

Chapter Twenty-four
THE SHOW/DOWN

It wasn't quite the James Bond moment that Max could have hoped for.

When he'd first sped away in the Zodiac, he'd planned to make straight for land and take cover in the jungle before anyone noticed him.

Unfortunately, it hadn't worked out that way.

Now he was puttering along in his bullet-ridden craft, stalling continually and leaving a trail of greasy black engine fluid. He suspected he had a slow leak, as the boat seemed to be getting lower and lower in the water. Eventually the engine gave up altogether, and he had to reach for the oars.

If one of Landa's guards spotted him now, he was a goner. But why hadn't they spotted him already? Or maybe they had? Maybe they were planning a reception at this very moment?

Max felt distinctly uneasy as he paddled the last few hundred yards to shore.

It was getting dark. He could make out the shapes of Landa's motorboats pulled up on the sand, about half a mile down the beach. But there was no sign of any crew. There

was also, he realized, no sign of any way up to the Temple of Ah Pukuh. A line of cliffs, hidden from the water by a grove of palm trees, formed an impenetrable barrier between the beach and the jungle.

How had Landa's men got up there? There had to be a trail near their boat landing. He crept along through the palm trees, as fast as he dared. His only thought was to get to the pyramid and find Lola before it was too late. In a few hours, Venus would rise and Landa would initiate the rituals.

By the motorboats, a thug in black lay facedown in the sand, with a blowgun dart sticking out of his neck.

Yay, Hermanjilio! One down, nineteen to go.

Then he saw the way up. A zigzag stairway had been carved into the cliff face. It was steep and narrow and completely exposed. Max knew that once he started climbing, he would be at the mercy of anyone above or below.

Trying not to look down, not to think about snipers, not to think about anything but getting to Lola, he slowly made his way up. The steps were weatherworn and cracked. As he got higher and his head started to spin, he turned his back to the water and climbed up sideways, his fingers clinging painfully to the crumbling rock.

When he got to the top, he sat down for a moment to recover. The moon was rising over the sea. No sign of Uncle Ted and the yacht. A bright star hung low in the sky. Could that be Venus?

He jumped up and headed inland. A path plunged into the forest. Mindful of Hermanjilio's disparaging remarks about his clumsiness, he moved as quickly and as silently as he could.

He didn't notice the body until he nearly fell over it.

The guard was sprawled across the path, with a blowgun dart in his neck. The Invisible Jaguar of the Night had struck again! A hundred yards farther on, Max found two more bodies, then another, and another. All felled by blowgun darts.

Maybe they could beat these guys after all. Max was just starting to feel hopeful when he heard the crack of gunfire ahead. The fight was still going on.

When he got close to Landa's camp, he left the path and crept on his belly, inching forward until he could spy on the camp from under a bush. Everywhere looked deserted. The rising moon cast a ghostly light over the scene.

Where was everyone?

Max lay still, his every nerve on high alert. He tried to filter out the cacophony of the rainforest and listen for voices or gunfire.

He had the unnerving sensation that someone was behind him.

He thought of the bodies on the path. Had those guards had the same sensation just before they'd been hit?

Slowly, very slowly, he turned his head and looked over his shoulder. There was someone in the bushes, he was sure of it.

Crouching now, Max pulled out his diver's knife. He scanned the undergrowth, but all he could see was the trembling of a fern frond that had recently been disturbed. His heart was beating fast. He listened hard, his ears straining for a clue.

Out of the bushes came a loud fart, followed by peals of laughter.

"Lady Coco?" whispered Max.

"I am in top form tonight," she said with a giggle, emerging from her hiding place.

There was a rustling in the trees and Max looked up to see a small figure in a Red Sox cap climbing to the ground.

"Lord 6-Dog! I am so pleased to see you!"

"I can only apologize, young lord, for the unseemly behaviour of my mother," said Lord 6-Dog. "She has been making an exhibition of herself all day."

Lady Coco emitted another barrage.

"Ignore her, I beseech thee," said Lord 6-Dog.

"But what's happening? Where are Landa's men?" asked Max.

"They sleep like newborn babes."

"All of them? But how?"

"Last night, as we had planned, Lord Hermanjilio slipped into the camp. To our most glorious luck, the cook is a local man named Eligio, whom Lord Hermanjilio knows well. When he heard about Landa's evil plans, Eligio agreed to pour a bottle of my sleeping draft into the lunchtime stew. An hour later, all who had partaken of the stew were out cold."

"It worked!" cheered Max. "Then what?"

"Eligio hid in the jungle to wait for Landa, while we pursued the stray guards who did not eat the stew."

"Who's 'we'?"

"Lord Hermanjilio and myself."

There was a squawk of protest from Lady Coco.

"Mother helped, too," sighed Lord 6-Dog. "Her duty was to create a loud and malodorous diversion of the kind you just witnessed. While the guards were transfixed in horror, Lord Hermanjilio and I took aim with our blowpipes."

"Way to go, Lord 6-Dog!" said Max admiringly.

"Excuse me," interrupted Lady Coco, poking a hairy finger into Max's chest. "Perhaps the young lord would like to compliment me on my diversionary skills. It's not easy maintaining such a high quality of flatulence, you know."

Max nodded politely. "Way to go, Lady Coco!"

"Thank you," she said with a regal air. Then she gave a few little toots of acknowledgment and jumped back into the trees to groom herself.

Max turned back to Lord 6-Dog.

"Did you get all the guards?" he asked.

"Unfortunately not. One of them was able to escape and make contact with the Spanish vessel."

"So that's why they all left the yacht in a hurry," reflected Max.

"We were ready for them," said Lord 6-Dog. "When Landa arrived with reinforcements, we ambushed them on the path."

"I fell over some of your victims! Did you get Landa?"

Lord 6-Dog shook his head. "Instead of leading from the front like a Maya warlord, he hid at the rear like a coward. While we battled his men, he scuttled into the forest with Lady Lola and two of his bodyguards."

"Poor Lola! Where are they now?" asked Max.

"They're heading toward the Black Pyramid," said Lady Coco. "Eligio the cook has been taking potshots at them to slow them down. We're hoping Lord Hermanjilio will get there first."

"I thought I heard gunfire. I hope the cook doesn't hit Lola by mistake."

"As I understand it, Eligio is not trying to hit anyone," said Lord 6-Dog. "He is merely taunting them, like a buzzing

mosquito. Meanwhile, Mother and I are taking up position to attack Landa's flank, if thou wouldst care to join us."

He made it sound like an invitation to tea and scones.

A shot rang out somewhere in the distance.

"Come," said Lord 6-Dog, "we must hurry."

They worked their way around the edge of the camp to the side of the pyramid. When they had taken cover behind a fallen tree trunk, Lord 6-Dog handed Max his blowgun and his last pouch of darts.

"Here, young lord," he said regretfully. "Thy lungs are bigger than mine. There are but three darts left. Use them wisely."

"What will you do?" asked Max.

"Mother and I will collect some tactical ammunition."

Before Max could ask what that meant, the two monkeys had vanished into the trees.

He surveyed the scene in the moonlight. Looking up at the Black Pyramid, he thought he could make out Hermanjilio on the top step, blowgun at the ready. Max gave a little wave. Hermanjilio nodded, held his finger to his lips, and pointed across the clearing. Evidently, that was where Landa was expected to emerge.

Max waited nervously. He loaded one of the darts into the blowgun and carefully placed the other two in front of him.

All was quiet.

Suddenly, a flock of parrots exploded from the trees, shrieking and squawking, and three men burst out of the rainforest. One of them pushed Lola in front of him. The other two shot at anything and everything as they ran across the clearing toward the steps of the pyramid.

The noise was terrifying—guns shooting, men shouting,

birds screeching—but Max tried to stay calm, waiting for the right moment. He knew he would only get one chance. And, armed with only a blowgun, he also knew the odds were against him.

In the end, it happened so quickly that he hardly had time to think.

Just as Landa reached the bottom step, the two monkeys let loose with a volley of nuts and fruits from high above Max's head. The bodyguards paused to blitz the treetops with bullets. Max crouched behind the log, not daring to breathe, as leaves and twigs exploded and rained down onto the forest floor. An animal shrieked and fell through the branches, landing with a thud somewhere behind him.

It was now or never.

Adrenaline pumped through his veins as he fired his three darts in quick succession. At the same moment, Hermanjilio fired from the top of the pyramid.

Yes! Yes!

The two bodyguards staggered and then collapsed.

No!

Landa pulled Lola in front of him like a shield. One arm was around her throat; the other pointed a gun into her back. She looked half asleep, as if she was drugged, but she was swaying and making little moaning noises as her entire body tried to fight whatever he had given her.

“Hold your fire!” Landa shouted. “Or I will kill the girl.”

Max kept completely still.

“And now, I will to count to three. *Uno, dos, tres*. If you do not step out with your hands up, your little friend is dead.”

Max looked up at Hermanjilio but couldn't see him. What should he do?



...nilio on the top step,

"Uno!"

His mind raced. Each second seemed like eternity. If he didn't come out, Landa was probably ruthless enough to shoot Lola in cold blood.

"Dos!"

But if he did come out, Landa might shoot *him* in cold blood.

"Tres!"

"Stop!" yelled Max. "Don't shoot, I'm coming out."

"No . . . urgh," groaned Lola as Landa choked her words by pulling his arm tighter around her windpipe.

Max slowly stood up and put his hands in the air. As he emerged from the underbrush, he took in the whole scene for the first time.

The brooding menace of the Black Pyramid.

The two guards sprawled on the lower steps.

Landa swivelling around to shoot him.

Then he saw something out of the corner of his eye, something soaring into the sky behind Landa. So unexpected was the sight that it took his brain a moment to register what it was.

A pineapple. It was a pineapple.

It sailed through the air in a graceful arc. When it reached its high point, it seemed to hang there for several seconds like a little UFO, hovering in the moonlight. And then the pineapple started its downward trajectory, plummeting to earth with increasing speed.

Landa became aware that Max was focused not on him but on something above him. He turned to look up, only to catch the pineapple squarely in the face. It exploded, sending pineapple chunks and juice in every direction.

Landa staggered, and Lola groggily pushed him away.

Now Hermanjilio had a clear target and, as Max watched, a silent dart embedded itself in Landa's forehead. The Spaniard didn't even have time to flick his cape before he crumpled to the ground.

A loud whoop came from the jungle in the same direction as the pineapple.

Max vaulted the log and ran toward Lola, who was slumped on the bottom step of the pyramid.

Lady Coco leapt out of the trees and got to her first. "Lady Lola! Are you all right?"

Lola groaned. She put her hands to her head. "I feel like I've been drinking Hermanjilio's elixir," she said.

"Landa drugged you," explained Max, "but it seems to be wearing off. Luckily for us, his sleeping potion isn't as strong as ours." A loud snore erupted from the Spaniard. "Anyway, he's getting a taste of his own medicine now."

Lady Coco jumped up and down in excitement. "Did you see that?" she asked. "What a perfect shot! And I've had no military training, you know."

"It was incredible, Lady Coco," said Max. "You saved my life."

Lady Coco smiled modestly, but her crossed eyes were shining with pride. "Did you hear that, son?" she asked, looking around for Lord 6-Dog. "I promised I'd make a good warrior—"

"Enough talking!" came a booming voice from the pyramid.

They looked up to see Hermanjilio making his way down. He seemed to be limping.

"Are you hurt?" Max shouted up to him.

"We will all be hurt," Hermanjilio called down through cupped hands, "if we don't get the Black Jaguar and get out of here."

"The Black Jaguar? Landa must have it," said Max, running over to the count's prone body. When he moved the Spaniard's cape aside, he saw a large pouch hanging from his belt.

Quickly, Max cut it free with his diver's knife and opened it. A smell of rotting flesh filled his nostrils, just as it had when Landa had opened his case and showed the Black Jaguar to Uncle Ted in the hotel garden.

"Found it!" called Max.

He turned back to the group in triumph, but Lola and Lady Coco had no interest in Jaguar Stones. They were looking around and calling into the jungle.

"What is it?" asked Max.

Lady Coco looked distraught. "My son—where is he?"

Max had a sinking feeling.

"I heard something fall through the trees in all the shooting. . . ."

Hermanjilio was getting impatient. "What are you doing?" he shouted down. "Bring me the Black Jaguar and let's go."

"We have to look for Lord 6-Dog," Max called to him. "We think he might be"—he saw Lady Coco's anguished face—"hurt."

"Just hurry!" commanded Hermanjilio.

"I'm too dizzy," groaned Lola. "I'll sit on the steps and wait for you."

So they left the Black Jaguar with her and went back into the trees to look for Lord 6-Dog. It was not an easy task. Very

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little moonlight filtered down to the forest floor, and the thick foliage made it difficult to search. They found a Red Sox cap hanging on a branch, but no sign of Lord 6-Dog.

In the end, it was Lady Coco's finely tuned nose that located the spot where her son had landed when Landa shot him out of the trees.

They found his limp, blood-soaked body under a thornbush.

Max put an ear to the brave monkey's chest. Tears welled in his eyes.

"Is he . . . dead?" whispered Lady Coco.

Max held the monkey close and burrowed his ear into its fur. He could just make out a faint heartbeat.

"No. He's badly hurt, but he's alive."

Max tenderly put the Red Sox cap back on Lord 6-Dog's head. Then he carried the monkey's limp body to the base of the pyramid.

"Lola!" he called. "Lola! We found him! We're going to need some of your rainforest remedies."

No answer. She wasn't there. She must have felt better and gone up with Hermanjilio to show him the escape route.

Max laid Lord 6-Dog out in the moonlight where he could take a proper look at his wounds. He'd been shot through the arm, and a second bullet had grazed his hip. It was bad, but not as bad as it had looked at first. Max took off his T-shirt and tore it into bandages while Lady Coco mopped her son's brow with a banyan leaf.

"Mama's here, little dog," she whispered in his ear. When they'd done all they could to tend Lord 6-Dog's wounds, Max gathered up the injured monkey and began to

stagger up the temple steps with him. It was surprising how much one howler monkey could weigh. Lady Coco tried to help, but it was slow going.

"Lady Coco," gasped Max, exhausted and only halfway up, "I think you need to get Hermanjilio. Ask him to come down and help me."

She hesitated. She didn't want to leave Lord 6-Dog's side. "He'll be okay," said Max.

Lady Coco licked her son's face tenderly, then bounded off up the temple steps. When she reached the top, she leaned over and waved before disappearing from view through the skull doorway.

Max kept looking up hopefully, but no one appeared to help him.

Eventually he hauled Lord 6-Dog up to the top by himself. He was breathing hard from the weight of the monkey and the steepness of the climb. He carried the monkey through the doorway and into the chamber of skulls. He was ready to give Hermanjilio a piece of his mind. How could he let his comrade-in-arms struggle all the way up on his own?

Then Max's resentment was replaced by a new feeling.

It was called fear.

Make that terror.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose up.

Something felt very wrong.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he looked around the chamber. What was that dark shape on the floor? He gasped as he made out the inert body of Lady Coco, a blowgun dart sticking out of her back.

Max had only one thought. He had to get out of there fast.

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Still carrying Lord 6-Dog, he lurched around to go back.
As he did so, he caught sight of Hermanjilio's arm swing-
ing down with the glowing Black Jaguar in his hand.
The stone hit Max hard on the side of his skull.
His head exploded into stars, and he dropped to the
ground unconscious.