

Chapter Twenty-two

THE BLACK PYRAMID

Sometime in the early hours, Max was awakened by someone grabbing his shoulder and shaking him.

"Rise and shine," said Hermanjilio. "It's time to get ready."

"Ready for what?" slurred Max groggily.

"You can't guard the camp if you're sleeping."

Max rubbed his eyes and peered at Hermanjilio. At first he thought he was still dreaming. In the moonlight, all he could see of the archaeologist were the whites of his eyes and the pink of his mouth. The rest of him was covered in black body paint.

"Great camouflage," he said. "They won't see you coming."

Hermanjilio put his hands on his hips and turned his head sideways like a warrior on an ancient Maya fresco. "They won't see me coming," he said, "because I am the Invisible Jaguar of the Night."

Max laughed, then realized that Hermanjilio wasn't joking. "Go get 'em, tiger," he said under his breath, as Herman-

jilio melted into the jungle with Lady Coco scampering at his heels.

Lola and Lord 6-Dog were getting ready to head off in the other direction. "Art thou ready?" said Lord 6-Dog.

She nodded.

Max tried not to show his glee at being left behind. "Good luck in the Pyramid of Death," he said, trying to sound envious.

Lola looked at Lord 6-Dog.

Lord 6-Dog looked at Max.

"Art thou ready?" he asked.

Max's stomach sank into the ground. "But Hermanjilio said . . ."

"I do not see him here, young lord, dost thou?"

Lord 6-Dog tossed Max a blowgun. He dropped it. "But I can't come with you," he said. "Who's going to guard the camp?"

"It can guard itself, Hoop," said Lola. "Don't let Hermanjilio bully you."

"Thou wast trained as a warrior, not a night watchman. It is only fitting that thou shouldst join us on this skirmish. It will limber thee up for the main battle tomorrow."

"You looked so disappointed when Hermanjilio ordered you to stay behind," said Lola. Her voice was filled with admiration, and Max savoured it for a moment before pulling himself together.

"The thing is," he said, "much as I would like to come with you, Hermanjilio is my commanding officer, and I have to obey him. For all I know, this is a test he's set for me. I can't put my own selfish desires before military discipline. I have to stay here."

Lola stared at him openmouthed. "You're scared," she said.
"Am not," said Max.

"Prove it," she said.

Max hesitated. What should he do? Save his skin and let a girl think he was scared? Or bluff it out and face the horrors of the Black Pyramid?

"Ready when you are," he said, picking up the blowgun.

Lola slapped him on the back. "Way to go, Hoop!"

Almost as soon as they set off, he stumbled over a fallen branch and sent assorted jungle birds flapping out of the trees in fright.

"Maybe Hermanjilio was right about you," whispered Lola crossly. "Watch where you put your feet!"

"Sorry," said Max. "Should I go back?"

"Keep marching, soldier."

Nearly an hour later, they approached the base of the Black Pyramid.

The closer they got, the more forbidding it looked.

The main pyramid had been excavated, but dense jungle covered the rest of the site and gave them cover as they crept closer.

"Wait here," whispered Lord 6-Dog.

Max and Lola waited. The jungle around them was shrouded in the sinister monochrome of night. Black flowers, grey leaves, vines like industrial steel cables, thorns like barbed wire. There was no buzz of life, and the air was as thick and heavy as molten tar.

As they stood in tense silence, Max's heart was in his mouth. It nearly stopped beating altogether when Lord 6-Dog dropped silently out of a tree in front of them.

"There are two guards on the pyramid. One keeps

watch from the topmost platform, one patrols the base," he whispered.

"Wait here, Hoop," said Lola. "Let us deal with them."

Max nodded gratefully. He watched them go, then sat down on a log and waited. And waited. Each minute seemed like an hour.

At last, Lord 6-Dog returned.

"Follow me," he said.

With a heavy heart, Max followed him up the side of the pyramid. It was an easy climb for a monkey, but steep and difficult for a boy. By the time they reached the top, Max was sure someone would hear his breathless panting.

But they were safe. The guard was crumpled on the floor, a blowgun dart sticking out of his shoulder.

Lola appeared out of the shadows, and Max helped her drag the sleeping guard beneath the carved skull and into the temple. Max shivered. Evil hung in the air like the smell of fried onions around a hot-dog stand.

"Light thy torches," commanded Lord 6-Dog.

They switched on their torches and gasped. The walls were made entirely of human skulls. While Max and Lola gazed around the chamber in horror, Lord 6-Dog pointed up to a particularly gruesome skull.

"Reach into the eye sockets, young lord," he instructed.

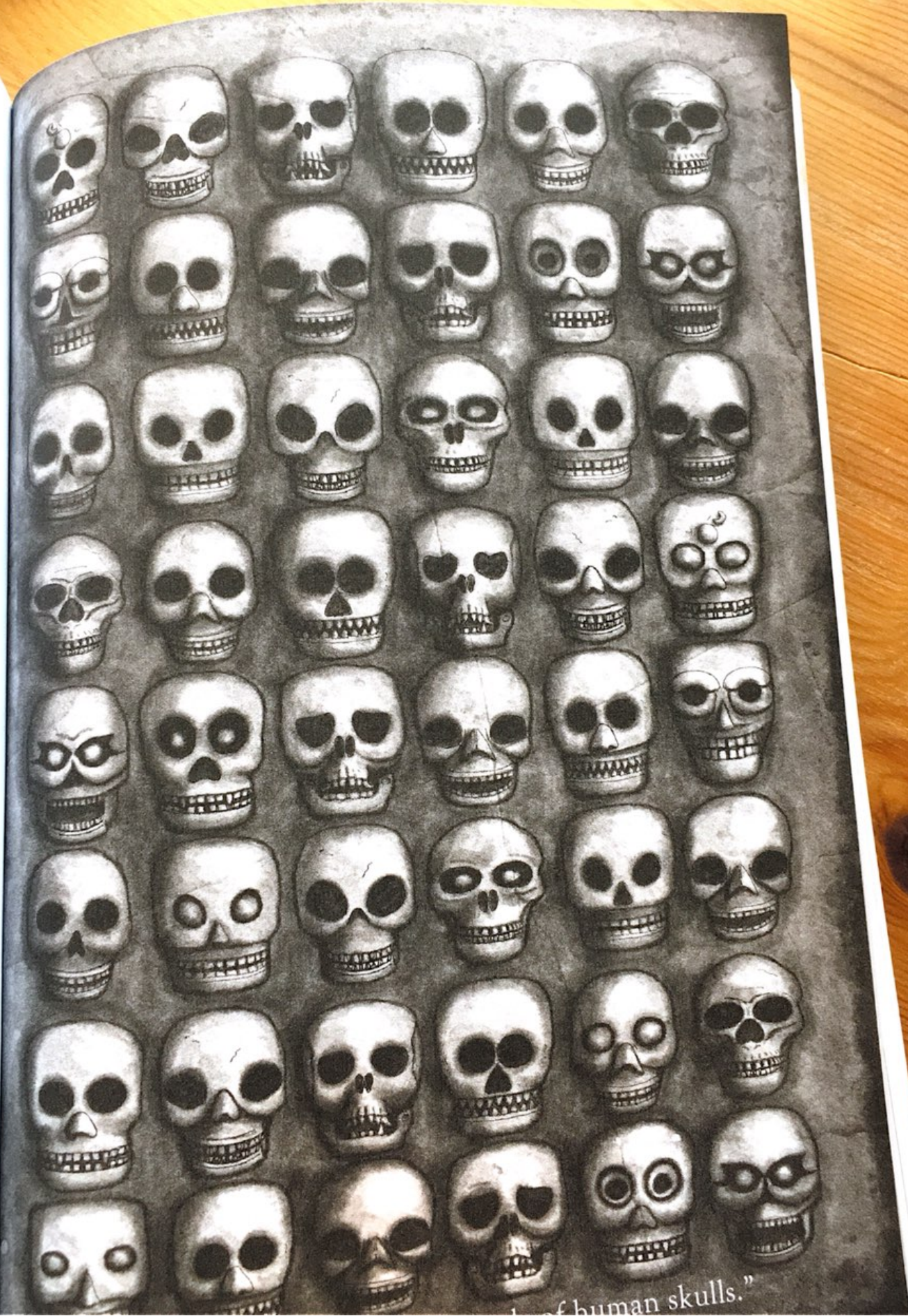
"How about we lift you up and you do it?" suggested Max.

"Art thou afraid of a carving?" said Lord 6-Dog. "These skulls are cut out of the limestone."

"They look real to me," said Max.

Lola pushed him out of the way and wiggled her thumb and forefinger into the eye sockets of the skull. "I feel something," she said. "It's a lever."

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of human skulls."

"Good," said Lord 6-Dog. "Now push it down with all thy might."

There was a grinding sound, and the wall began to rotate. As one panel of stone covered the doorway, another panel slid away to reveal a small opening in the back wall.

"Make haste," ordered Lord 6-Dog, stepping through the gap, with Lola behind him. The gap was getting smaller all the time, and Max slid through just before it closed up completely.

He looked back. All along the wall, holes were drilled into the rock to let observers peer through a row of eye sockets into the first room. Max wondered what horrors had been witnessed from this vantage point.

"From this moment, be on thy guard," said Lord 6-Dog. "The pyramids were always gateways between worlds. But remember that, as the new *baktun* draws near, they are more alive than ever. Watch thy step and do not deviate from the path. Trust nothing, not even thine own perceptions. Have no fear, or they will use thy fears against thee." He patted each of them with a gentle paw. "Stay close," he said.

The passageway spiralled steeply downward. The atmosphere was damp and musty. With each step, Max felt the air close in.

He wished he had blinders like a horse so he couldn't see the walls on either side of him. They were covered from top to bottom in gory frescoes that looked horribly realistic in the dim light. Muscular warriors in jaguar-skin tunics plunged their lances into bulgy-eyed enemies. Cowering captives begged for mercy. A Maya priest held a human heart above the blood-spattered body of his victim. Shuffling past these terrifying scenes, Max found it all too easy to

imagine himself as a captive being led to the sacrificial altar. They made their way down the passageway for another twenty feet or so, until they came to a dead end.

"We'll have to go back," whispered Max, trying to sound disappointed.

"Wait," said Lola, "maybe this is one of those tricks Lord 6-Dog told us about."

They were both wrong.

Lord 6-Dog stared intently at the floor and poked in the dust with his foot until he located some finger holes in one of the flagstones. "Help me, young lord," he said.

Together the boy and the monkey heaved up the ancient trapdoor to reveal a staircase disappearing down into darkness.

"After you," said Max. Then, almost trembling with fear, he followed Lord 6-Dog and Lola into the unknown.

The staircase led them into an enormous chamber.

"There's another pyramid inside this one!" said Max.

"They used to build new temples on top of old ones," explained Lola.

"Silence!" commanded Lord 6-Dog. "We are entering the burial chamber of the lords of Ah Pukuh. Woe betide the fool who dares disturb their slumber. Touch nothing. Tread only in my footsteps."

Max wanted to turn tail and run, but Lola pushed him forward.

"Don't look," she said. "Just follow Lord 6-Dog."

They began to work their way down the steep stairs cut into the terraced walls of the inner pyramid.

Max knew he shouldn't look.

He tried not to look.

He looked.

On both sides of the steps, reclining on every surface, lay the richly attired bodies of hundreds of dead Maya warriors. Some were nothing but crumbling bones. Others mouldered in various stages of decay. But many of them looked fresh, as if they had only just died, their skin still glistening with body paint. All of them wore battle gear, and clutched an arsenal of swords, axes, and spears.

It was too much. Max made a noise. A sort of muffled scream.

The eyes of the corpses who still had eyes opened in unison. With a creaking of bones, they sat bolt upright, even the skeletons. Their heads swivelled toward Max.

This time, Lola screamed as well.

"They will not hurt thee," said Lord 6-Dog. "I am sure of it." He didn't sound sure. "Only the Black Jaguar can bring them to their feet. But let us hurry."

Max and Lola did not need telling twice. They went flying down the rest of the steps until they reached the base of the inner pyramid. From there, more steps led down through a hole in the floor.

Max plunged through the hole after the other two and into another long, narrow passage. Lola and Lord 6-Dog were already out of sight ahead of him.

"Wait for me," he called. In his panic to catch up, he missed his step and fell flat on his face. The impact knocked his torch from his hand. He watched in horror as it skidded along the floor, bounced off a wall, flickered, and went out.

"Lola! Lord 6-Dog! Help me!"

Only the echoes of his own voice replied.

He got down on his hands and knees, gingerly feeling around on the dusty floor for the torch. Eventually, he found it.

Please work, he prayed.

It didn't.

"Lola! Lord 6-Dog! Where are you?"

This time he thought he heard a faint response.

"Lola! Lord 6-Dog! Come back!"

"Max? Is that you?" The voice was far away but getting closer.

"I'm over here! My torch has gone out."

Now he could definitely hear footsteps getting closer. He breathed a long and heartfelt sigh of relief. For a moment there, he'd thought he was a goner.

Far down the corridor, a light was flickering toward him.

"Max, where are you?"

"Straight ahead," he called.

Who was that? Was it Lola? It didn't sound like her. And yet he knew that voice.

"Stay there, Max! I'm coming!"

"Mom?"

The nightmare was over! Here he was, alone in the dark in the Pyramid of Death, convinced he was about to be captured by demons, and who should come along to rescue him but the person he loved most in the world! He was weak with amazement and happiness.

"*Bambino!* It is you!" Carla Murphy hugged her only son and kissed his head. "How can this be? I thought you were still in Boston! I am so happy to see you, but what are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?"

"We have so many questions for each other! But all that matters is that we're together again. Come, let's go and tell your father the good news." She took Max's hand and began to lead him down the passageway. "He's just down here with his friends. . . ."

"What friends?"

"Oh, they're such nice people. I can't wait for you to meet them."

What was going on? It crossed Max's mind that a group of nerdy archaeologists must have got together to watch the rising of Venus from the Black Pyramid. In which case, he had to warn them to get out.

"Mom," he said, "it's not safe in here."

"*Sì, sì, bambino,*" she said absentmindedly as she looked around to get her bearings. "Ah, here we are. . . ."

Her candle illuminated a set of ornately carved double doors. She reached out to knock, but before her hand touched the wood, the doors were flung open. Max blinked with surprise as bright light spilled out into the corridor, bringing with it a pungent aroma and a wave of chattering voices.

A figure stepped out to greet them.

It was Lola.

"Hoop!" she cried. "Isn't this fantastic? I was going to come back for you, but Carla insisted on getting you herself. She wanted to surprise you."

"And she succeeded," said Max.

Now that he could see his mother properly, he registered that she was wearing a long, embroidered dress with a huge jade necklace and a feathered headdress.

"That's quite an outfit, Mom!"

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“Isn’t it fun? Now come and join the party, *bambino*.”

Max opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He didn’t know where to begin. Taking an arm each, Carla and Lola escorted him into a large room lit by flaming torches. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to clean it out and decorate it to look like a lavish Maya palace. Woven rugs hung on the walls, and a roaring fire blazed in the hearth. All around the room, alcoves had been carved into the walls. If it had been a church in Italy, figures of the saints would have looked down from these niches. But in this room, each space was filled by a large owl. At first Max thought they were stuffed, but as he moved, he noticed their unblinking yellow eyes were following him. At ground level, men dressed as Maya lords reclined on cushioned ledges or stood around in merry groups, filling the air with their cigar smoke and raucous laughter. The festivities were evidently in full swing.

On a raised platform in the centre of the room was a stone table, laden with food and drink. Seated at this table, deep in conversation, were Lord 6-Dog and two other Maya lords. Lord 6-Dog appeared to be demonstrating to them the advantages of his monkey body. It was only when Max drew closer that he realized he knew one of the men.

“Dad?”

Like his wife, Frank Murphy was dressed in traditional Maya costume. He stood up when he heard Max’s voice and beckoned his son over to join them.

“Max! What a wonderful coincidence! 6-Dog here has been telling me all about it! But you must come and meet our host! I know you’re going to get on famously!”

Max had never seen his father so animated. He was usually

a shrinking violet at parties, just looking for an opportunity to escape. But tonight he was smiling and talking ten to the dozen, like some cheesy TV presenter.

Max guessed he'd been drinking elixir.

Party on, dude, he thought. *Tomorrow, we go home.*

The nightmare was over.

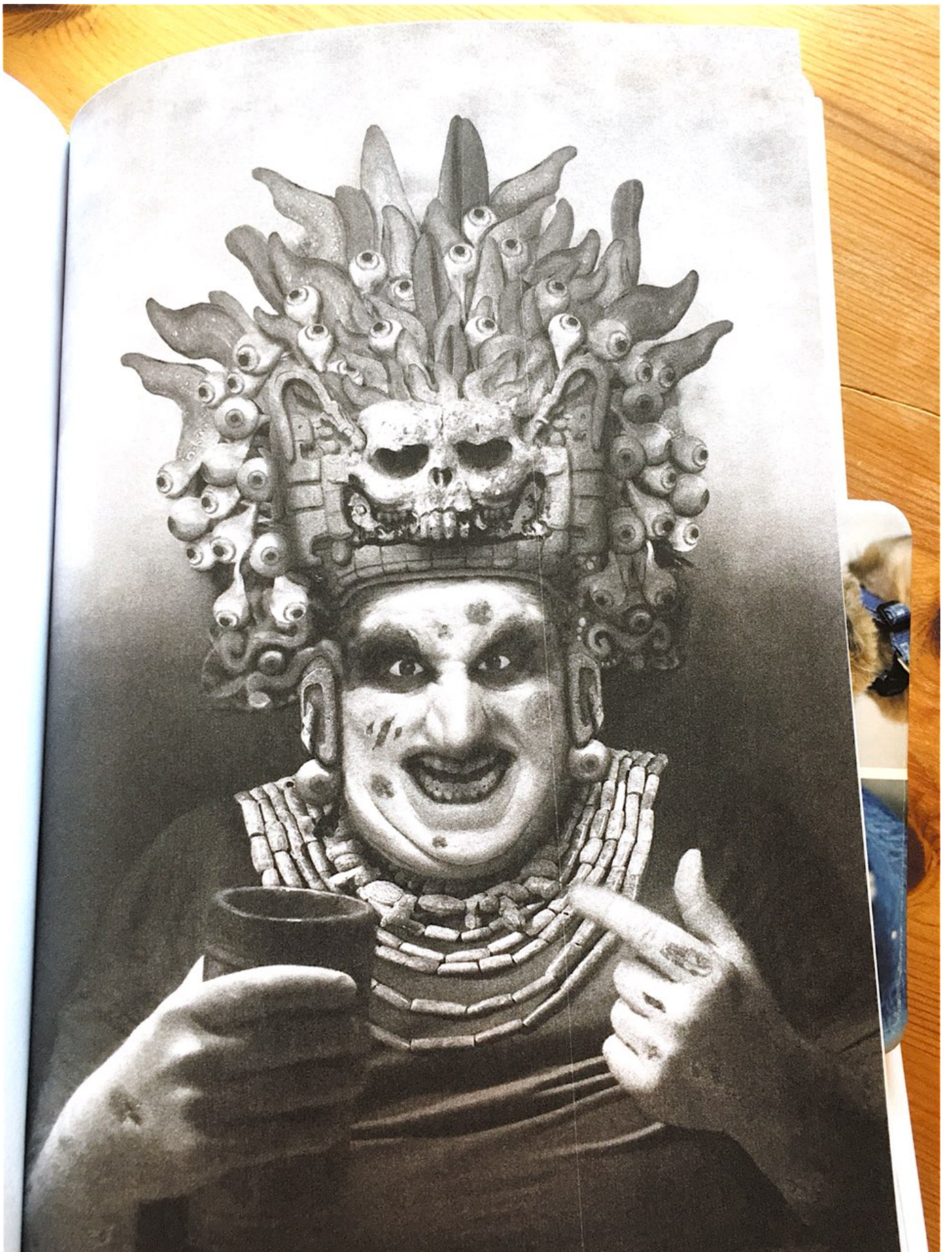
It was over.

He hugged his father and shook Lord 6-Dog's hand, then waited politely to be introduced to the third Maya lord at the table.

He was obviously supposed to be someone very important because his chair was bigger than the others' and was draped with jaguar skins. He was enormously, disgustingly fat, and his chalky white skin was covered in hideous black bruises. He looked like a bloated body washed up on a beach, the corpse of a plague victim perhaps. To make the effect even more ghastly, he wore rouged cheeks and bright red lipstick.

As if this character's appearance was not striking enough, his tentlike tunic was covered in little bells that looked like they were carved out of real bone and jingled dully at their wearer's every move. As a finishing touch, his thick black hair was tied in an elaborate headdress, decorated with dried human tongues and shrivelled eyeballs that bounced on their nerve cords as he spoke.

Max had never seen someone go to so much trouble for a masquerade costume. The fat suit alone must have cost a fortune, and the makeup was incredible. No expense had been spared. He'd even brought along five massive, vicious-looking dogs that sat behind him in a semicircle, growling and slavering.



"Max, I'd like to introduce you to our host, Lord Ah Pukuh."
"Pleased to meet you," said Max, reluctantly going along with the joke.

Ah Pukuh held up a finger, as if asking Max to wait a moment. Then he leaned to one side, lifted up one of his huge buttocks, and noisily passed gas—the most noxious gas that Max had ever smelled. He thought he might faint from the fumes. Meanwhile everyone else in the room was laughing, cheering, and clapping. Max's mother was leading the applause. Was this the same woman who had a fit if Max drank from the milk carton? She'd evidently relaxed her standards since she'd been in San Xavier.

Carla indicated that Max should sit next to their corpulent host, while she and Lola took chairs opposite.

"Welcome!" boomed Ah Pukuh as Max sat down.

Whoa! The blast of foul breath from the guy's black hole of a mouth nearly knocked Max right off the chair. He tried, surreptitiously, to cover his nose with his hand as the fat guy continued to speak. "Eat! Drink! Let us celebrate this joyous reunion! What will you have, young lord?"

"Nothing, thanks," said Max, who was feeling queasy.

"But I insist!" said Ah Pukuh. He clapped his hands. "Bring roast gibnut and hot chocolate for our guest!" he bellowed.

Immediately, a servant appeared with a loaded plate and a pottery goblet. The gibnut still had its head and tail attached. It lay on the plate like a burned rat. Max surveyed it miserably as the servant filled his goblet with a viscous brown liquid the colour of old blood.

"Dig in," urged Ah Pukuh.

Carla screamed with laughter. "Dig in! It's an archaeologist

joke," she explained to Max. "Do eat something, *bambino*; you don't want to offend dear old Pookie."

Max gave the gibnut a desultory poke with his fork. He pushed back from the table in horror as the rodent opened an eye and turned its head toward him. "Aaaaagggghhhh," he shrieked, jumping to his feet.

The rodent sat up, looked nervously from side to side, leapt onto Max's shoulder, and sprang from there onto the floor. With a nod from Ah Pukuh, the waiting dogs ran after it and gobbled it down.

"Mom," whispered Max, "can we get out of here?"

"But why, *bambino*? The party has only just started."

"I just want to go home."

"Home? But, *caro mio*, this is our home now."

"You mean we're going to live in San Xavier?"

"I mean that Pookie has invited us to live here, in the Black Pyramid."

"Can we just drop the joke, Mom? I'm tired. I've had enough. You have no idea what I've been through. I thought you might be dead."

"Dead?" Carla threw her head back and laughed. "We will never die!"

"I'll drink to that!" Lola cackled as they clinked their goblets in a toast.

"Mom, have you been drinking elixir?"

"Yes, and it's even more delicious than Chianti. Be a good boy and find me some more, would you?"

Max went over to his father. "I think Mom's had too much to drink," he said. "I can't get any sense out of her. Will you tell me what's going on?"

"Of course I will, Max. We have such good news for you."

"Good news?"

"Yes, jumping into that cenote was the best thing we ever did."

"It was?"

"If we hadn't done that, we'd never have met Ah Pukuh and the gang. We made friends with them in Xibalba. They're a great crew. And they'll be running the world soon, so we're in a good position. It's all ours for the asking, Max . . . we'll be rich beyond our wildest dreams."

"Thy father speaks the truth," said Lord 6-Dog. "It pains me now to think of all the time I have wasted in pointless combat with my brother Tzelek. Far better that he and I should work together. The entire world will be ours to command."

"You've both gone mad," said Max. "Why are you obsessed with money and power all of a sudden?"

"Isn't that what everyone wants, Max? It's why we all go to work."

"No, it's not. You love archaeology, Dad! You've always said you'd do it even if they didn't pay you."

"I've had it with old pots! Be honest, Max, haven't you ever wished that we led a more glamorous life? Or that we lived in a bigger house? What about a hot tub? An indoor pool? One of those plasma TVs you like so much?"

"Dad, you sound like the shopping channel. I thought you disapproved of the consumer society."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Max. I've changed. Everything's changed. From now on, we're going to live like Hollywood stars. We'll take our vacations in the south of France or anywhere you want to go. We'll reserve a permanent suite at Disney World, if you like. We'll employ a chef to make

you fresh pizza every day and all the homemade ice cream you can eat. How does that sound?"

"I don't want any of it, Dad. I just want our old life back."

"Oh, come on, Max, there must be something you want. What was that game you kept asking me to buy back in Boston?"

"The new limited edition *Hellhounds 3-D*!"

"That's the one. Limited edition, my foot! We'll commission the designers to create an edition just for you—starring you, if you like. Now that's what I call a limited edition! And you'll have all the time in the world to play it, because you need never go to school. You'll have enough money to buy everything your heart desires, so you can just laze around for all eternity."

"Professor Murphy!" scolded Lola. "Life isn't just about buying things."

"At last," said Max, "the voice of reason."

"Life is also about the things that money can't buy," Lola continued, "like revenge. Think about it, Max. Chan Kan really made a fool of you with that pepper soup. Wouldn't you like to give him a taste of his own medicine?"

"And dost thou not hate the way Lord Hermanjilio orders thee around?" asked Lord 6-Dog. "Wouldst thou not like to turn the tables?"

"What about that teacher who failed you in woodworking just because you sawed his desk in half?" put in his father.

"And that girl who stood you up in seventh grade?" added his mother. "She'll be sorry when she sees you driving around Boston in a red Ferrari. . . ."

Max put his hands over his ears. "What are you all saying?"

he cried. "I know I used to be greedy and materialistic—"

"And selfish," interrupted Lola.

"And selfish," added Max, "but I'm not like that anymore."

"Of course you're like that," boomed Ah Pukuh from his throne. "All boys your age are like that. And I'm happy to say that most of them never grow out of it. Why, I can remember . . ." His reminiscences were drowned out by a barrage of flatulence.

"The question is, *bambino*," said Carla, "are you with us?"

"I'm your son, aren't I?"

"The continuation of that filial arrangement," said Frank Murphy, "depends on whether or not you decide to turn over a new leaf."

"Is there something in particular you want me to do?"

"Since you ask, there is. We would like you to sign in blood right now, committing yourself to the protection of Lord Ah Pukuh. He'll be like a godfather to you and spoil you rotten."

"Just sign," wheedled his mother, "and we'll be together for all eternity."

"Obey thy parents," commanded Lord 6-Dog.

"It's a good deal, Hoop," added Lola.

"I'm not sure," said Max. "It sounds creepy. I need to think."

The mood in the room changed instantly. The light hardened from a rosy glow of flames to a cold blue ashy glare. The laughter died down. The dogs growled and licked their chops.

"He needs to think," said his mother, mimicking him.

"He's never needed to think before," said his father. "Why start now?"

"What a loser," agreed Lola in disgust.

"Make him breathe smoke from burning chilli peppers until he obeys," suggested Lord 6-Dog.

"Why are you all picking on me?" asked Max. "What happened to the happy reunion?"

"It might have been a happy reunion for you," said his father pointedly.

"What do you mean?"

"To be honest, son, we were happier without you."

"The truth is, *bambino*, we've never liked you, not from the moment you were born." Carla leaned over to Lola. "You know the type," she said in a stage whisper, "always crying and puking. The mess he made on my silk shirts! I used to pay strangers on the street to hold him so I wouldn't have to. Then there was all the bed-wetting and the nose-picking and the whining. He made my life a living hell."

"Mom . . . ?"

His father put an arm around him. "The truth hurts, eh, son? But having you ruined our lives. We never risked having another child in case it turned out to be as boring as you. I know you thought I worked long hours because I was so interested in the ancient Maya. But, in truth, I just didn't want to come home to you. Half the time, I wasn't even in the office—I was at the movies or a ball game. Other fathers would be there with their sons, but not me. I couldn't bear to be near you. . . ."

Max's jaw dropped. He couldn't believe his ears. Occasionally, when his parents had refused to let him stay out late or said no to the most expensive trainers, he'd suspected he was adopted. But he'd never dreamed they hated him this much.

"You need to start pulling your weight in this family, Max. Just sign the paper and we'll make a fresh start," said his father.

"Yes," said his mother, smiling. "We'll forgive you for everything and be a happy family. It's up to you, *bambino*."

It was tempting to sign and have it done with.

He was afraid that, if he didn't, he'd never see his parents again.

Afraid that he'd be alone in the world . . .

Afraid that . . .

Afraid?

They will use thy fears against thee.

Max took a deep breath.

What was he afraid of?

That these sadistic bullies could possibly be his parents?

That any parents were better than no parents?

That his parents had never loved him?

He considered the evidence.

He remembered when he was little, sitting on his mother's knee and waving to the moon Dog. He remembered all those Saturday-morning soccer games when his father had cheered him on in the rain. He remembered the night the laser printer broke down, and his parents had stayed up till dawn trying to get his fifty-page project on state capitals printed out. He'd gone to bed in tears. But when he came down for breakfast, there was his project, all fifty pages, tied up in a big red ribbon.

Would they have done these things if they thought he was just a nuisance?

Then he remembered his mother's expression on the evening they left for San Xavier, and he knew beyond

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a shadow of a doubt that his parents loved him.

He looked at the faces around the table and saw their hate-filled eyes for what they were. He'd let himself be tricked by the demons of hell.

Mustering all his courage, he leaned over to Ah Pukuh. "Is that all you've got, fatso?" he said.

Ah Pukuh laughed loud and long, like the sound of a saw cutting down trees. His multiple chins rippled and shook with merriment.

Max felt very small and very crushable.

"I've only just begun," said Ah Pukuh. "I have the next four hundred years to torture you, Max Murphy. I know everything about you and I will make you suffer in ways you cannot yet imagine. Surrender now, or you will regret it."

"No," said Max. He wanted to sound brave and manly and defiant, but his voice came out as a squeak.

"Don't do this to us, son," cried his parents, as chunks of flesh fell off their faces and Max could see patches of white skull peeking through their peeling, shrivelled scalps.

Lola touched his arm with a skeletal finger. "Save me," she said. "There's still time to sign."

"No," said Max.

And when he looked again, she was a decomposing corpse.

The stench was overpowering.

"I told you it wouldn't work," said the corpse of Lola. "We should have just ripped out his heart, like I said. Come on, Pus, you lost the bet. Pay up."

"Not so quick, Scab Stripper. How about double or nothing?" said the demon of pus, who had so recently been posing as Max's mother.

"Let's suck his brains out," suggested the remains of Lord 6-Dog, who was now just random bits of fur and gristle.

"Not for me, Blood Gatherer. I'm on a diet," said the skull of Frank Murphy. One of his eyeballs fell out, bounced on the table, and rolled onto the floor. An owl swooped down and carried it back to his perch.

"Set the hounds on him," ordered Ah Pukuh.

"Perfect!" said the demon of pus. "Apparently, the boy likes to play a game called *Hellhounds 3-D*. Let us see how he likes the real thing."

The five massive dogs were snarling and foaming at the mouth, waiting for the signal to attack. Max was shaking. He was out of tricks. He was going to be torn limb from limb by a pack of devil dogs in the halls of Ah Pukuh, god of violent and unnatural death. It was certainly a fitting end for a gamer.

And then he realized how to win. These guys were no more real than the characters in his games. They didn't understand love or courage or truth. They were casebook cartoon bad guys, motivated by hate and greed. If he refused to play by their rules, he might be able to blow the cosmic circuitry.

Ah Pukuh clicked his fat greasy fingers.

The dogs leapt.

"I know my parents love me."

Max saw the dogs' yellow eyes and their sharp yellow teeth.

"I am not afraid of you."

He smelled their foul breath and felt their burning saliva that dripped like acid from their foaming jaws.

"Lord 6-Dog will protect me."

Their bodies barreled against him, and their claws knocked him down. He closed his eyes, bracing himself for the first bite.

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All was quiet.
He didn't move.

"Hoop?" said a voice.

He opened his eyes slowly. He was back in the corridor, lying flat where he'd fallen in the dark. Lola was crouching over him, holding his torch.

"Hoop!" she cried. "What happened to you?"

"You won't believe it," said Max as she helped him to his feet. "I've just met Ah Pukuh. But I stood my ground. You would have been proud of me."

"You weren't scared, then?"

"A bit. But old Pookie is basically all talk."

Lola raised a sardonic eyebrow. "He's not the only one," she said.

"What do you mean?" asked Max, baffled.

She pointed at his jeans.

He looked down. There was a large wet patch at the top of his legs. Had he really been so scared of the dogs that he'd wet himself?

Probably.

He was mortified.

"There were these five huge dogs—"

"Oh, did the doggies scare ooo? Poor lickle baby!" She sneered. "We should've bwrought some diapers for the lickle baby!"

"Stop it! I'm not a baby!" yelled Max. "You don't know what it was like."

"You're a bit old to go around wetting yourself, Hoop. I'd see a doctor, if I were you. Just wait till the others hear about this—"

"No, please," begged Max, "don't tell them."



"Why not?"

"Because it's embarrassing."

"Are you worried about what they'll think of you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can tell you what they think of you. They think the same as I do—that you're a jerk. A useless little jerk with stupid red hair and a face like a rat with acne."

"Stop it, Lola! I thought we were friends!"

She snorted with derision. "Why would a hot girl like me ever be friends with a jerk like you? I've been leading you on for a laugh, but now I'm going to tell you the truth. You're sad, you're ugly, you're boring, and you're disgusting. Even when you're not soaked in pee, you smell. You've got bad breath, and those zits on your chin make me feel sick. Nobody likes you, Massimo Francis Sylvanus Murphy. Even your name is stupid. Everybody's laughing at you behind your back, and they'll laugh even harder when I tell them about this. If I were you, I'd just run away now while there's time."

Max sank back to the floor in misery. He felt as gutted as a fish on a slab. It was so unfair. He could see that the old Max Murphy, the couch potato who'd landed at San Xavier airport, hadn't been much of a catch. But he thought he'd improved since then. His face was tan and his body was fitter. He'd tried to be a better person on the inside, too, since that day on the Monkey River.

But, apparently, it all counted for nothing.

All Max's bravado melted away.

There was no point in going on.

Maybe his parents didn't love him after all. How could anyone love him? He was a failure. A creep. He'd always