

Chapter Twenty

COUNTING THE DAYS

It was too awful to contemplate: the fiendish Tzelek in league with the ruthless Count Antonio de Landa. Between them, they represented twelve hundred years of absolute evil. Who knew what warped scheme they were hatching?

"But why would Tzelek come back? What does he want?" asked Lola.

"He wants what he has always wanted," said Lord 6-Dog, "to be the supreme and sacred ruler of Middleworld."

"It's such a cliché," said Max. "Why do bad guys always want to rule the world?"

"Deep-seated emotional insecurity masquerading as a superiority complex?" suggested Lola.

They all looked at her in amazement.

"I'm thinking about majoring in psychology," she explained.

"Whatever," said Max. "It's stupid. An ancient Maya madman can't just suddenly appear and declare himself king of the world."

"With his friend Ah Pukuh in charge of the new

baktun," said Lord 6-Dog, "he can do whatever he wants."

"And this time," said Hermanjilio, "his power will not stop at the limits of the Maya realm. This time, all humanity will be under his dominion."

Lady Coco pulled a branch off a nearby tree and stripped the leaves with her teeth. "At least we know where and when he'll make his first move," she said, in between bites.

"We do?" said Max.

"We do," confirmed Lord 6-Dog. "The place will be the Black Pyramid of Ah Pukuh. And the time will be at the rising of Venus on 5-Kimi—or 5-Death, in thy parlance. It is an auspicious day, a day of sacrifice and mourning. . . ."

"Most importantly," interrupted Lady Coco, "it is in four days' time."

Max swallowed. "And how far is it from here to the Black Pyramid?"

Lord 6-Dog and Hermanjilio spoke at the same time.

"One day," said the ancient Maya king. "It is an easy march."

"Two days," said the archaeologist, "and it won't be easy."

They looked at each other in surprise.

"The straight stone roads your warriors marched on are long since overgrown," said Hermanjilio. "We'll have to hack our way through. We must leave tomorrow. And now, if you'll excuse me, I have much to do."

"Thou art dismissed," said Lord 6-Dog imperiously. As Hermanjilio strode away, the king furrowed his monkey brow. "He is so familiar to me, and yet I cannot place him. Does he remind thee of someone, Mother?"

"He has shifty eyes," said Lady Coco.

"Oh no, not Hermanjilio," Lola insisted, getting up to clear the table. "He's the kindest man you could ever meet."

"When is his birthday?" Lady Coco asked Max.

Max shrugged. "I have no idea."

"And you, young lord?" persisted Lady Coco. "On what day were you born?"

"In the Maya calendar?" he said. "Who knows."

Lord 6-Dog and his mother looked at each other in alarm.

"No wonder Middleworld teeters on the brink of destruction," said Lord 6-Dog. "For if mortals have forgotten how to read the days, they are doomed to stumble through time like children wandering across a battlefield."

"What's the big deal?" asked Max.

Lola threw him a cloth to wipe the table. "Our royal guests believe that a person's entire character and destiny are decided by the day of their birth," she explained. "Like a horoscope—except a bad one could ruin your life."

"And a good one could ensure success," pointed out Lady Coco.

"But how could anyone look at a newborn baby and pronounce it a liar or a thief?" said Lola.

"When your future's been decided by the gods, you don't question it," replied Lady Coco.

"Well, maybe you *should* question it," said Lola. "Did you know that the Spanish used your beliefs against you? They convinced your priests that your defeat was written in the stars, and it became a self-fulfilling prophecy."

"All history is a self-fulfilling prophecy," said Lord 6-Dog. "What has happened before will happen again."

Lady Coco looked thoughtful. She lowered her voice. "But you do believe you can beat Tzelek this time, don't you, son?"

Max and Lola pretended to be engrossed in washing up, while straining to hear the great king's reply.

"Why dost thou doubt me, Mother?"

"Because Tzelek has always wrapped you around his little finger. You must face the truth, 6-Dog. He is evil from his balding head to his stinking feet. You must not give him another chance. He must be stopped."

"I understand the situation, Mother."

"Then why didn't you finish him off last time?"

"He is my twin, my flesh and blood."

Lady Coco spat a nutshell onto the ground. "No," she said. "No, he isn't."

"What art thou saying?"

"Tzelek was born a few minutes after you, but he was not my child. His mother was a witch. She died in childbirth that very day—but not before she'd made me promise to adopt her evil spawn."

"Why wouldst thou, a royal queen, adopt a witch's son?"

"His mother vowed that, from that day forward, your lives would be intertwined as you grew up. If I abandoned Tzelek or he failed to thrive, you, too, would wither and die. Your father knew nothing of this curse, and for three *baktuns* I have kept my silence."

"Tzelek is not my brother? But I always thought he was thy favourite."

"He was always so very jealous of you. When your father died and you became king, he plotted against you constantly. I thought you might be safer if I pretended not to care for you.

But all the while, I was trying to help you in unseen ways. I used to pray to the spirit of your father to show me what to do. He was so proud of you, 6-Dog. He still is."

"If I had not gone hunting that day, he might have lived," said Lord 6-Dog, looking across to the pyramid of Itzamna, his father's final resting place.

It had been a day of merrymaking, a *katun* celebration to mark Punak Ha's first twenty years on the throne. As the elder twin, 6-Dog was expected to stand by his father's side at the ceremony. But he'd slipped away to go hunting instead. How could he have known that Punak Ha would come looking for him? Or that he'd be ambushed while calling his son's name?

When 6-Dog had returned with his catch (an armadillo too small to bother cooking), the conch-shell horns and the wooden trumpets were sounding their laments. The next day, preparations began for 6-Dog's coronation.

His father's murderer was never caught. Lord 6-Dog swore to honour his father's memory by becoming the greatest king that Middleworld had ever seen. Gorgeous and terrible in his black body paint, jaguar pelts, and quetzal-plumed helmet, he had won every battle and subdued every enemy.

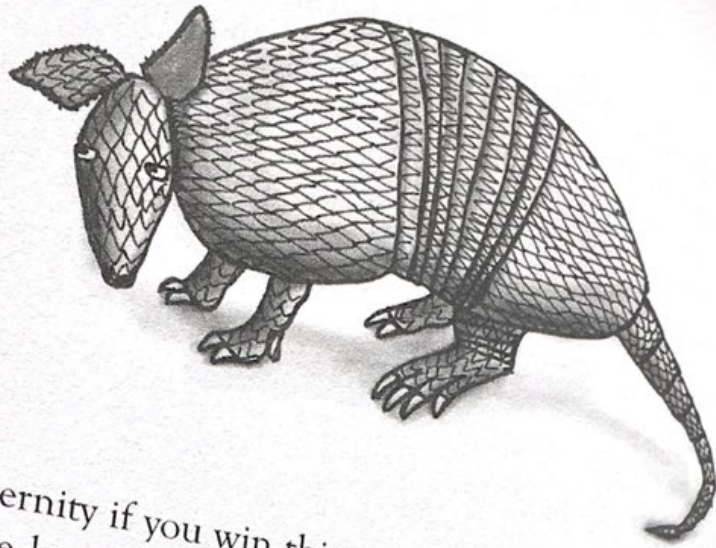
But he had never vanquished his own conscience.

"Dost thou believe our lives are written in the stars, Mother?"

"I believe in second chances, son. What has happened before will happen again. But this time, you can change the outcome."

"I cannot bring my father back."

"But you can sit next to him under the great ceiba tree for



all eternity if you win this victory. He is waiting for you, son, in the heroes' heaven. You must deal with Tzelek once and for all."

"Even the mighty 6-Dog may not be strong enough to defeat the combined forces of Tzelek and Ah Pukuh."

"This time," declared Lady Coco, "I will fight by your side. This is my second chance, too, 6-Dog. I promise to be your most loyal and devoted warrior."

"May good prevail," he said.

She nudged him playfully. "Here's what I think of Tzelek and his cronies."

Lord 6-Dog watched in amazement as his mother, First and Most Glorious Wife of the Great King Punak Ha, pointed her bony monkey posterior in the air and noisily broke wind.

And then, for the first time in more than a thousand years, he laughed until his sides ached.

PREPA

"As I see it," said the archaeologist, "the end of blowguns? Am I wrong?" said the painter.

Max and Lora looked at each other for hours. It was late but at least he was not a trick shot, and the accuracy of the blowgun was not a problem.

"But it's good to have a break?"

"What, and the archaeologist said Hermanjil was pouring rain from the tips of their daggers."

"Could we have a break?" he asked as he