

suspected that girls found him repulsive. Now his worst fear had come true.

Wait a minute . . .

His worst fear!

They will use thy fears against thee.

He looked up. Lola was grinning triumphantly.

"Give me a kiss," he said.

Her smile disappeared.

"Come on," he coaxed, "why not? You're not such a catch yourself, you know. You've got a big nose and a bad haircut, and you're so bossy you give me a headache. I think you'd be lucky to kiss a hunk like me."

"What?" she said incredulously.

"Face it, Monkey Girl, you can't get to me because you're not real. You're a product of my imagination. I don't have to listen to anything you say."

He just had time to grab the torch before she melted back into the wall.

Phew. That was a close one.

Max got to his feet and started to make his way quickly down the corridor. Running around a corner, he ran smack into Lola.

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

"My torch broke. . . ." He flicked the switch to demonstrate, and it came on instantly.

"It seems to be working now," she said.

Was she real or was she a ghost?

He shone the torch on his crotch.

"What are you doing?" she asked, appalled.

It was dry. She was real.

"Hoop, what are you doing?" she repeated.

"Nothing." He pointed the torch away from him. "It's just that things got a bit weird for a while."

He told her all about the phantom party, except for the bit at the end where her evil twin had appeared to him in the passageway. No need for her to know that his worst fear in the world concerned girls and what they thought of him.

"Poor Hoop, that sounds awful. Let's get out of here."

"So, while we were separated, did Ah Pukuh get at you, too?" he asked.

She nodded.

"What with?"

She shuddered. "I'll tell you another time. Now, which way? This place has as many tunnels as a termite nest. . . ."

"Wait!" said Max. "There's something I have to ask you."

"What is it, Hoop? We have to hurry—"

"Do I have bad breath?"

"What? This isn't the moment to discuss personal hygiene," she snapped. "We have to find Lord 6-Dog."

"Thou hast found him," said the monkey, stepping out of the shadows.

Max peered into the monkey's eyes. "It is you, isn't it?"

Lord 6-Dog held his gaze. "Indeed it is," he said. "But am I to assume that the spirits have been testing thee with phantasms?"

Max nodded. "Did they test you, too, Your Majesty?"

"My test will be Tzelek," said Lord 6-Dog gravely. "Remember, this is but a rehearsal. No matter what thou hast endured this night, young lord, worse is to come. So far thou hast been menaced with magic and illusion; on the

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morrow, thou wilt face the reality of pure evil. Until Tzelek is vanquished, each one of us is in immeasurable danger."

"Do you still think we can vanquish him?" asked Max doubtfully, but Lord 6-Dog had bounded ahead down the passageway and didn't hear. Max and Lola hurried after him, wrapped in their own thoughts.

"Was that a yes or a no on the bad-breath question?" he asked.

She stopped dead and made a noise like a cat when someone steps on its tail.

"That bad?" he said, horrified, cupping his hand on his chin and trying to direct his breath upward so he could smell it himself.

But Lola was pointing straight ahead. "Oh no!" she said. "I can't bear it."

Once again, the passageway ended in a solid wall. But this time there was no trapdoor, no way forward.

"What now?" wailed Lola, reprising her tortured cat noise. "I just want to get out of here."

"Please don't say we have to go back," said Max. "Anything but that."

"Tsk, tsk," Lord 6-Dog chided them. "Have faith." Using faint indentations in the wall, he began to climb up the stones. When he reached the ceiling, Max and Lola were astonished to see his head and then his body and finally his tail disappear through the solid rock. A few moments later his head reappeared upside down.

"The passage is free to the caves," he announced. "We have our escape route. Now follow me and do not hesitate." Max prepared himself for pain as he forced his head up

against the ceiling. To his surprise, he met with no resistance, and was able to climb straight through, up into another passageway. The air was less oppressive here and, giddy with relief, he sensed that their escape plan was going to work. The rest was easy, and Lord 6-Dog led them through a network of caves and tunnels, out into the sweet, wet, humming, buzzing, living forest.

It was daylight by the time they got back to the camp, but Lady Coco and Hermanjilio had not returned.

"Take a rest," said Lord 6-Dog. "I will keep a lookout."

He took off through the trees.

Max and Lola were dead tired and threw themselves down on the grass.

"What a night!" said Max.

"*Sí, ¡qué noche!* A most interesting night," said a voice behind them.

They jumped to their feet and spun around.

A dark-haired man dressed all in black clicked his fingers loudly. Men in black sidled out from among the trees and surrounded Max and Lola.

"Who are you?" asked Max, but he knew the answer.

"I am Count Antonio de Landa," said the Spaniard, pointing his goateed chin in the air and making that melodramatic cape-flicking movement that Max had first seen at the hotel in Puerto Muerto.

"But the big question"—the count sneered, striding over to Lola and grabbing her roughly by the jaw—"is who are you?" As she fought to free herself, he held her face steady in his black leather gloves. "The gods always like the pretty ones," he said. "They will be pleased with you. Are you ready

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to sacrifice yourself, my dear? You have an appointment at the altar."

"Spanish scum!" she yelled, and spat in his face.

He slapped her hard across the cheek. "Take them to the ship."