

Chapter Twenty-one

PREPARING FOR BATTLE

As I see it," said Max, "all that stands between humankind and the end of the world is two talking monkeys, a crazy archaeologist covered in red paint, and a couple of kids with blowguns? Am I right?"

"Wrong," said Hermanjilio. "I'll be wearing my black paint this time. Now keep practicing."

Max and Lola had been honing their blowgun skills for hours. It was late afternoon, and Max's cheeks were aching, but at least he was starting to hit the target. Lola had graduated to trick shots, and several surprised parrots could vouch for the accuracy of her aim.

"But it's going to rain," said Max. "Couldn't we take a break?"

"What, and miss the chance to practice in wet conditions?" said Hermanjilio. While Max and Lola shot their blowguns in the pouring rain, Lord 6-Dog brewed up a potion to coat the tips of their darts.

"Could we not make it a little stronger, Lord Hermanjilio?" he asked as he stirred his mixture. "If we added just one small

poison dart frog, we would have enough toxin to slay Landa and all his men. . . .

"A sleeping draft will be fine, Lord 6-Dog," Hermanjilio assured him hastily. "These days, we tend to shy away from human sacrifice."

"Have it thine own way," muttered Lord 6-Dog. "But let us hope that Tzelek is equally well versed in the etiquette of modern warfare."

When all was ready for their journey, they gathered around the campfire for one last meal.

"This meat is delicious," said Max. "What is it?"

"Iguana," said Lola. "Would you like another skewer?"

As Max chowed down on the juicy lizard, he marvelled that his mother had ever called him a picky eater. He reckoned that, these days, he could even eat Zia's tamales without complaint.

Everyone was quiet around the campfire, thinking about the next day's journey to Ah Pukuh. Hermanjilio tried to boost their confidence with tales of daring deeds from Maya legends, but his stories fell as flat as stale tortillas. "Well, good night, then," he said in resignation. "Get some sleep, all of you. We leave for the Black Pyramid at dawn."

The rest of them murmured their good-nights and began to gather their things. But somehow, with Hermanjilio gone, the atmosphere lightened and they lingered under the stars.

"Look, son," whispered Lady Coco, "look up at the moon rabbit."

Max overheard. "The moon rabbit? You guys know about that? My mom used to make me wave to the moon rabbit when I was little."

Lady Coco smiled. "Mothers have been pointing out the

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moon rabbit since the world began. It is a good omen that we see it so clearly tonight. It tells us that its owner, Ixchel, is watching over us."

"Ixchel?" said Max suspiciously. "The moon goddess? Do we want her watching over us? The waiter at the hotel in Puerto Muerto said she's bad news."

"Like any woman, she has her moods," agreed Lady Coco. "As the old moon, with a serpent headdress and human bones on her skirt, she can be quick to anger. But as the young moon, with her pet rabbit, she's a beautiful woman, creative and caring, a patron of motherhood, weaving, and medicine. It is the young goddess that has smiled on us tonight. She is the mother to us all, and she will protect us like a doe protects her fawn."

Lola was staring glumly up at the moon rabbit. Max guessed she was thinking of her own mother, whom she had never known.

He reached out to touch her arm.

"I'm going to bed," she said curtly.

He got up to walk with her, but Lord 6-Dog pulled him aside. "Thou hast won favour with Chulo tonight, young lord. It seems that baby howlers also know the moon rabbit. I think he likes thee better now."

"Well, that's one less enemy to worry about," Max said with a grin. "Good night, Chulo; good night, Your Majesties."

"Good night," replied Lord 6-Dog, with a courtly bow.

"Don't let the vampire bats bite!" added Lady Coco.



Max felt like he'd only just gone to sleep when Lola was calling him to wake up and get going. As he dragged himself

down the tree-house ladder, his fear felt like a lead weight in his stomach. For the first time in fourteen years, he wasn't hungry for breakfast.

It was a sombre party that made their way through the jungle, following the overgrown course of the old Maya causeway. Even the monkeys, who usually kept up a constant chatter and crashing of branches, crept silently through the trees as they scouted ahead. Everyone was tense. Every creature that rustled in the undergrowth made them jump, and every new turning seemed fraught with danger.

As they walked, Lola tried to take Max's mind off things by teaching him about the jungle birds. But the screams of the macaws, the croaks of the toucans, and the screeches of the parakeets made him feel like he was in a haunted house.

"Why are the birds so noisy in the jungle?" he asked her.

She shrugged. "What do the birds in Boston sound like?"

Max thought about it. "I don't have a clue. I guess I'm always wearing headphones."

They made camp before sunset by a rock pool.

As Max gathered wood, he saw a small green lizard running across the surface of the water on its hind feet, like a miniature Godzilla.

"Look! Look!" he called to Lola.

"It's a basilisk," she said. "Something must be chasing it."

They watched as the little creature reached dry land and ran up a tree.

"What are you two doing sitting around?" asked Lady Coco crossly. "Come and help me get this fire going."

"Sorry, Your Majesty," said Lola. "Max had never seen a basilisk before."

"A basilisk? Where is it?" Lady Coco sounded horrified.

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"You don't like them?" asked Lola in surprise.

"It's nothing personal, but it makes me think of Tzelek. His name means 'Basilisk Lord,' you know. And that's what he is. A slimy, cold-blooded lizard. He even leaves a trail like a lizard, with that crippled foot that drags behind him."

There was a rustling of leaves, and they turned to watch a bright yellow iguana, maybe seven feet long, skin like chain mail, emerge from the bushes. It stopped in its tracks to check them out.

Lady Coco regarded it with disgust. "You could learn a lot about Tzelek by studying his fellow lizards. They are cunning escape artists and masters of disguise. Most of them will shed their own tails to avoid capture. The horned lizard squirts blood out of its own eyes to defend itself." She waved her arms wildly at the iguana. "Scoot! Scram! Shoo!"

The iguana, unimpressed by its first encounter with a talking monkey, flicked its tongue at her a couple of times before lumbering down to the rock pool.

Lady Coco shivered. "I sometimes think that all the reptiles in Middleworld are in league with that monster Tzelek."

Max surveyed the huge scaly body of the iguana as it drank at the water's edge. As if sensing his scrutiny, it stopped drinking and slowly looked up, its hooded eyes appraising him without a trace of fear.

"Let's build a big fire tonight," said Max.



Next day, through rain and sun, they tramped steadfastly on. By late afternoon, the monkeys' noses detected the first tang of sea air. As they rounded one last hill, a fierce storm blew up out of nowhere. And there in front of them, set against

a backdrop of black clouds and angry waves, was the city of Ah Pukuh.

It was every bit as forbidding as Max had imagined it.

As the thunder raged and the lightning flashed, he looked across at this ancient city that had taken the ways of darkness to its heart. Through the driving rain, he saw how it was built on a finger of rock pointing into the ocean. At the tip of the finger were the ruins of several overgrown buildings, dominated by a tall, thin-stepped pyramid.

The Pyramid of Death.

As Max watched, a bolt of lightning struck the pyramid and threw the stones into sharp relief. For a few seconds, the temple on the top platform was illuminated, and he saw to his horror that a huge skull, maybe twenty feet high, had been carved over the doorway.

Max knew that very soon, maybe tomorrow, he'd have to go through that doorway. It seemed unlikely that anyone who entered would live to tell the tale, and his heart beat wildly at the prospect.

Then all was calm again.

The storm stopped as suddenly as it had started. The sky turned dusky blue and the birds began to sing. As the setting sun cast its glow over the pale green sea, it looked like a scene out of a travel brochure.

"It all looks so pretty now," said Lola, amazed at the transformation.

"Don't be fooled, my dear," said Lady Coco. "Malevolence hovers over this place like gas off a swamp."

Lord 6-Dog nodded sadly. "It was here that the priests of Ah Pukuh developed their dark powers and Tzelek raised the Undead Army from their slumbers."

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"Look!" whispered Lola.

Squinting into the sunset, Max could see several armed guards moving about on the top platform of the pyramid. Perched high up on the decorative roof comb, on a level with the wheeling vultures, another armed guard scanned the surrounding area.

"They look like Landa's men, all right," said Max.

Lola craned her neck, trying to count the guards. "Hermanjilio, you're the tallest. How many do you see?"

Hermanjilio didn't hear the question. He was staring at the Black Pyramid in a daze. "This is my destiny," he whispered. Max guessed he was giving himself a pep talk for the coming battle and resolved to do the same before he went to sleep that night. Having seen the Black Pyramid, he wished he'd never got involved in this mission.

Lord 6-Dog ran up a palm tree. "I count ten guards. But I cannot see the whole plaza."

"How many do you think there are altogether?" asked Lola.

"There is only one way to find out," replied Lord 6-Dog. "The first rule of war is to know thine enemy. I therefore propose that Mother and I infiltrate the guards' camp. We will try to ascertain the whereabouts of the Black Jaguar."

"No!" cried Lola. "It's too dangerous."

"It's all right, Lady Lola," said Lady Coco. "I know you're worried about Chulo and Seri, but Landa's men have no reason to shoot two friendly howlers."

"They don't need a reason," said Lola.

Lord 6-Dog stood straight and proud like the warrior he used to be. "Allow us to do the task we were summoned here to do," he said, and started off toward the city.

"Don't worry," said Lady Coco, "we'll be careful." She

gave Lola a quick hug before following her son into the valley.
Lola stared after her.

"She'll be fine," said Max. "Come and help me find some firewood."

They busied themselves making camp at the edge of the jungle.

Night fell.

Occasionally, a shout or a curse or a burst of raucous laughter would drift over from the guards' camp. But no monkeys returned.

"What's taking them so long? Why aren't they back yet?" fretted Lola.

"They can take care of themselves," Max reassured her.

Hermanjilio was less sympathetic. "Lola, you must get a grip on your emotions," he said. "This is a war. There will be casualties."

A shot rang out in the distance.

Lola froze.

"We're doomed, we're doomed," wailed Lady Coco, leaping into the middle of the campsite.

Lola held out her arms to the monkey, who was shaking with fear. "Are you all right? What's happened? Where's Chulo?"

"He's here," said the voice of Lord 6-Dog, climbing down a tree.

"Are you hurt?" asked Lola. "What was that shot?"

"I know not. It was behind me . . . probably a guard discharging his weapon at a tree squirrel. Landa's men are as jumpy as a barrel of bullfrogs."

"Tell them the bad news," said Lady Coco. "Tell them what we heard!"

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Lord 6-Dog took a deep breath. "I am sorry to tell thee that the Chee Ken of Death is in Landa's pay. We heard its infernal crowing from behind the cooking hut. I doubt my sleeping draft will work on that scaly devil."

"A chicken? You were scared by a chicken?" said Max. He and Lola looked at Hermanjilio expectantly. Surely it was time to come clean about Thunderclaw?

Apparently not.

"Don't worry, Lord 6-Dog," said Hermanjilio. "I believe I am more than a match for this Chee Ken."

"Thou art truly a brave man, Lord Hermanjilio."

"To think you would attack a chicken single-handed," said Lola in mock admiration.

"Will you use a knife—or a fork?" asked Max.

Hermanjilio had the grace to look embarrassed. "Forget the chicken," he said. "Were you able to find out where they're keeping the Black Jaguar, Lord 6-Dog?"

"That we were. The lily-livered coward Landa is still hiding out at sea. It is my assumption that the Black Jaguar is with him."

"That sounds likely," mused Hermanjilio. "He probably won't show himself until the last minute. We must be ready to move quickly. How many guards does he have?"

"No more than a score."

Max looked blank.

"That's twenty," Lola explained. "Four to one."

"Let's make this easy on ourselves," said Hermanjilio. "I propose that we drug the guards' food and knock out any stragglers with blowgun darts. When Landa comes ashore, we'll ambush him, steal the Black Jaguar, and be long gone before his guards wake up."

"And then?" objected Lola. "Surely he'll track us down and kill us? Landa-slash-Tzelek won't give in just like that. There's too much at stake."

"And let's not forget my parents in all this," said Max.

"First we find the Black Jaguar," said Hermanjilio. "Everything else will follow."

Max felt intensely irritated. These archaeologists were all the same. Worrying about their precious artefacts when they should be thinking about human beings. Still, at least the Black Jaguar would give them a bargaining chip with Landa. And if this stuff about Tzelek and Ah Pukuh were true, they might even avert the end of the world. Not a bad day's work.

"So how do we make a clean getaway?" he asked.

"I can answer that," said Lord 6-Dog. "I know this place like the back of my, um, paw."

"Why would you know the Black Pyramid?" asked Max suspiciously. "I thought only bad guys hung out here."

"While Ah Pukuh himself has always been the most cruel and feared of the Maya gods, the city that bore his name was not always rotten to the core. Before it was corrupted by Tzelek, in the days when good and evil were in balance, Ah Pukuh was one of the five sacred pyramids of the Monkey River. We used to come here to celebrate victories in war. The royal party would stand on the top platform and wave to the cheering crowds below. Then—*poof!*—when the smoke cleared, we were gone!"

"How?" asked the rest of them in unison.

"We would make our way down inside the temple to a secret passage known only to the Jaguar Kings. It led to a labyrinth of caves and tunnels that crisscrossed the whole region. There were exit points all over the jungle."

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"Like a Maya subway system?" suggested Max.
"I know not about this subway, but I can tell thee it was a merry trick. The people loved it. It was almost as popular as sawing the slave in half."

"Except that sawing the slave in half wasn't a trick," pointed out Lady Coco. "You really did saw him in half."

"If I may bring you back to our escape plan," said Hermanjilio, "why doesn't Tzelek know about this passageway?"

"Despite their best efforts, high priests did not know everything," replied Lord 6-Dog. "Passageways like this one were a closely guarded secret, passed down from king to king. It was not just a matter of knowing the way. Tests and traps were built into the walls—a trespasser would not survive."

"How do we know the passage is still there after all these centuries?" asked Lola.

"Good question," said Hermanjilio. "Lord 6-Dog, perhaps you could check it out for us? As a monkey, you'll be able to sneak around without arousing suspicion."

"I would do so gladly, Lord Hermanjilio, but this stunted body cannot operate the secret door. One of thy number must accompany me."

"I'll go," said Lola without hesitation.

"Thou hast the heart of a true Maya warrior," said Lord 6-Dog.

"Thank you." Lola smiled proudly. "So where's the nearest entrance?"

"There are many places to exit the secret passageway, but there is only one point of entry."

Lola's smile was fading. "Don't tell me . . ."

Lord 6-Dog nodded. "We must enter through the Pyramid of Death."

“Rather you than me,” said Max. Then he felt guilty because he could see that Lola was having second thoughts. “No, I’m sure it’ll be fine,” he said. “I mean, it can’t be worse than Chahk or Itzamna, can it?”

Lola turned to Lord 6-Dog. “Please tell me what to expect.”

“Tell her the truth, son,” instructed Lady Coco. “Forewarned is forearmed.”

“It is not possible to arm thyself against the Undead Army, but I will protect thee, Lady Lola, I promise thee.”

Lola and Max exchanged anxious glances.

“I don’t like the sound of this,” said Max. “It’s too dangerous. Who are the Undead Army? What are they?”

“Before Tzelek cast his spell on them, they were the lords of Ah Pukuh, all thirteen generations of them, entombed in their final resting place. Now they are the earthly bodies for the Demon Warriors of Xibalba. They lie sleeping in the Black Pyramid, dressed in battle gear, awaiting the call to arms. They feel no pain; they have no fear; they cannot die, for they are dead already.”

“But you said they’re sleeping, right?” asked Lola in a small voice.

“Tzelek cannot awaken them until the rising of Venus—”

“We better be quick, then,” she said, with a note of hysteria.

Lord 6-Dog took a deep breath. “Just one more thing . . .,” he said.

She looked at him, her face a mask of fear.

“As thou knowest, the god Ah Pukuh will rule Middleworld in the new *baktun*. It is possible that he has come to the Black Pyramid to prepare for his coronation. He may be in there at this moment, feasting with his cohorts and planning his reign

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of terror. I think it unlikely that our paths would cross. As to what would happen if they did, thy guess is as good as mine. But I have sworn to protect thee, Lady Lola, and I will keep my word."

It was Hermanjilio who broke the stunned silence.

"That's settled, then," he said.

"You mean they shouldn't go?" said Max, relieved.

"No, I mean Lord 6-Dog will take good care of our precious Lola. Meanwhile, I'll take a closer look at Landa's defences. Lady Coco, please come with me and provide the necessary distractions."

"My pleasure," said Lady Coco.

"I order thee to be careful, Mother," commanded Lord 6-Dog. He dropped his voice. "Remember, thou art my most loyal and devoted warrior. I need thee by my side in the final battle."

Lady Coco smiled at him tenderly. "Don't worry about me, son. After a lifetime of waving off the menfolk, I'm ready for some action. And now, if you'll excuse me, I must go and practice my most entertaining monkey mannerisms."

They all got up to start preparing for their various missions.

"What about me?" asked Max. "What should I do?"

Hermanjilio put a hand on his shoulder.

"To you, Max, falls the most important job."

"What's that?" said Max warily.

"You will stay here and guard the camp."

Max could have cried with relief. He could have thrown himself at Hermanjilio's feet and kissed his battered old tennis shoes. Yes! Yes! Yes! He didn't have to go inside the Black Pyramid. He didn't have to go anywhere near Landa's

camp. All he had to do was keep the campfire going and toast the odd tortilla.

Then he realized that Lola and Lord 6-Dog were listening. "That's not fair," he said. "Why can't I go on a mission like everyone else? I've trained as hard as anyone. I'm ready to go into battle."

"Then take your orders, soldier," barked Hermanjilio. "You don't have the skills to move through the jungle without endangering us all. We all have our own tasks in this unit. You're staying here, and that's final."

Max was so happy he could have danced a jig. He pretended to clench his fists in anger. "Yes, sir," he replied, in the surliest voice he could muster.

Lola and Lord 6-Dog shot him sympathetic glances.

He shrugged as if to say, *You go ahead and enjoy yourselves; don't worry about me.* He attempted a brave smile, then turned away quickly so they wouldn't see it broaden into a grin. No zombie armies for him.

"Get some rest, everyone," said Hermanjilio. "You're going to need it."