

Chapter Eighteen

# THE CHICKEN OF DEATH

**"R**un for it!" screamed Max, jumping up and pulling Lola with him. Hermanjilio caught them both by the arms and held them in an iron grip.

"Are you mad?" he said.

"Are *we* mad?" said Max. "You're the one who's planning to sacrifice us."

Hermanjilio rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Of course I'm not planning to sacrifice you. That's why we brought the chicken."

"Not Thunderclaw—?" began Lola.

"It is his destiny. This is why Chan Kan sent him. Besides, it is considered a great honour to be chosen for sacrifice," Hermanjilio assured her. A tear rolled down her face. "Thunderclaw is a warrior, Lola. He wouldn't want to end up as chicken stew."

She nodded mutely.

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"Will the gods accept a chicken?" asked Max.

"Unless you would like to volunteer . . ."

He shook his head.

"Then a chicken will have to do. Remember, Thunderclaw is no ordinary fowl. Chan Kan said he was a great champion, a fearsome fighting cock."

They regarded the wretched little creature, huddled in a corner and trembling in his sleep. "He doesn't look very fearsome right now," said Max.

"Give me a break," sighed Hermanjilio. "As I understand it, there isn't a precise science to these rituals. They're more about showing swagger and confidence. The Maya gods are like children. They like costumes, special effects, and plenty of action. We just have to put on a good show."

"You're bluffing it?" said Max incredulously.

"In a manner of speaking. And now, if there are no further questions, please sit down. I'd like to get started."

Hermanjilio opened several little packages of incense wrapped in banana leaves and threw them into the fire. The flames flared up and cast an orange glow on his face. Pungent smoke billowed out. He began swaying back and forth, chanting in Mayan. Then he took a handful of the black powder made from ground-up bugs and threw it into the flames. It sent crackling sparks flying in all directions.

More incense.

More smoke.

More black powder.

The smoke was now so thick that Max found it hard to breathe. Through the black clouds, he could see Hermanjilio pouring his blood concoction into the stone snake's mouth

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before he slotted the Green Jaguar between its gaping jaws.  
At Hermanjilio's signal, Lola tapped the drum in the rhythm of a heartbeat.

*Tum-tum, tum-tum, tum-tum.*

It carried over the jungle and echoed back again. It reverberated through Max's body, and his own heart followed the rhythm.

*Tum-tum, tum-tum, tum-tum.*

Hermanjilio poured *balché* liquor over the fire. Blue and green flames flickered and hissed like snakes' tongues.

Sitting down between Max and Lola, he pulled out a ceramic flute and played a simple melody, the same four notes over and over. It was a hypnotic sound that seemed to work on the brain like a drug. The heartbeat of the drum and the song of the flute played faster and faster, over and over.

Soon Max felt a crackling energy around him, as if the night air had become electrically charged. The Green Jaguar started to glow. As it grew brighter and brighter, the snake began glowing, too, beginning with the head and spreading down the back, feather by feather, coil by coil, until the whole serpent radiated a green light.

It moved.

A coil uncoiled.

Max rubbed his eyes.

It moved again.

"Stay completely still," muttered Hermanjilio. "Don't move a hair."

As Max watched in terror, the stone snake unwound itself from the column and slithered around the top of the platform, passing inches from where they sat. It formed its massive body into a circle, nose to tail, and shafts of light rose up, until

the body of the snake enclosed a thick column of green light. Within the column, wraithlike images of Maya people emerged, appearing faster and faster, until the whole column writhed with ghostly figures.

Hermanjilio cleared his throat.

"It's now or never," he said, standing up and facing the column of ghosts. From where he sat, Max could see the archaeologist's knees shaking.

"Spirits of my ancestors, we are in desperate need," boomed Hermanjilio in his most commanding voice. "We beseech you to help us. Send us your greatest warlords. Send us the spirits of the mighty Lord 6-Dog and his fearless battle chief, the noble Lord Kukab!"

As Hermanjilio called out these names, the column of light grew brighter still. Waves of green flames flowed out of it, one after another, across the platform and down the sides of the pyramid. The next wave of flame was headed straight for Max and Lola. They looked at Hermanjilio in terror, but he just winked happily as if everything was normal and they were having a lovely time. Chulo and Seri inched closer to Lola and put their hands over their eyes.

Max held his breath as the green flames licked his legs. They were icy cold. When they touched him, he could remember things he had never experienced. Disconnected images of ancient Maya life—a ball game, a ceremony, a market, a harvest, a jaguar at a water hole—strange smells of spices and fire and jungle, the sounds of battles and birds and women weaving flooded into his brain. It was as if each flame contained the soul and the memories of a long-dead Maya.

There was a deep, rolling rumble like distant thunder, and two ghostly figures stepped out of the column. As soon as they

did so, the light disappeared and the snake rewound itself around the stone column.

One of the figures strode forward, resplendent in an elaborate plumed headdress. He was covered from head to foot in black body paint, and he held before him an obsidian sword, ready to strike. While the second figure hovered behind, the great warrior peered down at the trembling spectators.

"Who summons Ahaw Wak Ok, the mighty Lord 6-Dog, and his fearless battle chief, Lord Kukab, to walk again in Middleworld?" he boomed.

Mustering all his courage, Hermanjilio stood up and bowed.

"It is I, Hermanjilio Bol, descendant of the lords of Itzamna."

"I will hear thy petition, mortal," said Lord 6-Dog.

The other figure, who'd been hanging back, now stepped forward and pointed a gnarled finger at Hermanjilio. "Where are the human sacrifices? Do you dishonour us with no suitable offering?"

Hermanjilio's jaw dropped open. The second warrior looked and sounded like an old woman, a cross-eyed old woman with four long grey braids.

Lord 6-Dog turned to stare in amazement at his fellow time traveller.

"Mother?" he said.

The old woman nudged him with her wrinkled elbow. "Don't just stand there; introduce me."

With reluctance, the king announced her to the astonished audience. "May I present my mother, Lady Kan Kakaw, First and Most Glorious Wife of the venerable Lord Punak Ha, King of the Monkey River?"

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*"Who summons Ahaw Wak Ok, the mighty Lord 6-Dog?"*

Following Hermanjilio's lead, Max and Lola bowed their heads.

"Welcome back to Middleworld, Your Divine Majesties," said Hermanjilio.

The old woman was still looking around with dissatisfaction. "Where are the bodies, the blood, the severed limbs?"

Hermanjilio took a deep breath.

"Your Divine Majesties," he began, "we would not insult you with a mere human sacrifice. To mark this most illustrious day in the history of Middleworld, we have brought a far greater tribute in the noble body of Thunderclaw, the merciless Fowl of Fear, the notorious Chicken of Death."

Max shot Lola a look of total incredulity. "Fowl of Fear?" he mouthed.

"Chicken of Death?" she mouthed back.

Hermanjilio opened the bamboo cage to reveal the scrawny, balding Thunderclaw, who was still in a dead sleep. "You are familiar with K'uk'ulkan, the serpent with feathers in place of scales?"

Lord 6-Dog and his mother nodded.

"Now meet his nemesis, the bird with scales in place of feathers. The Chicken of Death is a ferocious warrior who tortures humankind with his terrible shrieks. He struts through Xibalba with claws like razors, and the gods themselves tremble with fear."

He shut the cage door, as if to contain a mighty army.

Lord 6-Dog raised an eyebrow. "I believe I have read of this Chee Ken in the Codex of Tikal." He looked into the cage. "Is it true that with one slash of his talons he can rip off thine arm?"

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"As you say, Your Majesty," said Hermanjilio solemnly.

"And with one peck of his beak, he can gouge out thine eyes?"

Hermanjilio nodded his assent.

"And with one shriek, he can banish thy soul to the ninth level of Xibalba?"

Hermanjilio nodded again.

Lord 6-Dog looked impressed. He whispered something to his mother, who peered at the bird in disdain.

"Is it not a bit small?" she said. "I would have expected something larger."

Hermanjilio was ready for this one. "With respect, Your Majesty, the chicken is like the scorpion: the smaller the body, the deadlier the bite."

"I see," she said. She seemed to have lost interest in the chicken. "Now tell me, Lord Hermanjilio, why did you summon us?"

"They did not summon thee, Mother," snapped Lord 6-Dog. "They asked for my noble battle chief, Lord Kukab."

She sniffed in disdain. "Kukab? I could beat that milksop any day. His mother said he squealed like a stuck peccary when she had his teeth filed into points for his birthday. Talk about ungrateful."

"In truth, Mother, thou art the Demon of Gossip," sighed Lord 6-Dog.

Hermanjilio coughed to get their attention.

Lord 6-Dog fixed him with a haughty look. "So, mortal, what besets my people in Middleworld?"

"The evil is among us, Your Majesty. The Black Jaguar roams the earth. Soon the Undead Army will be released

and the world will be ruled by Ah Pukuh, god of war and violent death."

The old woman turned to her son. "I told you so," she said. "You should have destroyed that Black Jaguar when you had the chance—and Tzelek with it. Then we could have been sitting under a shady tree in heaven all these years, instead of freezing to death in Xibalba."

"Technically, we're dead already, Mother," said Lord 6-Dog. "But I thank thee for thy counsel. Let us hope thou wilt have less reason to reproach me this time around."

"This time around? You mean, we're staying?" The old woman clapped her hands in delight. "I've been waiting three *baktuns* for something exciting to happen."

Lord 6-Dog bowed to Hermanjilio. "This is a worthy challenge, mortal. It will be my pleasure to lead thine armies and give them victory over the enemies of Middleworld. I stand before thee as a warrior in my prime. Show me now the body I will fight in." He looked around the platform expectantly.

"Where are the human vessels for our spirits?" demanded his mother, eyes glittering with anticipation. "I trust they are of royal birth?"

Lord 6-Dog's eyes came to rest on Max and Lola. "Surely thou dost not propose that my venerable mother and myself should dwell in these runtish bodies?"

Max and Lola shook their heads vigorously.

"Divine Majesties," wheedled Hermanjilio, "forgive my ignorance, but could you not aid us in your present form, as spirits? Times are desperate in Middleworld, and we're a little short on royal personages."

Lord 6-Dog drew himself up to his full height. He

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was tall for an ancient Maya, at least five foot six, and his headdress added another three feet of iridescent quetzal feathers. He threw back his magnificently sloped forehead and drew his sword.

"Fool! Dost thou not know that, once summoned, we cannot easily return whence we came? When the Jaguar Stone is disengaged, we will vanish in the wind like smoke from a fire." He slashed his sword through the air. "That will not come to pass. Produce a host, or I will take thy body by force."

"One moment, Your Highnesses," stammered Hermanjilio. "I must consult with my acolytes." He crouched down to Lola and Max. "Any ideas?" he asked.

"I can't believe you didn't know about this," whispered Lola.

"Well, it's happened, so what can we do? We need two bodies—quick."

"What about Chulo and Seri?" suggested Max.

"No way!" responded Lola angrily.

"But it's perfect!" said Hermanjilio. "You always say they're more like humans than monkeys, Lola. This will be fun for them."

Lola looked doubtful.

"Frankly," muttered Hermanjilio, "we have no choice. This guy is going to skin me like a gibbon."

"Okay," said Lola reluctantly. "But your new friends want royal bodies."

"Leave that to me." Hermanjilio bowed to the ancient Maya spirits, who were now bickering loudly with each other. They paused in midquarrel to listen to him.

"If I may have your attention, Divine Majesties, I am pleased to present the two noble bodies that are ready for your immediate possession."

"That sounds more like it," said the old woman. "Where are they?"

"Most Beauteous Highness," began Hermanjilio, receiving a flirtatious wink for the compliment, "may I ask you to think once again of the mighty scorpion. For while your new bodies may be small in stature, they are strong in muscle and brave in spirit."

The winking stopped abruptly as the old woman looked around with mounting excitement. "Scorpions?" she asked. "Are we to have the bodies of scorpions? Maybe with the heads of crocodiles? I have seen this fashion on temple walls. . . ."

Hermanjilio seized his chance. "Although Your Divine Majesty would look fabulous in anything, the style these days is for something a little more . . . I believe the word in fashion circles is . . . furry."

He cleared his throat and pointed to Chulo and Seri, who were engrossed in picking lice off each other and eating the proceeds.

Lord 6-Dog held up his hand and a beam of light shot out to illuminate the monkeys. "Howler monkeys? Art thou insane?" He pointed his sword at Hermanjilio's throat. "I am the greatest warrior of the Jaguar Kings, a living god, and thou wouldst have me enter the body of a flea-infested howler monkey? Thou shalt die for this. . . ."

Max could see that Hermanjilio was out of ideas. The archaeologist's eyes bulged in his red-painted face, and his whole body was visibly trembling. Given that he was seconds away from having his throat cut, who could blame him?

Max looked at Lola. She was rooted to the spot, clutching Chulo and Seri to her, all three of them whimpering in terror.

In that split second, Max realized it was up to him to save the day.

In which case, they were sunk.

He didn't want to get involved. He especially didn't want to get hurt. After all, this was a Maya thing, nothing to do with him. But as his brain came up with excuses, his heart told him the truth. He wasn't a tourist anymore. He didn't have the option of watching from the sidelines.

But what could he do?

A trickle of blood ran down Hermanjilio's neck.

"Hey, Featherbrain!" shouted Max, running over to the altar.

Lord 6-Dog's fury made his plumed headdress quiver. "Who dares speak thus to Lord 6-Dog, supreme and sacred ruler of the Monkey River?" he bellowed.

"I do," said Max, putting both hands into the snake's mouth. "Because in exactly two seconds, I'm going to pull this Jaguar Stone out of here, and your little Maya butts are going to be ancient history."

Lord 6-Dog froze, his eyes on the Jaguar Stone.

"So listen up." Max tried to sound braver than he was feeling. "We haven't got two royal bodies. But we do have two healthy howler monkeys. And it's the howlers or oblivion. You choose."

"Thou wouldst not dare," said Lord 6-Dog.

"Watch me."

The old woman stared at Max in terror. "Who is he?" she gasped. "His hair burns like the torches of Xibalba. I think we

should listen to him, son. He makes a persuasive argument.”

Lord 6-Dog shifted uncomfortably. He had the strangest feeling that this moment was meant to happen. Deep inside him, some half-buried memory stirred like a long-forgotten dream. But a monkey? How could it be?

At that moment, Thunderclaw woke up.

It was nowhere near dawn, but that had never stopped him before. Lord 6-Dog and his mother watched in horror as the Chicken of Death arose and crowed its unearthly shriek.

Before Thunderclaw had finished his first chorus, the spirits of the great warrior-king and his mother exchanged a glance of mutual agreement and flew into the mouths of the monkeys. Like a passing tornado, the force of it knocked the three humans and two monkeys off their feet. All five of them landed flat on their backs with a thud.

For a few moments, Max lay there, winded and terrified. He was aware of nothing but a green glow in the air and the perfume of incense. He closed his eyes. When he opened them a few seconds later, the night was black again. Only the light of the moon and stars remained.

He sat up and looked around.

Slowly the two bodies next to him sat up also.

Hermanjilio massaged his temples as if he had a headache and rubbed his throat where the point of 6-Dog’s sword had been.

“So,” came his hoarse voice, “I thought that went well.”

“What?” said Lola. “You were nearly skewered by a spirit lord, Chulo and Seri have been possessed by who knows what, you brought back a little old lady instead of a battle chief—and you call that going well?”

"I saved the chicken, Thunderclaw," said Hermanjilio defensively.

"You mean Thunderclaw saved you," said Lola.

"It was all part of my plan." He sniffed. "I knew Chan Kan must have sent him for a reason. I'll send him back to Utsal tomorrow."

"I'll miss little Thunderclaw," said Lola. "But I'm glad he's safe."

"How are our guests?" asked Hermanjilio.

Lola shone her torch across the monkeys' immobile bodies. Seeing no sign of life, she knelt down and listened to Chulo's chest.

"Is he breathing?" asked Max, trying to sound like he cared.

"Yes," said Lola, "but they're both out cold. We'll have to carry them."

Between them, they hauled the monkeys down the pyramid, across the plaza, and up the ladder to the tree house, where they laid them gently on mats.

"You guys get some sleep," said Lola. "I'll stay with them."

"Everything will seem better in the light of day," said Hermanjilio.

But he didn't sound very sure.