

Chapter Nineteen

MONKEY BUSINESS

Lord 6-Dog was awakened by the sound of his own screaming.

For a few moments he lay still on his sleeping mat, trying to shake off the memory of the dream. He told himself to calm down, but still his body trembled and sweat ran down his face.

A howler monkey . . . ?

Groaning, he sat up and ran his hands through his thick black hair. Then a thought occurred to him, and he quickly examined his arms and legs. Upon finding them covered in monkey fur, he let out a muffled scream.

"It was no dream," he moaned.

On the other sleeping mat, Lady Kan Kakaw sat bolt upright and looked around in alarm. Then, seeing her own furry limbs, she instantly relaxed.

"It was no dream," she exclaimed happily.

She held out her monkey hands and tested her opposable thumbs. She clenched her fists and flexed her arms. Then

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she jumped up, stretched her wiry little body, and scratched herself from head to foot.

"Mother!" protested Lord 6-Dog. "Thou art a royal queen!"

"Yes, son, and I have a royal itch!"

"This vulgarity does not befit thee. Thou mayest look like a flea-bitten howler, but thou dost not have to act like one."

"That's a nice thing to say to your own mother." Lady Kan Kakaw tried to look offended, but her attention was caught by a passing moth. She leapt into the air to swat it, only to fall flat on her face.

"Missed!" She chuckled. "A pox on my old crossed eyes!"

She'd been a cross-eyed queen and now she was a cross-eyed monkey. As an upper-class Maya woman, her crossed eyes had been a sign of beauty. As a monkey, they made it difficult to focus on small objects. She gamely scanned the room for another victim. Soon her skewed gaze came to rest on a large black fly, and this time she did not miss.

Lord 6-Dog watched, appalled, as his mother caught the insect and popped it into her mouth. She noticed his disgusted expression.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Thou didst eat the fly. I saw thee."

"I'm sorry, did you want it? Shall I catch another one?"

"Mother, we are royalty. We do not catch flies."

"I do. And I eat them."

"No, Mother! I forbid it. It is unconscionable."

Lady Kan Kakaw considered her son's words. "Our howler monkey hosts are mostly vegetarian, I grant you. But who can resist a fresh, chewy snack?"

"I am ashamed of thee, Mother. Pray have some decorum."

She hid her monkey smile behind a paw. "Cheer up, son. Yesterday, we were spirits floating in a time loop. Today we have living, breathing bodies—what does it matter if they're covered in fur?"

She scampered over to Lord 6-Dog and stroked his bristly little head. "Anyway, I like this stuff, it's very fashionable. I used to have monkey-fur trim around the shoulders of my best robe."

She started making a strange gurgling noise and clutching at her throat.

"What ails thee?" asked Lord 6-Dog. "Did the fly stick in thy gullet?"

All this time, Lola had been lying low in her hammock, watching the monkeys and giving them a chance to settle in. As she told it to Max later, it looked like Seri was deliberately choking herself. In a flash, Lola understood the problem.

"Excuse me, Your Majesties," she began.

The monkeys jumped in surprise, registering her presence for the first time.

"On thy knees, mortal!" thundered Lord 6-Dog. "How darest thou speak to a divine king without permission? How darest thou even look at me? Thou shalt die for this! Mother, call the guards!"

Lady Kan Kakaw staggered to the doorway.

"I see no guards," she rasped, still holding her throat.

"The royal bedchamber left unguarded? This is an outrage," bellowed Lord 6-Dog. "And where are the servants? I am overheated in this fur. Where is the bearer of the royal fan?" His disdainful gaze came to rest once more on Lola. "Where are the other servants? Speak!"

"I'm not a servant, but I will be glad to help your mother.

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I think Seri is throttling her from the inside, to punish her for wearing monkey fur on her robe."

"It was just a bit of trim," wheezed Lady Kan Kakaw.

"And who, pray, is Seri?" asked Lord 6-Dog.

"She's your mother's . . . er . . . hostess. Do you mind if I rub her back?"

Lord 6-Dog looked at his mother's furry body, which was now convulsing on the floor. "Proceed," he said.

Lola gently stroked the monkey, crooning all the while in howler language. The monkey responded with a series of protesting squawks. "I know, Seri, it's not easy to wake up and find an ancient Maya queen living in your body," agreed Lola. "But you'll have to learn to live with each other. It's only for a few days."

After a few more whimpers, Seri calmed down and released her grip.

"Thank you, my dear," said Lady Kan Kakaw to Lola.

"I'm sorry about Seri's behaviour," said Lola, "it's quite out of character. All this has come as a bit of a shock to her and her brother, Chulo."

"But my dear, I had no idea that monkeys had feelings!"

"Of course they don't," snapped Lord 6-Dog. "They're the lowest form of life, rejects from the Great Sky God's first attempt to make mankind. That's why they're all so ugly. Flat-nosed dwarves—"

Lord 6-Dog fell to the floor, clutching his throat.

Lola and Lady Kan Kakaw watched, fascinated, as the king and the monkey rolled around, slugging it out in the same body. Lola had never seen anyone try to strangle themselves and bite themselves at the same time.

"Who are you, my dear?" Lady Kan Kakaw was asking

her. "What is your bloodline? Who are your family?"
Not wanting to reveal her lack of parents, Lola answered,
"I am from the house of Chan Kan in Utsel. My name is Ix
Sak Lol, but most people call me Lola."
"Lo-la." Lady Kan Kakaw rolled her tongue around it. "I
like it. What does it mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything. It's just a nickname. You know,
something your friends and family call you."
Lady Kan Kakaw looked wistful. "Even my mother called
me Ix Kan Kakaw. I've never had a nickname. . . ."

"Let's think of one, right now!" suggested Lola, glad to
change the subject from parentage to nicknames. "Ix Kan
Kakaw means 'Lady Yellow Cocoa Bean,' doesn't it?"
"Goodness, no! Kan can be 'yellow,' but it has an idea of
ripeness, something perfect and precious. Kakaw is 'cocoa,'
but cocoa beans were also money, so there's a sense of treasure
and riches. To ancient Maya ears, my name means something
like 'Lady Perfect Precious Treasure of Accumulated Wealth
Through Judicious Trading of Cocoa Beans.'"

"Lady Precious? Lady Treasure?" suggested Lola. "Lady
Coco?"
"I love it!" said the monkey, jumping up and down
with excitement. "What do you think, son? Do you want a
nickname, too?"

Having managed to pacify Chulo, Lord 6-Dog was
standing on a stool, looking out of the window. "6-Dog is
my nickname, Mother," he said. His voice was still hoarse
from the self-inflicted throttling.

"Silly me, how could I forget that? 6-Dog was the date
he was born," Lady Coco explained to Lola. "The name his

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father gave him is unpronounceable even by ancient Maya standards."

Lord 6-Dog put his head against the screen and inhaled. "Aaaah, how I have missed the smell of sweet, wet earth."

Lady Coco sniffed the air. "Yes, these noses are much better than our human ones. I can smell bananas and mangoes and . . . oh, that's disgusting!" She sniffed again. "It's you, 6-Dog! You need a bath."

"By the quetzal!" he exclaimed. "What a torment to have a sensitive nose when one's own body reeks like a dung heap." Choking noises suggested that Chulo had taken offense again.

"Chulo, stop it!" cried Lola. "It's high time you had a wash. Let me show you to the bathroom, Your Majesties. I think you'll enjoy the technology."

Lola explained how to work the solar shower and, after some hesitation, put out the hand-milled French lavender soap that Hermanjilio had brought back for her from a lecture trip in Europe.

Before she left them to it, she turned to speak again. "Please join us in the plaza for breakfast when . . ." Her voice trailed off as she took in the extraordinary sight in front of her eyes.

Lord 6-Dog, wearing a towel as a cloak, was standing on the sink surveying himself lugubriously in the mirror. Lady Coco was swinging and somersaulting on the shower rail like an Olympic gymnast. Somehow they'd managed to open every single bottle and jar in the cabinet, and the contents were daubed around the bathroom.

"I'll . . . um . . . see you at breakfast, then," said Lola,

notice backing out, but the monkeys didn't her.

She was still complaining as she helped Max set the table.

"You should have seen the mess," she fumed. "Well, if they think I'm cleaning up after them . . ."

"I wouldn't get on the wrong side of them if I were you," said Max. "They're not your friendly monkeys anymore. They could have you sacrificed in the blink of an eye."

Hermanjilio emerged from the cooking hut with a plate of tortillas and a bowl of fruit. He was limping slightly and he looked dreadful, as though he hadn't slept a wink.

"I was just saying," said Lola, "that our guests have trashed the bathroom."

"Blame Chulo and Seri," said Hermanjilio. "It probably takes a while for this possession thing to settle down. I'm sure our guests will start acting like nobility soon enough. They just have to learn to control their inner monkeys."

"In that case," said Lola, "I think they're in the wrong bodies. Lord 6-Dog is formal and serious like Seri. But Lady Coco's full of fun like Chulo."

"Lady Coco?" chorused Max and Hermanjilio.

"She wanted a nickname," explained Lola.

"I still have to get my head around talking monkeys," said Max. "You really did it, Hermanjilio! You brought back Lord 6-Dog and his mother!"

"I can hardly believe it myself," said Hermanjilio. "It's taken it out of me, though. I've got the worst headache of my life this morning and I didn't even drink much *balché*." He groaned and sat down at the table, laying his head on his arms. "Wake me up when our guests appear."

In fact, it was the reek of lavender that woke him. You

didn't need a monkey nose to know that the two soft and fluffy specimens descending the ladder had used rather a lot of Lola's precious French soap.

She opened her mouth to protest, but Hermanjilio cut in. "Lord 6-Dog! Lady Coco! It is an honour to make your acquaintance. If there's anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable, you have only to ask."

But the king and his mother didn't hear him. They were standing in the plaza, transfixed.

"What is this place?" asked Lord 6-Dog.

"Itzamna," said Hermanjilio.

"Itzamna?" they repeated in bewilderment.

"Welcome home, Your Majesties," announced Lola with a flourish. To her dismay, the monkeys looked distraught.

"It cannot be," said Lady Coco, looking around. "My Itzamna was surrounded by fields and fertile terraces. Where are the markets, the houses, the workshops? Fifty thousand people lived in this city. Where are they?" Her gaze settled at the far end of the plaza. "My palace," she wailed.

Lord 6-Dog's liquid monkey eyes looked sadder than ever. He pointed mournfully toward the ruins at the other end of the plaza. "Could that be the great Temple of Itzamna," he whispered, "with its red paint all stripped away?"

Hermanjilio nodded.

"My father is entombed beneath those stones," said Lord 6-Dog angrily. "What enemy has dared to desecrate his memory?"

"That enemy was time, Your Majesty," said Hermanjilio. "The golden age of Itzamna was twelve hundred years ago."

"Twelve hundred years," repeated Lord 6-Dog wonder-

ingly. "Three *baktuns*. Like a whirlpool, time encircles me and confounds my memory in its bubbling waters." He stared intently at Hermanjilio. "Who art thou, sir? I feel as if I have known thee all my life."

Hermanjilio looked away from the monkey's intense gaze. "My name is Hermanjilio Bol. My ancestors were the guardians of the royal library. It was I who summoned you here."

"Then I should thank thee, sir, for I am glad to walk in Middleworld again."

While the men were talking, Lady Coco was looking longingly at the bowl of fruit.

"Would you like something to eat?" said Lola.

"Yes, please, my dear. Where is the women's table?"

"We'll all be sitting together."

"Disgraceful!" growled Lord 6-Dog.

"Delightful!" cooed Lady Coco.

"Please make yourselves comfortable, Your Majesties, while I go and fry the eggs," said Hermanjilio.

Lord 6-Dog looked puzzled. "Lord Hermanjilio," he said, "thou hast the look of a noble warrior, yet thou dost act like a kitchen maid. Cooking is woman's work. Let us talk, man to man. Send the girl for the food."

Hermanjilio smiled meaningfully at Lola.

Reluctantly, she went to look for the frying pan. It wasn't that she minded cooking, so much as she was bad at it. She hoped these eggs would turn out better than her last attempts, which had bounced off the plates like rubber balls.

Lord 6-Dog took the stool at the head of the table, where Hermanjilio usually sat. Hermanjilio, who'd been making his way to the same place, was left standing. For a moment, the

monkey and the archaeologist locked glances in a battle of wills. Lord 6-Dog glared at his rival autocratically. Hermanjilio's gaze was bleary but unwavering.

"Chill," whispered Lola to him as she brought in the plates.

Hermanjilio blinked rapidly, like someone snapping out of a trance. "Of course," he said, graciously ceding his place.

"What was that about?" Max asked Lola.

"It's the dominant-male thing," she said. "They both think they're king of Itzamna."

"Wilt thou tell me about my people?" Lord 6-Dog asked Hermanjilio. "Tell me everything that has happened in the last three *baktuns*."

As Lord 6-Dog heard about the invasion of the conquistadores, how Diego de Landa had burned all the books, how the Jaguar Stones had been lost, and how all the great Maya cities now lay in ruins, his monkey face grew sadder and sadder.

"Hast thou no tales of heroism?" he asked.

Hermanjilio thought for a moment. "There was Nachankan. He was a great Maya lord from the north. When the Spanish demanded tribute, he said he'd give them 'turkeys in the shape of spears and corn in the shape of arrows.'"

Lord 6-Dog laughed a booming howler-monkey laugh.

"Many Maya lords stood firm," continued Hermanjilio. "In fact, the Maya fought the Spanish for another two hundred years after the Aztecs surrendered."

"The Aztecs? Pah!" Lord 6-Dog sneered. "In my day, they were nothing but a pack of swamp-dwelling scavengers."

"A few hundred years later, they got to be quite big," said Hermanjilio.

"They did?" Lord 6-Dog looked disappointed.

"At their height, they had ten million citizens," continued Hermanjilio. "Of course, they sacrificed them at an alarming rate. Sometimes they ate the corpses."

"That's disgusting," Lady Coco said, grimacing.

"No wonder their empire only lasted three hundred years," said Lola, coming out with a platter of eggs. She sniffed haughtily. "We Maya have been around for three thousand years. And counting."

"Well spoken, Lady Lola," said Lord 6-Dog, cheering up. "I will wager that the Aztecs yielded to the Spanish like a gaggle of old women."

"Excuse me?" Lady Coco turned on him angrily. "That statement is offensive to old women. I'll have you know that an old Maya woman would fight to the death—"

"Eggs, anyone?" said Lola, trying to keep the peace.

"Omelettes!" said Hermanjilio. "They look delicious."

Lola glared at him. "They're *fried* eggs actually."

"Thirteen thanks for all our blessings," began Lord 6-Dog. He thanked the wild turkeys that laid the eggs, the earth that grew the corn for the tortillas, the trees that bore the fruit, the rain for water to drink—

Lady Coco's stomach gurgled loudly. "And we thank Lord Hermanjilio for his hospitality," she said. "Let's eat!"

It was the last civilized moment of the meal.

Perhaps the hunger of twelve hundred years superseded the constraints of table manners. Or perhaps Chulo and Seri were venting their inner monkeys.

Whatever the cause, the breakfast was soon in chaos.

Lady Coco started it by sitting on the fruit bowl.

"Mother! Off the table! Hast thou lost thy mind?" shouted Lord 6-Dog.

Lady Coco considered this question for a moment, then lobbed a banana skin at her son, quickly followed by a ripe papaya that exploded on contact and showered him with black seeds. Lord 6-Dog jumped onto the table to retaliate, and the two monkeys started wrestling, tails lashing, pots crashing, food flying until Hermanjilio and Max pried them apart.

"And these guys are going to save the world?" sighed Max.

A small melon bounced off the side of his head. He looked around to see Lord 6-Dog celebrating a direct hit. Remembering that, on the inside, his assailant was a mighty warrior-king, he decided against retaliating. "That hurt, Your Majesty," he said. "We're on the same side, remember?"

Lord 6-Dog looked mortified. "My apologies, young lord, but Chulo made me do it. It seems he bears thee much ill will. I will try to control him."

Balanced giddily on the back of a chair, Lady Coco brushed bits of food off her fur and attempted to muster her dignity, an effort diminished by the raffia fruit bowl she now wore like a rakish straw hat. "I do apologize," she said, trying to sound refined. "I can assure you this is not our usual . . ."

Her concentration lapsed as she watched her son use his tail to grab a mango and bring it to his open mouth. "Let me try that," she screeched.

Soon both monkeys were fully absorbed in experimenting with their newly discovered prehensile tails.

It was the craziest breakfast Max had ever experienced.

At one point, Lady Coco bounced over to perch beside

him. "And who are you, young lord? Are you of royal birth? Who is your father?"

"My father is an archaeologist," said Max. She looked blank, so he added, "He studies history."

"A wise man indeed," said Lord 6-Dog, nodding sagely. He tipped back his head, poured the last of the juice into his mouth, and upended the empty jug. "It is only by studying the past that we can predict the future. What has happened before will happen again." He turned to Hermanjilio. "Speaking of which, art thou sure we have not met before?"

"I am positive," said Hermanjilio quickly. "And now perhaps we could discuss more pressing matters. How do you propose we stop Count Antonio de Landa from using the Black Jaguar to raise the Undead Army?"

"Landa, didst thou say? Was that not the name of the varlet who burned our books?"

"That was Friar Diego de Landa. Antonio is his descendant."

"Then it will be my pleasure to take him captive and flay him alive."

"He has bodyguards," interjected Max. "And guns."

Lord 6-Dog stroked his chin. "How many armies dost thou command, Lord Hermanjilio? How many warriors will join us in this battle?"

"Four."

"Four armies?"

"Four warriors."

"This is no time for jest."

"It is the truth. There are four of us: you, me, Lola, and Max."

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"Make that five, Lord Hermanjilio; you can count me in," said Lady Coco. "But in all that you have told us, there is one name you have not mentioned."

"And who would that be?" asked Hermanjilio.

"Tzelek!" She spat out the word like a curse. "My twin brother?" said Lord 6-Dog. "What has this to do with him?"

"His old crony, Ah Pukuh, is about to take the reins of power. Do you really think Tzelek would miss such an opportunity to make mischief? It was common knowledge in Xibalba that he was hanging around the surface, trying to find a way through."

Max remembered the grip on his ankle in the Temple of Itzamna.

"Does Tzelek have long, bony fingers?" he asked.

Lady Coco nodded. "He kept his nails specially sharpened for ripping out hearts with his bare hands. You mark my words, if there's evil afoot in Middleworld, Tzelek is involved in it up to his villainous neck. I'll wager ten baskets of cocoa beans that he's already here. I expect he glimpsed a hole in the gateway and squeezed through it like the cockroach he is."

"Then the question we should be asking," said Hermanjilio, "is whose body is Tzelek living in? And I'm sorry to tell you, I think I know the answer."

"Is it me?" said Max in a small voice. "I think he grabbed my ankle in the Star Chamber and tried to suck out my soul."

"Surely you'd know if you'd been possessed by Tzelek," said Lola. "Do you get black moods? Do you think evil thoughts? Are you bad-tempered and irrationally angry?"

"Yes." Max felt nauseous. "It's me, isn't it?"

"Of course it's not you!" snapped Hermanjilio in exasperation. "Let us not confuse the emotional turmoil of adolescence with the inner workings of one of history's most evil villains! Guess again."

Blank faces stared back at him.

"Isn't it obvious?" said Hermanjilio. "Who's been playing around with Jaguar Stones? Who has an interest in the black arts? Who would welcome an ally like Tzelek?"

"Count Antonio de Landa!" burst out Max in horror. Hermanjilio nodded gravely.

"Well, that explains why he's been too busy to look for us," said Lola.

"This just gets worse and worse," groaned Max. "Now the evil descendant of one of the most evil men in history has been possessed by the evil spirit of an evil Maya priest. And my parents are caught in the middle of it."