deserve to know the truth."

Ik's face turned bright red, and I thought smoke might start curling out of her ears. What was her problem? She took a couple of deep calming breaths. "How noble of you."

More often than not, the truth worked. Most of the kids were pretty psyched to find out they had a godly parent and

might have inherited a power of some sort, especially after I showed them my fire-shooting skills. I was always careful to leave the enemies-ripping-out-their-hearts stuff for last. By then, they were usually too distracted by the word *power* to care about anything else.

But, if I'm being totally honest, not everyone had been pumped about the news. A few godborns had thrown up or passed out. The runners were the worst—I hated chasing them down. In the end, curiosity always won out. So far . . .

The godborns' human parents had a different reaction, but more about that later.

My blood ran hotter. Why couldn't I shake this feeling? I twisted my hands around Fuego and tried to push the sensation away, but it punched me in the chest anyway.

There was no doubt about it: we were being watched. Or maybe I was just being paranoid. I mean, no one could be following us. Ik always released her magical misty whatever to cover our tracks so completely that even if we were ambushed and thrown into an underground cave, no one, not even Xib'alb'a's best tracking demons or hellhounds, would find our leftovers.

"Uh . . ." I glanced over my shoulder at the dark and empty sidewalk. "Do you have a feeling something is way off?"

"You're *that* guy, huh?"

"That guy?"

"The one in the scary movie that everyone should have listened to before they got murdered." She rubbed her stomach. "Can you hurry it up so I can eat?"

Just then, my phone rang. Mom had bought it for me,

saying that if I was going to hunt with demons, she had to be able to reach me.

"A thousand bucks it isn't that girl." Ik leaned closer, nasty breath and all, to get a look at the phone's screen. "Ha! Told you. Don't answer it."

Ik had spent the last three months telling me all the reasons why Brooks hadn't called. *She doesn't care. She thinks you're boring. She's just not that into you.* But no way would my best friend, the awesome shape-shifter who had saved my hide more than once, ghost me. Even if Brooks *had* read all that sappy stuff I wrote about her in my first book, the one Ixtab had forced me to write. Stupid truth paper!

My best guess was that Brooks had joined some undercover network with her sister, Quinn, and couldn't talk to anyone.

I answered the FaceTime call. "Hey, Hondo."

My uncle's smiling face filled the screen. Ren's silvery-blue eye loomed in the corner. "You'll get a chance to talk to him," Hondo said to her with a grunt. "Move over."

"You don't need the whole screen," the godborn argued.

"Hey, guys?" I said. "I'm kinda busy right now."

My dog, Rosie, whined in the background as Ren grabbed the phone away from Hondo. "My phone tracker says you're in New York?" She had thought it was a good idea to share locations with each other. Just in case.

Ik tapped her foot. "Tell them you can't talk. Don't they know we're on an important mission?"

"Did you find number sixty-four?" Hondo shouted from the background.

"I'm working on it now."

"Oh, good." Ren smiled. "Then you'll be home tonight?" She flashed what looked like a notecard. "We got another invitation, with the same instructions as before: Don't pack anything. Don't bring your phone. Blah, blah, blah."

"I am *not* going to wear a SHIHOM uniform," Hondo chimed in.

He was talking about the Shaman Institute of Higher-Order Magic at the World Tree. All the godborns were supposed to report there next week for summer training. My uncle, a full-blooded human, was going to teach combat and meditation and stuff.

I pressed my face closer to the screen. "Why did we get a second invitation, do you think?"

Ik made a bored face and mouthed, *Who cares?*

Ren shrugged. "They want everyone to report sooner."

Iktan's tentacles popped out. "Sooner?" she whispered.

"As in the day after tomorrow, first thing in the morning," Hondo said. "And they better have all the equipment I ordered for the kick-butt drills I have planned."

"Why did they change the date?" I asked as Ik nodded vigorously. How come she was so interested in our schedule all of a sudden? It wasn't like *she* was heading to SHIHOM.

Ren said, "Guess we'll find out when we get there."

The gods had reasons for everything they did (mostly related to stuff that was best for them), so yeah, I had a bunch of red flags slapping me in the face about then.

Ik snatched the phone away, ended the call, and turned off my phone. Thin trails of black smoke floated from her eyes.

"Hey!" I shouted.

Tossing the phone back to me, she frowned. "You're letting outside stuff get in the way of this mission. Now get your brain in the game so we can get out of here. You're not the only one with a schedule to keep."

I widened the distance between us and took a deep breath, focusing all my energy on the last godborn. The signal grew stronger and stronger. I followed it . . . then froze in mid-step. "This can't be right."

Ik glanced around. "I don't see any mutts."

I pointed to a darkened store across the road. "The godborn is inside the antiques store."

"The one with the Closed sign in the window?"

Right. What was a kid doing in a closed antiques shop at ten thirty on a Wednesday night? Maybe it was a family business or something.

"Are you sure?" Ik asked, and I swear she started drooling.

"One hundred percent." I threw her a side-glance. "Need a napkin?"

I crossed the avenue, cut between some parked cars, and stalked toward the store window. Ik was right behind me.

"Did I ever tell you why the Statue of Liberty is blue?" she whispered.

"That's random, and she's actually green." I crouched at the edge of the window front, trying not to be seen as I peered into the shop. Two hooded figures lurked inside.

So which one was the godborn? My GPS should have been screaming at me by now, pointing its finger with total accuracy, but it was like . . .

Whoa!

Was that even possible? They were *both* godborns?

I wanted to ask Ik why her “superior tracking” had only picked up one, but she was still fixated on the Statue of Liberty.

“Its sculptor was a demon,” Ik offered. “He wanted to pay homage to all demons everywhere.”

My eyes were trained on the taller godborn with square shoulders. The one inspecting something in their palm while the other inched closer to get a better look. And then the something began to glow red. What the holy heck?

“Do you know why he wanted to pay homage?” Ik’s voice turned gravelly.

Why was she still talking about this? I ignored her, pressing my forehead against the window. “I think . . . they’re stealing something,” I muttered. “It’s glowing.”

“Because the statue is a reminder that demons are the *real* lords, superior to *everyone*.”

The taller godborn’s head jerked up. Our eyes met.

I was so focused on what was *beyond* the glass, I didn’t notice the reflection *in* the glass until it was too late.

Shining black eyes, a twisted smile, and murderous claws raised and ready.

Just as I snapped back, Ik’s talon slashed my cheek. I cried out. The pain was instant, the venom fast.

“Foolish, foolish boy,” Iktan tutted. “Never trust a demon.”

Fuego slipped from my grasp as my knees buckled. I collapsed and my head slammed into the concrete. The world slanted. Glass shattered. Agony ripped through me.

"Don't blink, Zane," Ik whispered in my ear. "The bat god is coming for you."

And the last thing I saw before my eyelids closed was a shimmer in the air and the rush of familiar dark wings.