

The Last Heir

by

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Dedication

To Jimmy, for talking me into taking that trip to the Yucatan, which was the inspiration for this story. And to the lesson to never drink shots of clear liquids bought at the port in Guatemala.

Chapter One

Edzná, Campeche, Mexico

The full moon sliced through the Maya rainforest canopy, casting skeletal shadows across the ruins of Edzná. Atop the main temple, a fire raged. Its ravenous flames licked the night air, painting the time-blackened limestone in a flickering glow. Around the altar, three figures moved in a frenzied circle. Their guttural chanting accelerated, matching the humid pulse of the jungle.

Jaguar Man wore a snarling black mask. Ivory fangs gleamed under the moonlight while a heavy crest of iridescent Quetzal feathers bounced against the pelts draped over his torso. Opposite him moved Serpent Man, his reptile headpiece framed by a breastplate of golden scales that flashed in the firelight. Skeleton Man cut through the rising smoke. Bone-white paint lined his skin as he shook a carved scepter, stamping through the ash.

The moon locked into position directly behind the stone statue of the Maya queen, Izta. A beam of silver light crawled across the altar.

Jaguar Man stepped forward and flung a vial of liquid compound into the heart of the fire. The flames flared. The sudden orange glare exposed the treetops, illuminating a pair of glowing golden eyes—a black jaguar watching from the canopy.

Jaguar Man threw the remainder of the mixture into the blaze. The fire surged, suffocating the moonlight for one brilliant second, then snapped black. A vacuum-like silence dropped over the jungle. The crickets, the birds, the wind—everything died.

The three men froze in the pale moonlight. Jaguar Man pulled back his pelt-lined sleeve, checking the face of a heavy, diamond-encrusted watch. He scowled, shaking his head in a tight gesture of frustration.

“She’s not coming,” Jaguar Man said, his voice thick with a Mexican accent.

The words had barely left his lips when the wind returned, howling across the stone plaza. The shaft of moonlight pierced the

carved eye of the Izta statue, focusing into a laser-sharp point on the dead altar.

Serpent Man checked his own wrist. His digital watch blinked a stark 12:00 AM.

The fire erupted back to life with a deafening roar. The blast wave threw the three men onto the limestone floor. Around them, the jungle exploded into a panicked chorus of animal wails. In the canopy, the black jaguar let out a defensive growl, its muscles tensing against the branch.

Dense, smoke swirled from the altar, defying the wind. It coiled and thickened, coalescing into the translucent silhouette of Queen Izta. She stretched her shimmering hands toward Jaguar Man.

The vapor flowed forward, filling his lungs.

"Find my king to release me," her voice echoed inside his mind. "Follow."

She rose with a fluid motion. A streak of white mist shot toward the North Star. The men watched the smoke dissipate into the night sky, leaving nothing but cold ash on the altar.

Gasping for air, they ripped off their masks. They were drenched in sweat, their hearts hammering.

Jaguar Man stared at the weathered stone statue. "She's a sylph," he breathed. "An elemental spirit."

"We need the remaining codex pages," Skeleton Man said, his voice sharp with a Mexican accent.

Serpent Man rubbed his face, "She said to find her king? I thought the records listed her as a virgin queen."

"History lied," Jaguar Man snapped, his gaze hardening. "We find the king."

Serpent Man pulled up a satellite grid on his phone. His fingers scrolled across the screen, calculating the trajectory of the mist. "The trajectory from the North Star... due north of Edzná is..."

He met Jaguar Man's stare. "New Orleans."

Chapter Two

New Orleans, Louisiana

A Few Days Later

A chrome Jaguar hood ornament leaped to a stop, its reflection mirrored in the black sports car's polished bonnet. Dr. Seronjo stepped from the convertible. Behind him, the Romanesque arches of Gibbons Hall towered over the Orleans University campus.

Seronjo was in his late fifties, tall with glacier-blue eyes. Dressed in a bespoke Caraceni suit, he carried himself with the preening vanity of a peacock, looking more like a ruthless Wall Street banker than the head of a history department.

Seronjo glanced toward St. Charles Avenue. A vintage streetcar rumbled down the tracks. The conductor clanged the heavy bell as the iron wheels ground to a halt at the university gates.

Iztali "Izy" Smith stepped from the platform. A history professor in his late thirties, Izy was tall with flowing black hair and a muscular build—the legacy of his indigenous South American and Creole heritage. He wore an unassuming facade, choosing to hide his features behind plain clothes. To Izy, academia was about the pursuit of knowledge, not capital.

Izy pushed his unstylish glasses onto the bridge of his nose. His clothes were wrinkled from the Louisiana humidity. He pressed a hand against his shirt, wiped sweat from his brow, and stuffed loose sheets into an overflowing attaché case.

Looking up, he spotted his boss.

"Dr. Seronjo," Izy called, his New Orleans accent bleeding through.

Izy darted across the street between oncoming traffic.

Seronjo rolled his eyes, turned, and walked toward Gibbons Hall.

Izy caught up, trailing a step behind while forcing rogue papers back into his briefcase. “Good morning,” Izy panted.

Seronjo merely grunted, shrugging without looking back. “I’m in a hurry, what’s up?”

“The Maya codex I’ve been studying,” Izy said, catching his breath. “I’ve found something interesting.”

“To you, perhaps.”

“Perhaps to the world.”

Seronjo glanced back, picking up his pace. “No.”

“Yes, I think there’s—”

“No,” Seronjo interrupted. “The answer is no.”

“But other codices may have survived,” Izy said, walking faster to keep up. “The clues mention a codex of spells and—”

Seronjo stopped short. Izy nearly collided with him.

Seronjo pivoted to face his subordinate. “No. I’ve told you, with cutbacks and grants scarce, there is no money.”

“But if I had just three months in the Yucatan,” Izy pleaded, “to see if the clues lead to the lost codices...”

Seronjo started walking again, shaking his head.

Izy kept pace. “This could be the biggest disc—”

Seronjo cut him off, turning with a velocity that made his silver hair catch the light. His eyes glared with venomous hostility.

“Professor Smith, let me make this clear to you.” He paused, letting the silence stretch between them. “Academics is about money. Period. Money. No money? No research. No.”

Izy kept his footing, his voice level. “I thought academics was about gaining and sharing knowledge.”

Seronjo shrugged, shook his head, and let out a soft laugh. He looked at Izy with pity. “Silly you.”

Seronjo turned and walked away, his tailored suit retreating up the steps.

Izy watched him go. Arguments about historical preservation or cultural impact were useless. The bureaucrat needed an incentive he could not ignore.

Izy raised his voice. “The clues lead to gold.”

Seronjo froze. He pivoted and marched back down the steps to Izy, standing inches away in menacing silence.

"The clues mention gold and spells, they—"

"My office, three o'clock," Seronjo snapped.

He turned and walked away.

Izy adjusted his glasses, watching him go. A slow smile spread across his face.



The history department office was a maze. Maya documents and photocopied glyphs covered every surface. A dark wood library table sat in the center of the room, surrounded by piles of paper.

Izy stood by the glass, looking toward the oaks of Audubon Park. "Jeevan, please bring coffee—with chicory."

His assistant entered before the request could trail off. A graduate student from India, Jeevan was thin, with dark eyes and short hair. He carried two steaming mugs.

"I have your coffee already," Jeevan said, his Hindi accent warm. "I saw you walking across the quad with Seronjo."

"Yeah," Izy sighed, turning to face the room. "I have an audience with his highness today."

Jeevan handed Izy his cup. He scanned the table to set his own mug, but the clutter of books and maps left no space. Defeated, he kept his grip on it.

Izy began shuffling through a stack of archaeological maps, searching for a specific grid.

"How did you manage that?" Jeevan asked, leaning against the table. "How did you get him to agree?"

"I told him about the gold."

Jeevan threw his head back in surprise. "What gold?"

Izy looked up from his paperwork, a smile forming on his lips. "The fool's gold."

Jeevan chuckled, taking a sip from his mug. "I will never understand how you drink that Louisiana mud."

"Native blood," Izy replied, adjusting his glasses. "You get used to the grit."

“Speaking of native—you have got to get cooler glasses,” Jeevan joked, gesturing toward Izy's face. “Modern frames. Something with style. It might actually help you land a date.”

“No time for dates,” Izy muttered, turning back to his maps. “Besides, I prefer women who make the first move.”

““Well, that explains a lot,” Jeevan said. “Because the undergrads keep asking me questions.”

Izy looked over the rims of his lenses. “Questions like what?”

“Is he single... or busy?”

They both laughed, the banter breaking the tension.

Izy turned to the Maya codex in the center of the table. Jeevan walked to the other side, looking at the esoteric symbols.

“So, how did you really do it?” Jeevan asked, his tone curious. “Get Seronjo to actually talk to you?”

“I was trying to tell him about the clues in the codex,” Izy said, tapping the parchment.

Izy leaned forward, his voice dropping into a caricature of their department head. “No. Academics is about money. No.”

He shook his head, breaking the impression, and took a long sip of his bitter coffee. “So, I told him the texts mention gold.”

Jeevan snorted. “And he actually fell for that?”

“Not yet,” Izy admitted, setting his mug on the table. “But he will. Because to a guy like Seronjo, academics is only about money.” Izy slapped his hand against the wood. “I need to get to the Yucatán, Jeevan.”

“What you need is to come out with me tonight,” Jeevan countered, gesturing with his cup.

“Can't. I promised my aunt I'd be home.” Izy looked over the rim of his lenses, his tone shifting from banter to something more guarded. “She had the dream. And now she says it's time to give me the box.”

Jeevan's brow furrowed. “What box?”

“The box my family has been carting around for over two hundred years,” Izy explained. “They brought it when they settled in New Orleans back in the 1700s.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, really. My aunt is the keeper of the family secrets. She’s always been into the spiritual side of things. Then this morning, she calls me out of nowhere. She told me she finally had the dream last night.”

Jeevan widened his eyes, raising his hands in a theatrical tremor. “Ooh, spooky story. Are you sure there’s no voodoo in her hoodoo?”

Izy laughed, waving off the display. “Nah. But my family has waited two centuries for one of us to have this dream. She’s the one who had it—and honestly, who else would’ve?”

They both chuckled, though Jeevan shook his head, fascinated. “What exact mix are you anyway? Where does the crazy branch of the family tree come from?”

“Spanish, French, Black, White... who knows,” Izy said with a shrug. “No one ever knew my father, and my mom passed away when I was three. My aunt swears there’s a Maya gene somewhere in the bloodline.”

Izy waved a hand, eager to get back to the text. He leaned forward, tapping a calloused finger onto the parchment of the codex.

““But look. Look right here.” He dragged his index finger across the interlocking glyphs. “2012. End of the calendar cycle, blah-blah-blah. We all know the standard pop culture stories. But look at this line. It says a god will get dressed up.”

Jeevan leaned in, squinting. “Dressed up for what?”

“I’m not entirely sure yet,” Izy said, his voice tightening. “But if you read the glyphs diagonally, it mentions a spell. A spell that cannot be broken until after the completion of the thirteenth B’ak’tun cycle—which aligns exactly with December 21, 2012. It has to be broken by someone who is...”

Izy trailed off. “That part of the page is missing. But right after the blank space, it says then a new queen will arise.”

Izy looked up, his eyes alive with excitement. “I’m telling you, Jeevan. The planetary alignment with the center of the Milky Way back in 2012 wasn’t just a calendar milestone. It was a literal cosmic door for spirits.”

He adjusted his glasses, downed the remaining dregs of his coffee, and nodded. “They knew things, Jeevan... the ancients knew things.”

Jeevan stared at him for a quiet moment. “Maybe the god gets dressed up for a wedding,” he offered dryly. “Which is something you’ll never do at the rate you’re going.”

The humor faded from Jeevan’s face. He stepped toward his friend. “Izy, come on. You don’t actually believe this stuff about spells, primordial gods, and cosmic doors, do you? Please tell me you aren’t planning to pitch this version to Seronjo.”

Izy pushed deeper into the text. His elbow flared as he reached across the table, knocking his empty mug off the edge.

Jeevan caught it with one hand and traded it, pressing the second, full cup of coffee into Izy’s palm.

“And this is the coolest part,” Izy forged ahead, barely noticing the swap. “Look. If you read the text from this angle, it hints that pages 77 and 78 of this codex are hidden in Lamanai. That’s modern-day Belize.”

Izy looked up, slammed his fist onto the table, and yanked his glasses off. He tossed the frames onto the desk. They skidded across the paper-slick wood and slid off the far edge.

“This codex only goes up to page 74,” Izy continued, his voice rising. “There’s more, Jeevan. There are more pages to this codex! Bishop Diego and the conquistadors didn’t find and burn them all. Do you really think after what they witnessed, they would destroy the books of knowledge?”

Izy turned, leaning against the bookshelf beneath the window. He stared at the lawns of the park, caught in thought. “I’ll bet the Vatican vaults are filled with lost Maya codices,” he murmured, almost to himself. “But we’ll never know.”

Below him, Jeevan stooped near the desk legs. He sighed, picking up the spectacles from the floorboards.

“I know this much,” Jeevan said dryly, holding up the twisted frames. “You are definitely getting new glasses.”



Dr. Seronjo’s office was not the workspace of an academic. It was furnished in antiques, resembling a hotel suite. Seronjo sat behind his mahogany desk, radiating impatience. Across from him sat Izy, squinting through the blur of the room.

“I have to meet the Blackwells in 20 minutes to discuss their endowment,” Seronjo said, adjusting his cuffs. “So get to the part about the gold.”

Izy cleared his throat, leaning forward. “The clues talk of spells—I mean, it spells out specific clues to hidden gold near Lamanai, in Belize.”

“Hidden?” Seronjo rolled his eyes, checking his watch. “Let’s be realistic, Professor. Nothing exciting has happened in Mayaland in fifty years. 2012 was a complete commercial bust. It is a hard sell to donors when you use the word hidden.”

“But if I had just three months—” Izy pressed, his voice tightening. “This could be the biggest breakthrough in Maya history. The knowledge that—”

Seronjo shook his head, holding up a manicured hand. “There you go again on your little crusade to share knowledge with the world. Even the Good Book says do not cast your pearls before swine.”

Izy stammered, his jaw dropping in disgust. “What!”

“Really, Professor,” Seronjo said, offering a patronizing smile. “Knowledge is for the select few, not the masses. The public doesn’t know what to do with it. We tell them what they can understand—or rather, what we want them to think they understand.”

Exasperated, Izy stared at the ceiling, rubbed his eyes, and sighed. He realized logic wouldn’t work here.

Slowly, he leaned across the desk to meet his boss’s gaze. “Then I appeal to your vanity,” Izy said softly. “You would be remembered forever as the man who made this expedition happen. And... if there is gold...”

A steady tap of his finger echoed against the mahogany. He swiveled his chair, staring out the window for a moment, then let out a sharp breath.

“One month.”

“Two,” Izy countered.

Seronjo swiveled back, leaning onto his desk to lock his eyes onto Izy. “Don’t disappoint me, Professor. I’ll make some calls and see if I still know anyone in Belize.”

The second Izy exited the office, Seronjo's demeanor vanished. He grabbed his phone and dialed a private number. The line rang twice.

"Hola, hablar," a deep voice answered.

"Jaguar Man, it's Jonathan," Seronjo said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Smith is here. He's mumbling about gold and spells in Belize. He claims he found the clues."

Over the receiver, a low chuckle rippled through the static. "Send him to me."

Chapter Three

The French Quarters, New Orleans That Same Night

A warm breeze blew through the louvered shutters covering the French doors of the Creole cottage. Sheer white curtains swayed in the dark. Above, a vintage ceiling fan spun, slicing through the humid night air.

Izy lounged on the sofa, staring at the wooden blades as his mind spun with glyphs and maps.

Floorboards groaned as his aunt, Cocco, walked into the parlour. In her late forties, Cocco was a striking Creole woman—slim, with light brown skin, fine features, and blazing green eyes. She moved slowly, cradling a thin wooden box in her arms.

Izy sat up, clearing a spot on the cushions. Cocco sat beside him.

“Over two hundred years we’ve waited to open this box, baby,” Cocco said, her New Orleans accent filling the quiet room. “And last night, I finally had the dream.”

She smiled, her eyes flashing with energy as she patted Izy’s knee.

“Two hundred years, baby. I can’t believe it’s happening. You and me.” Cocco shook her head, gently wiping tears from her eyes.

Izy smiled back, though his academic skepticism was already creeping in. “Aunt Cocco,” Izy said, his voice soft. “What is actually inside a box we’ve been carrying around since who knows when? And, really, no one has ever opened it in all this time?”

Cocco looked at him with reverence. “They wouldn’t dare. I wouldn’t dare, baby. Not until someone had the dream. And I did. I saw the crown.”

She patted the venerable wood before setting it on Izy’s lap.

He looked at the box, his brow furrowing. “What dream is so special that—”

“It’ll be in here,” she interrupted, her voice tingling with excitement. “You’re fixing to see.”

Her green eyes locked onto him. Feeling a wave of apprehension, Izy pushed the box back toward her side of the couch. “You open it,” he insisted. “It’s your dream. Why me?”

“Oh no, baby, it’s about you,” Cocco said, her tone brooking no argument. “Whoever has the dream gives the box to their next of kin. And that’s you, nephew. Now open it.”

Izy hesitated, his hand hovering over the lid. “This isn’t a curse or something, is it?”

“Oh, it’s something alright,” Cocco whispered. “Two hundred years worth of something. I had the dream, and you get the box.”

She set it back onto his lap and pressed a utility knife into his hand. “You know your name, Iztali, means the dream is reality. That’s no coincidence, boy. Now open it.”

Izy rolled his eyes at the mysticism but pressed the blade into the hardened tar seal. He sliced through the brittle compound and tried to pry the lid, but it was stuck. Bracing his forearm, he levered the knife hard.

Crack. The lid gave way.

A sharp sound escaped from the hollow interior of the wood—like a chilling human exhale. *Haaaa.*

Izy froze, looking at Cocco in surprise. She remained unconcerned, a smile playing on her lips.

Reaching inside, Izy brushed away layers of brittle straw packing. His fingers wrapped around something smooth and heavy. He lifted out a jade necklace featuring a tiger-eye pendant. The carving depicted two clenched fists clutching a crown.

Izy held it to the light. A shimmering chatoyancy danced across the surface of the tiger-eye stone. Astonished by the craftsmanship, he handed it to Cocco.

He reached back into the box, his fingers finding a fragile piece of bark paper. Gently, treating it like spun glass, he unrolled it across his knees.

His breath hitched. It was the missing center portion of two pages, marked with glyphs and Maya numbers along the edges.

Izy murmured in astonishment. “77 and 78.”

He looked at Cocco. Without a word, she slipped the jade necklace over his head. The stone medallion hit his chest.

Whoosh.

A breeze surged through the room, blowing the white curtains straight out. They undulated in the night air like ghosts. Izy whipped his head toward the window.

Cocco watched them, unfazed by the sudden tempest. She turned to Izy, cupping his face in her hands. “Nephew, your life just changed.” She smiled. “Guess what else?”

Izy’s eyes widened. “There’s more?”

Instead of reaching into the box, Cocco pulled a glasses case from her sweater pocket. She popped the hinge and lifted out a pair of sleek designer frames. Before he could protest, she slipped them onto his face.

“I got you some cool glasses,” she said. She leaned back against the cushions, inspecting her handiwork, and nodded. “Um-huh. You are some kind of handsome now. Maybe these will finally help you get a girlfriend.”

She kissed Izy on the cheek.

Chapter Four

Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport Two Days Later

The morning sun beat through the glass windows of the airport terminal. Travelers bustled past, but Izy and Cocco stood near the security gates, waiting.

A familiar voice called, and Jeevan jogged through the crowd, clutching a duffel bag. The moment he saw Izy, he stopped, dropping his bag to the floor in amazement.

“Cocco,” Jeevan gasped. “What on earth have you done to him?” He walked over and patted Izy’s shoulder, circling him. “Man, look at you. You actually look cool.”

“Thanks,” Izy mumbled. “I thi—”

“Please tell me you brought the pendant and a high-res copy of that text,” Jeevan interrupted. He gestured rapidly, his eyes wide. “The stuff from the box?”

Cocco cut her eyes at Jeevan, warning him to keep his voice down.

In response, Izy held up a cardboard document tube, patted the hidden jade emblem beneath his shirt, and nodded.

“I still can’t believe Seronjo fell for the fool’s gold,” Jeevan muttered as they moved toward the security line.

Cocco glanced between Izy and his assistant, her gaze sharpening. “Don’t go thinking Seronjo is a fool, now. That man knows a whole lot more than he lets on.”

Jeevan hoisted his duffel bag and stepped toward the gates. “He’s still a butt-head. Let’s roll.”

Cocco wrapped Izy in a hug. As he turned to follow Jeevan, she reached out, her fingers catching his shoulder. Izy pivoted back.

Cocco’s eyes searched his face with heavy intensity. “Baby boy,” she whispered, her voice dropping against the airport chatter. “You be careful of any black cats that cross your path.”

She kissed his cheek, turned, and walked away into the crowd.

Izy watched her go before catching up to Jeevan.

“Your Aunt Cocco gives me the willies sometimes,” Jeevan said, glancing back. “Are you sure there’s no voodoo in her history?”

Izy shook his head with a shrug. Together, they handed over their passes and disappeared through the jetway doors.

Chapter Five

Philip S.W. Goldson International Airport
Ladyville, Belize

The tropical humidity hit them the moment they stepped from the sun-baked Belize terminal. Izy and Jeevan dropped their bags onto the concrete curb, wiping sweat from their foreheads. They looked around the landscape, waiting.

Twenty minutes passed. Soon, they were reduced to sitting on their luggage, checking their watches as the midday sun beat down.

Screeech! A battered Volkswagen Beetle careened around the corner and slammed to a halt in front of them. The passenger door flew open. The driver leaned across the space, squinting at them.

“Professor Smith?” the driver called, his voice carrying a sharp accent.

Izy gave a cautious nod.

The driver jerked his head, motioning for them to climb inside. “Get in, brother! Throw your bags up front.”

Izy stepped into the vehicle first, only to realize there was no front passenger seat—just a hole where the chair used to be.

The driver gestured toward the back. “In the back, in the back!” He checked his mirrors, looking around as if he were piloting a getaway car.

The man behind the wheel was in his late twenties—short, muscular, and visibly high-strung, with an abrupt personality. Mestizo features were topped by short, gelled hair, and dark tattoos peeked from the edges of his shirt.

The moment Jeevan squeezed into the rear, before their weight could hit the vinyl, the driver slammed the gas.

The car rocketed. Izy and Jeevan flew back, their heads nearly cracking against the rear glass.



The little Beetle roared down the sun-bleached road, the wind howling through the open windows.

“Sorry I’m late!” the driver yelled over the engine roar. He turned in his seat, ignoring the road to look Izy up and down.

At the last second, he swerved to avoid a man riding a bicycle on the shoulder. “You Indian too? Or Creole? Yeah, yeah—I see it in the face, man!” He flashed a smile, glancing at the tarmac for a fraction of a second.

Izy shot a look at Jeevan.

“I’m Indian,” Jeevan shouted, gripping the door.

The driver caught Jeevan’s reflection in the rearview mirror and frowned. “Not that kind of Indian, bro.” He looked back at Izy, then the road, then back at Izy, jerking the steering wheel to miss a family walking along the dirt roadside. “Welcome home, brother.”

Izy leaned forward, the wind buffeting his face and making his new glasses slide. He had to scream to be heard. “I’m not from here!”

The driver rolled his eyes, pursing his lips in disbelief. He gave a nod, yanked the wheel to miss another cyclist, and looked back at Izy. “If you say so, man. Anyway, sorry again. I had an errand to run. I’ve met your jerk boss a few times when he came down to see my jerk boss.”

Izy and Jeevan exchanged a look.

The Beetle swung into the oncoming lane. The driver floored it, attempting to pass a sputtering cargo truck.

Horns blared. A colorful chicken bus barreled toward them from the opposite direction.

The driver laughed, cutting back into his lane at the last second. Izy and Jeevan were tossed across the backseat.

“Who is your boss?” Izy yelled, his heart pounding. “What does he do?”

To emphasize the name, the driver took his hands off the wheel, flashing street signs while tilting his head with an exaggerated lean.

“Personally? I’d call him a cartel boss, bro. Real dangerous, street-level muscle.” He laughed, swirling his tattooed arm around the interior of the car. “Anyway, I used to drive a cab.”

Jeevan, his eyes wide with terror, shook his head. “You drive like you’re running moonshine!”

Al threw his head back and laughed, a barking sound that echoed in the car.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Al said, dodging a pothole. “Anyway, I used to give private tours. I know all of the ruins around here—and even a few that aren't on any maps. Tourism tanked after 2012, so now I work for Jaguar.”

He turned in his seat, ignoring the oncoming traffic to pat Izy's knee before swerving back into his lane. “I'll be coming along with you two on this little trip. Jaguar wants me to keep an eye on you. But hey, I'm always loyal to the best tipper and whoever is the most fun... *comprender?*”

Al laughed again, raising his eyebrows in a silent proposition.

Izy and Jeevan exchanged a nervous glance.

The Beetle pushed on toward the heart of the city, cutting through the midday traffic.

Izy stared through the window at the turquoise expanse of the Caribbean Sea. The warm wind whipped hair across his face, but with his new designer frames, he looked cool. He leaned his head back, gazing at the white clouds drifting across the sky.

A formation caught his eye. He froze. He reached forward, hitting the back of Al's seat.

“Pull over! Stop the car! Pull over right now!”

Al slammed the brakes. The Beetle skidded, bumped over the concrete curb, and came to a halt on the shoulder of the road.

Izy scrambled out before the car stopped shaking. Jeevan and Al tumbled out behind him. Izy stood on the sand, pointing at the sky.

Even as they looked, the cloud formation began to break apart, dissipating into the blue.

Jeevan stared at his friend. Al silently studied the empty sky.

“It looked exactly like the medallion,” Izy panted. “Just like it.”

Izy reached under his collar and pulled the jade medallion from his shirt, letting it dangle in the sunlight.

Jeevan looked at the stone, shook his head, and climbed back into the car.

Al stepped closer. He took the medallion in his hand, rolling the stone between his fingers. He looked at the sky, then the jade, then back at Izy. He raised his eyebrows and gave a slow nod.

“Nice piece,” Al said softly, his tone serious. “Don’t let my boss see it. You really saw this in the clouds?”

Al dropped his hand. The jade piece hit Izy’s chest as a sudden gust of wind kicked up from the ocean.

Al turned, stepped through the missing seat of the car, and cranked the engine. Izy climbed inside, and they tore down the road.

Al glanced at Izy in the rearview mirror. “Sylphs, man. Elementals of the air. Female spirits. They use their wings to draw pictures with the clouds.”

Izy and Jeevan both gave Al a blank look.

Al sighed. “Paracelsus... alchemy? Alexander Pope?”

Still, nothing but a pair of blank stares.

Al shook his head in disappointment. “Whew! What are they even teaching you guys in schools now? Sylphs. They come up here from Cozumel. Anyway, like I said, bro... welcome home.”

Al flashed a smile, turned to the steering wheel, and fell silent.

Jeevan turned to Izy, his eyes wide. “Now you’re giving me the willies,” Jeevan muttered.

Chapter Six

Belize City

A few minutes later, they reached the streets of Belize City. The colorful pier houses and English-speaking residents gave the city a resemblance to New Orleans.

Al pulled the Beetle in front of Jaguar Man's office building—an imposing Spanish Colonial structure. They parked, hauled their bags from the vehicle, and stepped through the entrance. The three men walked across a tiled mosaic floor. Passing the front desk, Al blew a kiss to the receptionist. She blushed, motioning for them to head into the back office.

They walked to the heavy door and entered. The office interior was similar to Dr. Seronjo's suite, with one exception: the walls were covered in an extensive collection of Maya ceremonial masks and costumes. One artifact caught Izy's eye—a snarling, black jaguar mask with gleaming ivory fangs.

The side door clicked and Jaguar Man walked in. He was in his early fifties, tall, with sharp features, dressed in a tailored suit and heavy gold jewelry. He glanced at the watch on his wrist, then looked at Al.

"I guess you're not as late as it seems," Jaguar Man said, his voice smooth but dangerous. "My watch has been running fast lately."

He tapped the glass of the timepiece, then walked past Izy to close the office door. As the man brushed by, an unnatural chill swept over Izy. He shivered.

Jaguar Man turned, extending a hand to shake Izy's. "Nice to meet you, Professor Smith. People around here call me Jaguar Man." He gestured toward the black mask and the pelts mounted behind his desk. "Like the cat."

From the corner of the room, Al rolled his eyes.

Jaguar Man moved past Izy to greet Jeevan. As the man crossed his path a second time, Izy felt that same shiver ripple down his spine.

He rubbed his arms, trying to warm his skin, his eyes fixed on the businessman.

In the silence of his mind, his aunt's parting words echoed: *"Baby boy, be careful of black cats that cross your path."*

Izy stared at Jaguar Man, then looked at the black mask on the wall. They settled into the leather chairs across from the desk.

"So, Professor..." Jaguar Man began, leaning forward on the wood. "I hear you've uncovered structural clues that lead to gold?"

Jaguar Man let out a laugh that echoed off the ceiling. It was forced. Nobody else in the room joined in.

Izy cleared his throat, his posture stiffening. "You've already spoken to Dr. Seronjo? He—"

"No," Jaguar Man interrupted, his smile never wavering. "I don't know any... Dr. Seronjo. My associate from the university system here in Belize called my line."

Izy looked at Al. Al immediately looked at Jaguar Man.

The businessman delivered a razor-sharp look to his driver. Al shrank back.

Distrust settled over Izy's face. "I may have found structural clues," Izy said, guarding his words.

"Clues that mention spells? And gold?" Jaguar Man pressed.

Izy glanced at Jeevan, then focused his gaze back on the man across the desk. "It's far too early to say that definitively."

"But you did say that," Jaguar Man countered, his voice dropping.

He stared at Izy, raising his eyebrows. Without breaking eye contact, he reached for a gold pen in its marble holder and began to write. He scrawled a series of coordinates onto a slip of paper.

He slid the note across the desk to Al, before shifting his gaze back to Izy.

"My associate within the university system mentioned this local individual," Jaguar Man said, his voice measured. "He purchased some unclassified stone pieces and uncovered an item—likely a tourist market forgery. But one can never be certain in this trade. Track this location and see what you think, Professor. Give me your professional assessment."

The men rose to depart. As they headed toward the exit, Jaguar Man leaned back in his chair, interlocking his fingers behind his head. “Professor Iztali.”

Izy stopped, pivoting.

“Do you find it coincidental,” Jaguar Man asked, his eyes locking onto Izy’s designer frames, “that the final queen of the Maya was named Izta—the eternal one?”

He picked up a photograph from his desk, tilting it toward them. “Examine this archival layout of her likeness from the temple at Edzná.”

Izy stepped back to the desk, Jeevan trailing behind. They studied the photograph.

As they bent over the image, Jaguar Man scanned Izy’s facial structure. A smile broke across the businessman’s features.

“A striking coincidence,” Jaguar Man murmured. “Your features... it is almost as though the dream is the reality.”

The men moved back toward the threshold. Before stepping through, Jaguar Man and Izy exchanged a measuring look—a silent acknowledgment of the chess match that had begun.

Jeevan tracked the interaction in silence.

The second they stepped into the corridor, Jeevan nudged Izy’s shoulder.

“I’m starting to think Cocco’s not coo-coo,” Jeevan whispered.

Chapter Seven

Belize Countryside

The Volkswagen moved away from the city, passing sun-baked shacks constructed from sticks and river stones. Al cut the wheel, swinging the car off the road and into the yard of a spartan residence.

In the yard, a man in tattered clothes was assembling a stone foundation addition to his home. He set down his trowel, watching nervously as the Beetle jolted to a halt. Al parked beside a pile of excavated stone pieces, and the three of them exited the vehicle.

The team walked across the dirt toward the unfinished structure. Al waved, trying to diffuse the tension. “Hey, how’s it going?” Al called. “Jaguar Man sent us down regarding an item you uncovered inside the ruins.”

The man gave a nervous nod. He raised a hand, asking them to wait, before disappearing into the dark threshold of his home.

He returned a moment later carrying a weathered wooden box. Inside the doorway, his pregnant wife and four children stood, watching with wide eyes.

The man handed the box to Al. Izy and Jeevan watched, their breath hitched. Al immediately handed the container to Izy, who set it onto the sun-baked hood of the car and flipped the brass latch.

Slowly, using the tips of his fingers, Izy unrolled the artifact inside. It was a completely intact, beautifully preserved codex page. Izy turned to Jeevan, their restraint vanishing as they shared an ecstatic high-five.

Izy focused back on the man. “Where exactly did this come from?” Izy asked, his voice trembling.

The man cut a nervous glance toward Al, then looked at the stone pile before looking back at his family. “They said I would not be arrested if I give you the paper,” the man said, his voice shaking. “That we trade and I keep my rocks.”

Al stepped forward, his tone firm. "Who said that? Tell us about the rocks and we'll go."

The man looked back toward his family. His wife gave a slow nod of assent. He focused on Al, exhaling.

"My friend... he takes them from Lamanai. He sells them." He pointed a finger toward his wife, looking at Al. "I need room... my wife is with child. My friend, he has more paper." He pointed toward the wooden box on the hood.

Izy's expression lit up with excitement.

"Where can we find him?" Al asked. "We just want to talk to him."

The man looked toward his family one last time, then dropped his gaze to the dirt.

Sensing the deadlock, Jeevan reached into his pocket and pulled out a stack of cash. He extended his hand, offering it. The man's eyes widened, and he took the currency, stuffing it away.

"He resides on Holy Emmanuel Road," the man said quickly. "You will recognize the property."

"*Gracias*," Al nodded.

"I guess academics really is about the money," Jeevan muttered dryly.

They slid into the Volkswagen, the engine roaring as Al accelerated onto the road.

Through the rear window, they watched the man counting the stack of cash. He showed the currency to his wife before she drew him into a relieved embrace, securing the money.

Inside the car, Izy sat in silence, holding the document container against his chest. Al wove through traffic, talking over the engine whine.

"His friend probably takes stones from the Maya sites and sells them," Al said, gesturing. "Half the town was built with stones stolen from the ruins. Every now and then, someone digs up something real. And when they do, it goes through Jaguar Man."

They approached a sprawling property. Piles of structural debris were scattered across the dirt yard. An iron chain secured a guard dog to each pile of stone.

Al swung the Beetle into the drive, parking beside a man who was unloading a truckbed of timber. They exited the vehicle, the tropical heat wrapping around them once more.



The second their boots hit the dirt, the guard dogs began barking, straining against their chains with snaps. The man stopped his work and removed his hat, wiping his brow as he studied the arriving team.

Izy fixed his eyes on the snarling animals. Without thinking, he let out a low mumble. “Shut up.”

Instantly, the barking cut out. The dogs dropped to the dirt, lowering their heads and whimpering as if a predator had entered the yard.

Shocked by the sudden shift, everyone looked at Izy.

The man stepped forward, his posture apprehensive. “Can I help you?” he asked warily.

“Want to talk to you about some rocks,” Al said, stepping up and pointing to the debris piles. “The ones from Lamanai.”

The man shook his head, wiping his brow again. “I have no rocks from there.”

“How about some old papers hidden in a box?” Al pressed.

The man shook his head, his eyes darting to the whimpering dogs, then over to Izy's cold stare. He waved an arm around the yard. “I only have what you see here.”

The threat worked instantly. The man looked around the yard, glanced at his cowering dogs, and shook his head. He marched over to the vehicle. “Who is your boss?”

Al leaned against the car door, looking at the contractor. “Jaguar Man.”

Al raised his eyebrows in a slow look.

The man let out an exhale, his resistance crumbling. “Wait. Perhaps I misunderstood,” the man stammered. “I... I may have what you're looking for. Wait a minute, please.”

He disappeared into the house, returning with a thin wooden box.

Izy's jaw dropped—the container was identical to the one Cocco had given him in New Orleans.

The man handed the box to Al. “This is what you want. There are two papers inside. I found it hidden in the rocks. Take it, and I stay in business, *sí?*”

Al reached to secure the artifact. As his arm extended, his sleeve rode up his forearm, exposing a dark tribal tattoo.

The construction man stepped back, the color draining from his face. He frantically made the sign of the cross, pointing a finger at Al's forearm.

“It’s in the papers...” the man gasped, his voice thick with terror. “That sign!”

He pointed toward the wooden box, backing away into his yard. “Please... you go.”

He waved a hand, shooing them from his property, though his eyes remained locked onto Izy. “Go! I say nothing!”

Al handed Izy the wooden box, nodding toward the car. They slid onto the vinyl seats and accelerated away from the curb.

Behind them, the man made the sign of the cross one final time as the guard dogs found their voices, barking into the dust cloud.



Al exited a roadside souvenir shop holding a replica codex. He walked toward the parked Volkswagen.

On the hood of the car, Izy and Jeevan were deep in study. The fragments of the codex pages were spread across the metal.

Izy looked up from the glyphs, running hands through his hair before punching his fist. “Yes! I knew it!” Izy shouted. “More missing pages—76 and 77! We just need the other—”

“You need to put this souvenir copy inside the box,” Al interrupted, sliding up to them. “We’ll give the fake to Jaguar Man. The other guy is so freaked out he won’t be saying nothing to no one.”

Al began rubbing dirt across the surface of the replica, crinkling the edges, rolling it tight, and placing it into the wooden container.

Jeevan looked at the authentic fragments, then focused on Al's forearm tattoo. “That man was right, Al. Your tattoo is exactly like this symbol right here in the text. What is it?”

Al glanced at his arm and shrugged. “Can’t tell you, man. Too much tequila, a weird chick who did it, and she was gone by the morning.”

Al dismissed it, but Izy remained locked in, studying his codex fragments.

“This story...” Izy murmured. “It’s about a king and his queen. There are tons of numbers and coordinates here. The number of servants, the number of baskets, travelers coming from the north, waiting a number of seconds... this is—”

Jeevan snapped his head up from his page, looking at Izy in realization. “Coordinates,” Jeevan gasped. “They’re coordinates—longitudes and latitudes.”

Izy nodded, the pieces clicking together.

Al looked confused, glancing between the two. “Man,” Al muttered, scratching his head. “And how would they’ve known about that kind of stuff back then?”

“It’s been used for centuries,” Izy explained, his eyes fixed on the text. “Longitude is about time, and the Maya knew everything about time.”

Leaning over the metal hood, Izy read aloud from the cryptic text:

“Twenty servants traveled north for twelve minutes and stood still fifty-three seconds. They were met by eighty-seven warriors from the west, carrying twenty-five bags of gold and forty-four baskets of food. They traveled east to bring the gifts to their queen.”

Izy scribbled on a notepad, nodding in a steady rhythm. He pulled his phone from his pocket, inputting the data values into his tracking system.

“20 degrees, 12 minutes, and 53 seconds north by 87 degrees, 25 minutes, 44 seconds west...” Izy’s voice trailed off. “Cozumel. The ruins of Tulum.”

Al’s jaw dropped. “That’s one of the last Maya cities—this is getting crazy, bro.”

Jeevan didn’t answer. He picked up his codex fragment, looking between the ink and Al’s forearm. He walked over, flattening the parchment over the skin markings on Al’s arm, then looked at Izy.

“Not as crazy as this,” Jeevan said, his voice dropping. “It’s the calendar.”

“Yeah... overlays,” Izy said, nodding. “The calendar is just a series of overlapping cycles. Everyone thought it ended in 2012.”

Jeevan shook his head, tapping his finger against the codex page. “This one starts at 2013.”

Izy walked over to join him, his eyes widening as he studied the data rings. A smile broke across his face. “We’re going to Cozumel.”

Al started gyrating, swirling his arms above his hair. “Road trip! Cozumel! Yeah, I’m in!”

Izy and Jeevan exchanged a look, letting out a laugh as they shared a high-five over the hood of the car.

Chapter Eight

Tulum, Cozumel

The three men stood atop the temple ruins, looking across the expanse of the Caribbean Sea. An unnatural wind gusted across the stone structures. High above, the white clouds began to converge at an impossible pace.

Jeevan shielded his eyes, staring at the sky. “When I was a kid, I liked to find shapes in the clouds,” Jeevan said, his voice carrying over the wind. He pointed toward a gathering formation. “Look at that one over there. It looks like a turtle.”

Izy removed his designer glasses, rubbing his eyes. “Man, this wind is strong.”

Al shook his head, moving between Izy and Jeevan to drop an arm across each of their shoulders. “You guys just don’t get it,” Al said, dead serious. “Sylphs make the wind when they use their wings to draw pictures with the clouds. The air only dies down when they stop to admire their art.”

Jeevan stared at the shifting formations, shaking his head. “That’s crazy, Al.”

“And what we’ve been seeing lately isn’t?” Al countered. “Sylphs can build small winds into storms—ever heard of the butterfly effect? It’s like that. Does Hurricane Katrina ring a bell?”

Jeevan and Izy looked at him in silence. Al shrugged.

Needing breathing room, Jeevan took a step away from Al. Al blinked, faking offense. “What, bro? I stink?”

“No,” Jeevan replied dryly. “But when the mothership finally beams you up, I don’t want to get caught in the beam. And I’m thinking it must be close.”

Al faked an expression of anger. “What are you trying to say, man?”

“That you’re a free thinker.”

Al’s face cleared, and he delivered a fist bump to Jeevan’s hand. “Yeah, yeah, I hear what you’re saying. You think I’m nuts.”

Jeevan shrugged, extending his palm. “The shoe fits.”

They laughed together, the tension breaking under the sun.

Nearby, Izy began gesturing, nodding as a realization hit him. “Cozumel... Cozumel, I remember now,” Izy muttered, his eyes lighting up. “Ancestral women came here to make offerings to Ixchel, the fertility goddess—she was a jaguar goddess. And the sylphs supposedly protected the virgins. Wasn’t this temple—”

“Where the last virgin queen, Izta, supposedly had a curse put on her,” Al interrupted, taking over the tale. “She refused to marry Chimbela, the hot-shot warrior of their time.”

Izy nodded, pressing on. “And the spell—”

“Put her in limbo,” Al said. “Turned her into a sylph until the end of time. The legends say sylphs can communicate knowledge and—”

Jeevan suddenly slapped his forehead, his eyes widening. “The end of time! 2012! The solar alignment, the portal for spirits, the start of the new calendar, these spells... it makes sense! We’re onto something deep here.”

He nodded, shifting his focus between the other two. “The spell can be broken now,” Jeevan whispered. “She can be freed.”

He locked his gaze onto his boss. “Whew. And I thought Al and India were weird.”

The three of them dropped into silence, their eyes drifting to the sky.

High above the ruins, vapor trails gathered, shifting into the shape of two fists holding a crown. They looked at Izy.

Moving on instinct, Izy pulled the jade medallion from his shirt, holding the artifact against the sky to match the image.

“Oh man,” Al breathed, his muscles trembling. “This is getting tripping.”

Dark storm clouds began to bleed into the horizon. They coalesced into the shape of a pouncing jaguar. The creature shifted its weight, moving through the sky toward the formation of the fists and the crown.

Suddenly, the wind stopped. The drop in pressure was jarring, leaving a ringing quiet in their ears. They looked at each other in disbelief, their breathing the only sound left on the temple summit.

“What does that mean?” Izy whispered, his voice hollow in the dead air.

BOOM.

The wind blasted back with the force of a blow, dissipating the animal shapes. High above, clouds began to swirl into a vortex, pulling vapor into the silhouette of a woman.

Jeevan pointed a trembling finger toward the sky. “Look, look, look!”

Cloud vapor rushed into the formation, adding detail to the mist. The sky became the face of Queen Izta, looking down on the ruins with sorrow.

The three men stared up in paralyzed awe, speechless.

Breaking the silence, Al threw his hands up. “And you two think I make this stuff up!”

The wind shifted in an ice-cold gust, howling through the hollow arches of the ruins. Dense clouds gathered, blotting out the sun and turning the afternoon into a bruised twilight—but a single, piercing ray of sunshine cut through the gloom, falling squarely onto Izy.

The others stared at the localized anomaly, stepping back.

“Tripping..” Al whispered slowly, his eyes wide. “Really tripping, bro.”



A few hours later, night had fallen over Cozumel. The three men sat around a campfire they had built atop the pyramid of El Castillo.

Al reached into his tactical pack and pulled a metal flask, carefully pouring a thick liquid into a battered tin cup. He took a sip, twisting his features into a grimace.

“I thought we could use this,” Al said, clearing his throat. “The old Maya priests used it for understanding. Here.” He extended the cup toward Izy.

Izy eyed the murky sludge warily. “What exactly is it?”

“*K'atx'alab okox*,” Al said with a smile, motioning the cup forward again.

“Nah...” Izy said, leaning back. “I don’t think—”

“What?” Al interrupted. “You think things can get any weirder than they already are? This will bring us some clarity. It’s all natural, bro.”

Izy reached for the tin cup, but Jeevan swiftly snatched it from Al's grip. Before anyone could stop him, Jeevan drank the entire contents in an aggressive gulp.

Instantly, Jeevan began choking. He coughed, his face turning red as the fluid hit the back of his throat.

Al leaned over and smashed Jeevan across the back.

"Oh man!" Al laughed. "That cup was supposed to be enough for all three of us. Good luck, bro. You should've called a travel agent before you took that trip—made some arrangements, you know?"

He patted Jeevan's shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll be right here for you, bro."

Al chuckled, pouring another amount of the liquid into the cup before offering it back to Izy. "Drink up, bro. All natural."

Izy hesitated, then downed the fluid. He immediately gagged, shaking his head in disgust as he gripped his throat against the burn.

Al grinned. "Good stuff, right?"

"It's awful," Izy panted.

"No, it's good stuff. You'll see."

They leaned against the stone blocks, staring at the blanket of stars. The campfire crackled, sending ribbons of smoke into the night, when a freezing wind blew over the summit. The men shivered, the temperature plunging in a matter of seconds.

Al grabbed a weathered log from their pile and threw it onto the campfire.

POP.

The fire exploded. A vortex of embers and ash swirled through the air. Before he could dodge, several fragments landed on Izy's skin.

He jumped, hopping around the stone platform as he rubbed at his forearm, screaming against the pain. "Hot! Hot! That's hot! That's gonna leave a mark!"

Suddenly, Izy stopped moving. He looked at his arm, his glasses slipping. His eyebrows raised, his jaw dropping in shock.

Slowly, Izy held his wrist out to show the others.

Burned perfectly into his skin—without a single blister—was a glowing brand depicting the image from the artifact: two fists holding a crown.

The wind increased to a roar, threatening to blow their tents off the pyramid. Smoke and red embers swirled into a tight column, manifesting into the translucent figure of Queen Izta. The three men stared at the sight, the fluid from the flask kicking in.

The vaporous entity swiveled around Izy's body. As she passed through him, her presence inflated his posture, his spine straightening as energy flooded his veins.

"See the vision," Queen Izta commanded, her voice echoing from everywhere and nowhere. "Find my king."

With a snap, she moved into the dark sky.

The moment she untangled from his spirit, Izy's posture deflated, his muscles going slack. In unison, the three men dropped onto the stone floor into a trance. Their eyes were wide, staring into the space ahead. Their mouths hung open, their bodies frozen like statues.

The column of campfire smoke expanded, rising to engulf the entire summit in a cloud of ash.

Deep within their minds, they began to see the same vision



1560

The stone altar of El Castillo stood in a flickering light. Queen Izta lay bound to the limestone blocks while the surrounding Maya priests offered chants to the sky. Ceremonial fires roared inside ceramic pots positioned at the four corners of the pyramid summit, casting erratic shadows across the stone.

Far below the platform, the citizens watched the proceedings in horror. The crowd parted as Chimbelu advanced to the altar.

Chimbelu was a towering Maya warrior, his muscular body painted ceremonial blue. His loincloth draped to the stone floor. Atop his head sat a hawk mask featuring feathers that extended into the night air, giving him the presence of a giant. He glared at the restrained queen with unbridled rage.

Drawing his stone sword, he swirled the weapon in a slow circle over her body.

"I ask you once more," Chimbelu growled. "Make me your king."

Izta shook her head against her leather restraints, her eyes flashing with fire. "I have my king."

Chimbelu's expression turned, his jaw tightening behind the paint. "Then I'll reign alone—as a god."

He glanced to the side of the altar. Standing in the shadows was a contingent of Spanish conquistadors, their breastplates gleaming. They held King Chac in their grip. King Chac was a majestic Maya monarch, sporting a beaded loincloth and a crest of iridescent Quetzal feathers.

Chimbelu turned his rage onto the queen. "No man will ever possess you. I'll suspend you in the air until the end of time—until the sun enters the dark rift and the first father is reborn."

"Cast what spell you must," Queen Ixta spat.

The surrounding priests looked at each other with hesitation. Chimbelu's anger flared; he lifted his stone sword, ready to strike. One priest grabbed his forearm to stall the blow.

Chimbelu nodded to the priest, pulling his weapon back as he stepped away from the altar to let the ritual proceed.

The priests resumed their chanting, pouring ceremonial ointments over Ixta's skin. One elder stepped forward, lighting a torch from the corner fire pots. He walked back toward the center of the platform.

He stood over Ixta, her body glistening under the firelight. Ixta locked her eyes onto Chac, ignoring the torch. A tear rolled down her cheek. In that moment, the pyramid summit dropped into silence.

Chac attempted to break free, throwing his weight against the guards, but the conquistadors forced a weapon to his head, locking him in place.

Chimbelu glared at Ixta, delivering a final nod to the lead priest.

The priest touched the torch to her body.

WOOSH.

Ixta was engulfed in roaring flames. The brilliant flash illuminated the jungle canopy for miles. From a dark treetop, a black jaguar let out a roar, pawing at the air in anguish.

On the summit, the priests dropped their heads in shame, while the crowd below continued the mourning chant. Chac glared through the heat waves at Chimbelu. Chimbelu smiled back, cold and victorious.

Thick smoke began to swirl over the charred silhouette of Ixta's body. The ash manifested into a translucent, winged specter. She stretched her ghostly arms toward the crowd below, fanning the embers with the motion of her wings.

The rising smoke shifted, forming the symbol of the two fists clutching the crown. Ixta drew the smoke symbol inside her translucent chest, the vapor swirling within her silhouette like a storm.

With a flash of light, Izta vanished into the night sky. A cloud of smoke rose above the pyramid before dissipating into the stars.

"Our blood will reign," Queen Izta's voice echoed in a disembodied whisper.



The three men continued to stare into the campfire, their eyes wide and unblinking.

Pad, pad, pad.

A black jaguar walked from the darkness, its paws making no sound on the stone. It navigated the space atop the pyramid, weaving between their frozen bodies.

The predator moved face-to-face with Izy. Their eyes locked in a supernatural stare.

The jaguar let out a guttural snarl, baring its fangs, then leaped into the night.



The sounds of wildlife and crashing surf filled the air. The bodies of the three men were sprawled across the stone platform surrounding the cold ash of the campfire. They began to stir under the morning sun.

Slowly, Izy pulled himself onto his elbows, rubbing his head in exhaustion. He inspected his forearm. The burned mark of the crown was raw and swollen against his skin.

Nearby, Jeevan crawled to the edge of the pyramid. Leaning over the ledge, he began to puke into the brush.

Al sat upright, staring at the Caribbean Sea as he rubbed his eyes. "Did you both see that too?" Al asked, his voice raspy.

Jeevan remained bent over the ledge, letting out a groan. "I saw conquistadors," he wheezed. "Did you see conquistadors?"

Izy looked around the ruins, rubbing his face to clear the vision from his mind. He focused on his assistant.

"We need to find the shaman," Izy said, his voice firm.

Jeevan snapped to attention, his head turning, his eyes wide with dread.

"Now," Jeevan groaned, wiping his mouth, "things are going to get weird."

CHAPTER NINE

Chiapas, Mexico
Two Days Later

The vehicle traveled down the lane, where rows of stucco houses turned into a blur through the window frames. Izy occupied the front passenger seat alongside a Chinese driver. Outside, a police presence was ubiquitous along the streets, with officers stationed at almost every intersection.

"I bring you to the shaman," the driver said, his voice carrying the cadence of a Mandarin dialect. "You must know someone who know someone." He cut his eyes toward Izy, then scanned the police officers on the corner.

"The shaman—I know the shaman," Izy replied, adjusting his glasses. "He helped me with my research years ago."

From the backseat, a hungover Jeevan let out a mumble. "I can't believe he's still alive."

The driver looked at Jeevan through the rearview mirror. "Why?"

"Because he was like a hundred years old back then," Jeevan groaned, rubbing his temples.

The driver chuckled, his eyes meeting Jeevan's reflection. "He much older than that, my friend. Much older than that."

Intrigued, Izy turned in his seat. "How do you know the shaman? How'd your family end up here in Mexico?"

"Ancestors come to Mexico in the 1800s to work the coffee plantations," the driver explained. "And my grandfather practice medicine—" He locked a suspicious look onto Izy. "Same kind as shaman."

The taxi came to a stop at a light. On the corner, two police officers hunched, glancing through the glass into the car. The driver looked at Izy nervously. "You no have drugs?" the driver whispered.

"No," Izy said firmly. He looked back at Al, who shook his head in a wide-eyed negative.

The light turned green, and the car continued forward. They meandered deep through the city streets, executing a series of turns

before pulling up to a white stucco residence draped in lavender bougainvillea vines. The men exited the vehicle.

Before Izy could finish extending his hand to offer the currency, the driver hit the gas, accelerating from the curb in a cloud of exhaust.

Turning toward the property, they crossed the yard to the main structure. Izy knocked on the heavy wood door.

A stunning young woman named Maria answered. Maria's rich brown hair fell over the shoulders of a simple sundress that perfectly caught the lines of her frame. She smiled warmly at them, appearing pleasantly surprised by the visitors.

"*Sí, ¿puedo ayudarle?*" she asked.

Izy stared at her, dumbstruck, a searching look in his eyes. She let out a giggle, tilting her head under his gaze.

Sensing the silence, Al delivered a sharp nudge into Izy's ribs.

"Ah..." Izy stammered.

"Can I help you—talk or anything?" Maria offered, her voice carrying a soft accent.

Al delivered a second, sharper nudge into Izy's side.

"Yes," Izy blurted. "Um, we're here to see the shaman."

Maria's smile widened. "You want to see my grandfather? Come in."

Izy looked at her closely, the pieces clicking. His face lit up. "Maria? Little Maria?"

Maria blushed, nodding as she stepped back. "You remember me. I didn't want to say anything first."

"Of course I do!" Izy said, a laugh breaking through his academic facade. "You were a little girl the last time I saw you."

"I was old enough to have a crush on you," she countered playfully.

"But definitely not old enough for me to have one on you," Izy smiled.

They laughed together. Izy wrapped her in a warm hug. Behind him, Al and Jeevan grinned at each other. They stepped through the doorway, entering the house.

Maria led the group through the residence, which was built around an open central courtyard. The perimeter was planted with medicinal herbs and flora.

Izy followed Maria, his eyes locked onto her. “You sure grew up to be beautiful,” Izy mumbled.

“Thank you,” Maria replied.

Izy stopped, looking surprised. He clapped a hand over his mouth. “Was that out loud?”

Al nodded with a smirk.

Walking ahead, Maria looked back over her shoulder, a smile playing on her lips. “*Sí*,” she whispered.

They stepped into a secluded cabana. The shaman sat in a trance, hunched over a ceramic pot that bubbled. Coils of blue smoke swayed like a cobra around his face, rising with his quiet chanting.

The men took their places, sitting in silence.

Maria gestured to the group, offering a drink. They all nodded. As she turned to leave, she caught Izy’s eye and smiled, a blush creeping onto her skin.

The shaman went quiet, his head snapping up. His milky eyes locked onto Izy. A wide smile stretched across his weathered face, wrinkling the skin beneath his feathered hat. Necklaces of shells and stones rattled against his chest.

“Iztali, my friend,” the shaman said, his voice raspy. “It has been far too long. I see that love has finally found you.”

Izy stumbled for words, his face flushing. “No, I—ah, I haven’t exactly—”

The shaman smiled and shook his head, raising a hand. “It wasn’t a question. I can see how Maria looks at you.”

Behind Izy, Al and Jeevan stared in silence.

Maria entered the cabana, balancing a tray of refreshments. Reverting to the behavior of an awkward schoolboy, Izy fumbled as he accepted the glass from her.

“Shaman,” Izy said, desperate to change the subject. “My friends here are—”

“My friends,” the shaman interrupted. “Did you really come all this way just to tell me about your friends?”

“No,” Izy admitted, leaning forward. “I had... well, we all shared a vision the other night at—”

“Tulum,” the shaman finished for him. “I too saw the vision. Come, sit here with me.” He patted the dirt floor in front of his bubbling pot. Izy crawled forward and sat. “I will show you another, and then you will understand.”

“The vision?” Izy asked.

The shaman offered a smile. “There is but one true understanding.”

The shaman reached across the pot and grasped Izy’s arm. He shoved Izy’s sleeve past the elbow, exposing the raw burn mark.

Pulling back his sleeve, the shaman revealed a silver scar on his forearm—the shape of two Maya swords, their tips touching, but each missing the center of its handle.

The shaman wet the tissue with his finger, then laid his scar flat across Izy’s brand. He held it there for a few seconds, then pulled his arm back.

Izy gasped, staring at his skin. The two fists of his original brand were no longer empty; they now held the handles of the swords, thrusting them above the crown.

The shaman’s eyes scanned every line of Izy’s face. “We are the chosen protectors of the crown,” the shaman whispered.

Jeevan leaned to Al’s ear, keeping his voice low. “I told you things would get weird.”

The shaman clutched Izy’s forearms, ensuring their scars locked together. With strength, he pulled Izy forward until his face hung over the bubbling pot.

“Hold my arms,” the shaman commanded, his gaze piercing. “Inhale the smoke softly. Do not let go of me, no matter what you see.”

Izy closed his eyes and inhaled the sweet blue smoke. Together, their bodies began to rock. Al and Jeevan sat on the dirt floor, watching the display.

Within seconds, both Izy and the shaman slipped into a trance.



— **TULUM - PYRAMID EL CASTILLO - NIGHT (1560):**
A young priest who looks exactly like the shaman stands under the stars, secretly

marrying Queen Izta and King Chac in absolute secrecy. No one else is present on the dark summit.

— **TULUM - PYRAMID - IZTA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT:** *Izta and Chac make passionate love on a bed of pelts. The entire stone room is bathed in a warm, ethereal glow from the surrounding firelight.*

— **TULUM - PYRAMID - NIGHT:** *Tears streaming down her face, Queen Izta hands a swaddled newborn baby to a trusted Maya couple. They turn and swiftly sneak away from the shadow of the palace, disappearing into the jungle.*

— **TULUM - PYRAMID - NIGHT:** *The timeline fractures back to the execution. Chimbela flares with hatred, glaring at Izta. He delivers a cold nod to the head priest, who touches her skin with the blazing torch. She is instantly engulfed in roaring flames. A contingent of Spanish conquistadors hold King Chac by the arms, forcing his head up to watch her burn.*

— **TULUM - BEACH - DAY:** *A row of heavily armed conquistadors stand on the white sand beach, speaking in low tones with Chimbela while keeping a chained Chac under guard. Nearby, a line of Maya slaves load wooden chests and sleek Paso Fino horses onto a sprawling Spanish galleon ship layout. "Take him far away," Chimbela sneered, handing a leather sack to the Spanish captain. "Take your golden payment, and bring the codex spell directly to your priests. For I know their zealotry will ensure they destroy it."*

— **ON THE SHIP - DAY:** *A brutal conquistador hurls King Chac into a damp, iron-barred brig cell, slamming the heavy wooden door shut and turning the skeleton key.*

— **TOP DECK SHIP - PACIFIC OCEAN - DAY:** *The sky darkens. The Spanish lookout screams as a black-flagged pirate ship approaches fast. Conquistadors scramble across the deck, preparing the heavy iron cannons and frantically rushing to secure the golden chests and sacred Maya codices below.*

— **PACIFIC OCEAN - DAY:** *Chaos erupts. A crew of ruthless pirates board the Spanish galleon, steel swords clashing. Bloody fighting ensues until the Spanish crew is completely conquered. The pirate captain laughs, ordering his men to load the chests, the exotic horses, and the captive King Chac onto their vessel. They torch the remnants of the Spanish galleon, leaving it to burn on the water.*

— **PIRATE SHIP - PACIFIC OCEAN - DAY:** *Several drunken pirates lounge on the main deck, laughing and pointing up at a strange cloud*

formation. The white vapor mimics the unmistakable silhouette of a beautiful woman. The drunken men mockingly blow wet kisses up to the sky.

— **PIRATE SHIP - DECK - DAY:** *More crew members join in, blowing kisses to the cloud figures. High above, the cloud woman seemingly blows a kiss back toward the vessel. With every single kiss exchanged, the ocean wind violently increases.*

— **PIRATE SHIP - PACIFIC OCEAN - DAY:** *The playful wind turns into a monstrous tempest. Violent, towering seas crash over the deck, turbulent winds shred the canvas sails, and the ship is tossed like a toy onto a jagged reef of black rocks.*

— **MÁS AFUERA ISLAND - DAY:** *The storm clears, revealing shattered flotsam and jetsam littering a desolate beach. The pirates lie dead on the sand. The resilient Paso Fino horses swim ashore through the surf. Exhausted but alive, King Chac staggers through the waves, manually pulling the heavy wooden chests onto the dry land.*

— **MÁS AFUERA ISLAND - CAVE IN LAS CASAS CLIFF - DAY:** *Working by torchlight, Chac manually drags the treasure chests deep into a hidden cave network carved into the sheer face of the Las Casas cliff.*

— **MÁS AFUERA ISLAND - DAY:** *Chac stands proud on the edge of the high cliff, his long hair whipping in the wind as he stares out at the endless horizon. Behind him, a towering volcano rumbles violently, sending a plume of black smoke into the atmosphere.*

— **MÁS AFUERA ISLAND - DAY:** *Chac stands on a high knoll as the volcano violently erupts, spewing molten rock. A choking cloud of black volcanic ash blocks out the sun, plunging the island into total darkness. Defiant against the cataclysm, Chac stretches his muscular arm upward, pointing directly toward the hidden cave location.*

— **MÁS AFUERA ISLAND - DAY:** *A weathered stone statue stands forgotten amidst thick, choking jungle foliage, its carved arm stretched defiantly toward the heavens. Far above, a sleek commercial jet flies high overhead, leaving a crisp white contrail streaking across the blue sky. The lonely sound of the ocean wind echoes over the landscape.*



The hypnotic state ended, causing the men to gasp. Their eyes remained wide in the immediate aftermath.

The shaman let go of Izy's arms, breaking the connection. Izy snapped back, looking up drained and speechless, his breathing shallow.

Breaking the quiet, Al rolled his hands. "Well?" Al demanded. "What did you see, bro?"

Izy blinked, trying to ground himself. "She wasn't a virgin queen."

The others looked puzzled, glancing between the two men.

"You saw Queen Izta and King Chac," the shaman explained, his voice low. "They were secretly married. No one in the old kingdoms knew that they had a child."

Everyone leaned toward the pot, wearing expressions of surprise.

"Chimbelu put a spell on Izta and paid the Spanish conquistadors to take Chac away," the shaman continued. "Their newborn son was taken into the jungle and never found."

Al snapped his fingers. "And Chimbelu took control."

"He ruled the kingdom with cruelty," the shaman nodded. "Chac was the keeper of knowledge. Without him, the people could not survive. Without his understanding of native plants, diseases quickly killed them."

Jeevan rubbed his face, his hangover forgotten. "But the bloodline... the bloodline actually survived?"

"Yes," the shaman said softly. "There is one last living heir."

The shaman reached out and tapped the scar on Izy's forearm, looking into his eyes. "You are the last heir, Iztali."

Izy sat stunned, the weight of a civilization on his shoulders.

The shaman took his hand, locking his grip. "You must follow the vision."

Izy stared, numb. "How?"

"Go to the island."

Izy looked at the shaman, perplexed. "But how are we supposed to know where it is? The vision just showed an island with a volcano."

The shaman didn't answer. Instead, he motioned for Maria to step forward. She walked over, her eyes downcast.

Reaching out, the shaman pulled the strap of her sundress, exposing her shoulder blade. He pointed a finger at a birthmark on her skin.

“The shape of the birthmark looks like the west coast of South America,” the shaman revealed. “And these two moles are the coordinates.”

He drew a line with his index finger from the top mole to the bottom one.

“This path leads to the island. The top mole represents where we are right now—Chiapas. If you draw a line on a map from this point, the lower mole aligns with Isla Alejandro Selkirk, in the Juan Fernández archipelago of Chile.”

Izy leaned toward Maria’s skin, studying the mark. He looked at the shaman, astonished by the precision of it. “Four hundred miles out in the Pacific Ocean?” Izy breathed.

“The place where you can see the planetary alignment with the Milky Way center,” the shaman nodded. “But more importantly, it is the only place where you can free Izta and recover the lost medical secrets of the Maya.”

He looked at Maria, extending his hand. She lowered her head, knowing what this meant.

The old man looked across the room at Jeevan and Al. “I must talk to Iztali and Maria alone now. A cab is waiting for you outside.”

Jeevan looked at Al. They both shrugged, rose from the floor, and shook the shaman and Maria’s hands.

“Honestly,” Jeevan sighed, “I can use more sleep.”

The shaman walked to a wall lined with jars. He pulled out a tea bag, handed it to Jeevan, and offered a toothless grin. “Make a tea for you both with this,” the shaman instructed. “You will feel well again.”

They thanked him and exited the cabana. Left in the room, Izy looked back at the old man.

“I need you to do something for me, Iztali,” the shaman said, his tone shifting. “For all of us.”

Izy looked at him, concerned. “What? What do you need? Tell me what I can do.”

The shaman smiled. He pulled Maria close, took their hands, and joined them together.

“Take Maria for a walk on the beach.”

CHAPTER TEN

On The Beach

The sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in layers of orange and purple. Izy and Maria walked along the wet sand of the Pacific coast in Tapachula, the cool surf lapping at their ankles.

Izy kept stealing glances at her, a smile breaking across his face. “I can’t believe—”

“That I actually grew up?” Maria interrupted, smiling.

“Well, yeah,” Izy admitted, looking at his feet. “All I remember from my last visit was—”

“How I followed you like a puppy when you were here last?” Maria asked, her voice light. “I had such a crush on you back then. And you were—”

“Older,” Izy supplied with a laugh. “You were pretty back then, Maria, but you were far too young to look at.”

Maria smiled, the surf crashing against their ankles. “You must have noticed something back then,” she teased.

Izy looked at the wet sand, warmth in his expression. Maria reached out, her fingers slipping into his hand.

“Time has changed things,” she said softly.

Izy met her gaze. “It has.”

They walked along the water in silence, glancing at each other as the twilight deepened across the horizon.

“So,” Maria said, breaking the quiet. “You’ll actually go to the island.”

“I have to,” Izy nodded, his expression turning serious. “The way every piece of this puzzle has fallen into place... it feels significant.”

Maria stopped. She turned to face him, sadness in her eyes as she touched his arm. “Be careful, Izy. Please come back.”

He nodded, studying her face. “What about you, Maria? What do you want?”

She looked toward the dark ocean, taking a deep breath to hold her composure. Izy reached out and turned her face toward his.

“I wanted to be a doctor,” Maria whispered. “I was in school... I wanted so many things. I wanted to experience life before I—”

She leaned in and kissed him. The world seemed to stop before Maria pulled back, looking at the sand.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I didn’t mean to be so bold.”

Izy lifted her chin, offering a smile. “It’s alright, Maria.” He held her shoulders. “Tell me. Tell me what you wanted... before what?”

Maria’s eyes welled with tears. Izy held her close as she met his eyes, heartbreak clear. “I’m ill, Izy. I don’t have much time left.”

The color drained from Izy’s face. “What?”

“A few months,” Maria sobbed. “And just like you, things were finally starting to make sense. And now you’re here again.”

Izy looked at the vast ocean, holding Maria close as they swayed in the sea breeze. “I don’t even know what to say, Maria,” he murmured.

She looked into his eyes. “I love you, Izy. I’ve felt this way for a long time.”

Izy looked at her, the weight of his mission taking on a new urgency. “I love you too, Maria.”

They kissed as the tide rolled across their feet.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MÁS AFUERA ISLAND—JAN FERNÁNDEZ, CHILE

Three Days Later

The waves of the Pacific rolled across Izy's boots. The men stood in the surf, gripping the straps of their backpacks. High above, the cliffs of Las Casas towered into the gray sky, their pinnacles hidden within a ceiling of clouds.

Suddenly, a herd of horses thundered along the surf's edge, their manes trailing in the wind. The men watched the spectacle pass.

"Horses?" Jeevan yelled over the roar of the ocean. "Four hundred miles out in the Pacific?"

"Yeah," Izy called back. "Paso Finos. They're descendants of survivors of the shipwreck mentioned in the records."

Turning from the water, they set up camp. Near the edge of the thick underbrush, the horses gathered to drink from a hidden stream. Izy wiped his brow, pointing toward the animals. "At least we found fresh water."

They watched the herd before looking at the vertical cliff wall. After pitching their tents, they sat to rest.

"We need to find that figure of Chac," Izy said, checking his notes. "The shaman said it's on a knoll past a stream... which the horses just showed us."

Jeevan stood, hoisting his pack. "Let's go. At least we know to go past the stream—it's a start."

The three men walked down the rocky beach. Arriving at the bank of the running stream, they stopped, wrinkling their noses.

"Man," Al muttered, waving a hand in front of his face. "This water smells like a fart. And the horses were drinking this?"

Jeevan knelt in the dark sand, fanning the humid air above the surface. He dipped a finger into the current, tasted it, and smiled. He scooped up a handful to drink.

“The water’s fine in small amounts,” Jeevan explained. “The smell is just sulphur, and it probably has methane gas trapped in the water—after all, this entire place is a volcano.”

They drank from the cold stream, then continued their trek into the interior.

Past the beach, the vegetation grew thick, clinging to the steep mountain side. The men stopped, looking at the wall-like terrain. Al shook his head.

“And we’re looking for—oh yeah, a needle in this haystack,” Al groaned. “Man, how are we supposed to find a statue in all of this?”

“Look for a knoll,” Izy instructed, adjusting his frames. “The trees atop a knoll should rise slightly above the others.”

Jeevan squinted, scanning the canopy. “Like those over there?” He pointed toward a distinct cluster of higher trees.

They grinned, drew their blades, and began to hack through the vegetation.



They reached the summit of the knoll. A vine-encased object sat atop the high ground. They stepped forward and began to tear the vines away, exposing a weathered basalt figure.

It was the silhouette of a man with a raised arm. They shared a high-five.

They followed the direction the figure was pointing, looking through the underbrush toward a huge tree.

“Maybe the gold is hidden inside the tree trunk?” Al suggested, stepping forward. He began cutting the vines, heading toward the roots.

Izy studied the trunk for a second, then held up a hand. “Don’t bother. That tree is a hundred years old at most.” He pointed back to the stone figure. “The tree wasn’t here when Chac was. He’s pointing past it, to the cliff face.”

Izy led them through the undergrowth, aligning their path with the statue’s trajectory toward the edge of the cliff. They stopped at the base, gazing at the rock face.

“If there’s a cave up there,” Jeevan asked, shielding his eyes, “how are we supposed to see it—let alone get to it?”

Izy took a compass reading, tracking the coordinates before turning toward the beach line. "Let's go. We'll be able to see the elevation better from the beach. Diagonally, it seems to be located right above our base camp."

The men walked to the beach. The horses followed from a distance, their hooves clicking against the stones.

Reaching the mouth of the stream, they plunged their heads into the water to cool off from the hike.

"Man, once you get past the fart smell, it's not too bad," Al panted, shaking water from his hair. "It's cold water. It must be coming off the mountain higher up."

They looked upstream, watching where the current disappeared into a mess of underbrush and fallen rocks. Exhausted, they returned to camp.

They scoped the cliff face with binoculars. As the clouds cleared from the pinnacle, Jeevan spotted a break in the stone.

"Now that's odd," Jeevan muttered. He pointed to the rock face. "Look at that drape of green vines."

The others peered through their binoculars, tracking his line of sight.

"See the blackness between the vines?" Jeevan pressed. "The rest of the cliff is a much lighter color behind the leaves. Do you see it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I see what you—well, I did," Izy sighed. "It's gone now."

A shelf of clouds rolled over the pinnacle, obscuring the viewpoint and plunging the mountain into shadow. They sat on the sand, staring at the rock face.

Al pulled snacks and his metal flask from his pack, offering the supplies. Jeevan accepted a snack bar but shook his hands at the container. "No way. I'm never drinking from your thermos again."

They laughed, the memory of the pyramid vision lingering between them.

The horses eased close to their position, sensing no danger. A black stallion stepped forward, nudging Izy with his nose. Izy smiled, running his hands through the animal's tangled mane.

"I wish you were Pegasus," Izy whispered. "I'd fly us right up there." He looked at the cliff, patting the horse's neck. "Because I

honestly don't know how we'll ever reach that cave. How did Chac get up there?"

They looked at the mountain, shaking their heads in silence. The men built a campfire using driftwood, their eyes drifting toward the darkening cliff face.

"No way, man," Al said, tossing a branch into the kindling. "After all the weird things that brought us here... we can't get stopped right at the finish line." He pointed toward the distant pinnacle.

Jeevan stoked the flames with a stick. "Maybe if we rappelled from a helicopter."

Izy and Al looked at him, their expressions clear that they thought he had lost his mind.

With no helicopter in sight, they fell into silence as the sun sank beneath the horizon, plunging the island into night.



The three men sat beside the dwindling campfire. Al drank whiskey from his flask, while Izy remained deep in thought, his mind anchored to Tapachula.

Jeevan stood, scanning their perimeter for fuel. "I thought we had more wood. Are we seriously out of wood?"

"I saw some past the stream earlier," Al said, his voice thick from alcohol. "I'll go get it—nothing like a midnight stroll on the beach."

Izy stared into the embers. "Yeah."

Al staggered up, pulling a piece of wood from the fire to use as a torch. The makeshift light glowed orange, casting erratic shadows across the sand as he wobbled away down the shoreline.

Once they were alone, Jeevan sat and patted Izy's back. "It sucks, man. I know you're thinking about Maria. But what can you do?"

Izy looked at the dark cliff face, shaking his head. "I have to get to that cave, Jeevan. The way the shaman talked about what we'd find here... the way he motioned to Maria... it was like he knew something here could—" Izy cut his words short. He dropped his gaze, using a stick to draw abstract shapes in the sand. "Never mind."

He tossed the stick into the darkness and laid back against the sand, tucking his hands behind his head.



Down the shoreline, Al stumbled to the edge of the stream. He leaped across the current, bending to gather driftwood. With his arms full, he gripped the glowing torch and turned toward camp.

Attempting to re-cross the stream, his boot caught on a rock. He tripped. The wood tumbled from his arms, and the torch flew from his hand, both rolling toward the water. He lunged on his knees to recover the light, but the torch rolled into the current.

FROOSH.

A flash of blue fire ignited, floating on the surface of the moving water. Al leaned forward, staring at the neon glow. “What the—”

The blue flame expanded, igniting the escaping pockets of methane gas. A wall of bright blue fire raced up the cliffside, tracing the path of the stream’s hidden mountain gully overhead.

Al bolted, running toward the camp. “Holy Moly! Watch out, guys—I don’t know what’s happening!”

He reached the camp out of breath. He didn't need to warn them; Izy and Jeevan were already standing, staring at the cliff face in amazement.

The fire consuming the hidden stream path drew a straight, luminous blue line up the mountain, illuminating the cavern opening in bright firelight. They stared in disbelief.

Tracking the burning neon line to the cave, the absurdity of the moment broke the tension, and they erupted into laughter. Al punched the others' arms, a grin on his face. “Hey guys—I found a path to the cave!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Next Morning

The three men navigated the rocky bank of the stream, hacking through the underbrush. At the base of the cliff wall, the current turned sharply behind a large rock structure. Following the line of the water, they dropped to a halt.

Shock and relief washed over them.

“Can you believe this?” Izy breathed.

Jeevan stepped forward, touching the stone. “It’s like a paved pathway.”

The stream was running low, and the primeval, water-worn gully created a natural, tiered walkway alongside the current. Pockets of the blue chemical flame continued to dance across the surface of the water, guiding their way.

Al looked up the escalating incline. “Like a steep highway, bro.”

They gripped their packs and began their ascent.



Hours passed as they climbed higher into the clouds. Pausing for a break, they sat on an outer rock ledge to catch their breath and look at the panoramic view. The vast Pacific glittered until the blue water faded into a seamless blur along the distant horizon.

Far below, a small boat bobbed offshore, unmoving.

They drank from their canteens, adjusted their gear, and resumed the steep climb.

“I can’t imagine how Chac got those chests all the way up to this cave,” Izy panted, leaning against a smooth boulder. “We’re not even halfway up yet.”

Jeevan paused, breathless, his chest heaving under the weight of his gear. “They were... in better shape back then.”

Izy shook his head. “Still... no way.”

The sharp sound of an echo hit the rock pathway, vibrating through the narrow gully. The men stopped. The noise vanished,

leaving only the sound of the stream. They shrugged, assuming it was just shifting stone, and continued their march.

Al glanced over his shoulder. "Tell me you both heard that."

"Don't we all seem to see and hear the same things lately?" Jeevan muttered, wiping sweat from his brow.

They stopped a second time. A rhythmic clip-clop echoed from around the upcoming bend, getting closer. The men's eyes widened. The impossibility of the sound broke the tension, and they broke into laughter.

Al pointed a shaking finger forward.

"I'm not believing this," Al breathed.

The black stallion emerged from around the bend. He stopped, shaking his head, throwing his long mane against the stone.

Izy stared at the animal, realization washing over him. "Now I know how Chac got those chests up here."

Izy tied their backpacks together, easing the load across the horse's back. The stallion stood still, offering no resistance. Smiling, Izy reached into his pack and gave the animal an apple.

Together, the team continued their climb, disappearing into a thick cloud bank.



They emerged from the cloud bank. A cave entrance expanded before them, carved into the pinnacle of Las Casas cliff. A pulsating blue firelight glowed from inside the darkness.

They stepped across the threshold. The men stood awed by the towering cavern. Every stone surface caught the shifting firelight, glowing in hues of sapphire and orange. Intricate, colorful drawings executed by King Chac centuries ago covered the smooth walls like a sprawling historical tapestry.

Jagged stalagmites and stalactites littered the room. The stream flowed from behind a series of large boulders, splitting into separate, crystal-clear channels that weaved through the floor. Flammable, methane-rich water pooled inside hand-carved stone bowls along the walls, spilling over to rejoin the current.

Izy lifted the packs off the horse. Free of the weight, the stallion walked to a glistening stalagmite. The animal smelled the damp ground, let out a sad, echoing whinny, and began pawing at the stone.

The men walked to investigate what had drawn the horse's attention. Brushing away layers of dust, they discovered the skeletal remains of a horse buried in the floor. Its extended front leg bone was encased beneath the accumulation of the stalagmite.

The stallion continued to paw at the base of the formation.

"That's strange," Izy murmured, kneeling to examine the bone structure. "That stalagmite couldn't have grown around the bones that fast, unless it's—"

Izy cut his thought short. A fluttering sound echoed from the shadows above. The men looked toward the ceiling. The darkness seemed to drop as thousands of bats rained down from the shadows above, flying past the men to exit the cavern mouth. They waved their arms, ducking to shield themselves from the cloud. Thousands of bats poured out of the cave entrance, darkening the afternoon sky like a localized storm.



High-powered binoculars tracked the cloud of bats pouring from the cliff cavern opening. The binoculars lowered to reveal the face of Jaguar Man, a wry smile spreading across his features. He turned to the man standing beside him.

"I told you they're onto something," Jaguar Man said.

Dr. Seronjo adjusted the lapels of his jacket, staring at the peak. "Should we go in after them?"

"No," Jaguar Man replied, leaning against the yacht's railing. "Let them do the heavy lifting. Then we'll make a trade."

He turned, his smile fading into a cold sneer.

Behind him, Burly Man One and Burly Man Two stood rigidly, holding Maria and the shaman captive against the ship's bulkhead. Maria glared at Jaguar Man, her green eyes flashing with hatred. He reached out, running a manicured hand across her cheek. "I can see why your new boyfriend fell in love so fast."

He let out a cold, echoing laugh. In response, the shaman closed his eyes and mumbled a sharp phrase in the Mayan tongue. Maria looked startled, her shoulders tensing.

Jaguar Man's smirk vanished, replaced by a dark frown. He shifted his gaze toward the island cliffs. "We wait."

He looked toward the captain's bridge, spinning his index finger in a circle as he shouted to the helm. "Move the vessel behind the rock formation. We'll wait there out of sight."



Jeevan waved his arms against the remaining stray bats, stepping blindly and tripping over the guano-covered stalagmite. He crashed to the floor, his pickaxe striking the stone. *CLANG*. The impact sent a chunk of rock sliding across the smooth floor.

The others ignored the noise, scanning the expanse of the cave. Izy walked toward the back, peeking into a narrow crack between the huge boulders where the stream flowed.

Surprised, he motioned to the others. "Check this out."

Jeevan and Al crossed the floor to peer through the stone seam.

A hidden subterranean lake expanded inside the cavern. Across the black water, a low blue firelight danced across the surface.

"Now if I was hiding something," Al said, staring into the gloom, "I'd put it right in there."

Jeevan turned to Al, his brow furrowing. "And you would manage to get it in there how exactly?"

Al frowned. "Bro, after all we've seen on this trip, and you still doubt a little something like that?"

Izy and Al nodded in silent unison.

Behind them, the stallion ignored the lake. He continued to paw at the guano accumulation beside the horse skeleton. The three men looked at the animal, rolled their eyes at the distraction, and turned back toward the glowing waters.

Jeevan hesitated. He walked to the hardened mound, studying the horse, then looked at the high ceiling where the bats nested. The stallion kicked off another chunk of the calcified pile. Jeevan focused on the others, the wheels in his mind turning fast.

"The lake is where you would hide gold," Jeevan said, stepping closer to the horse. "But how would you preserve a box of fragile papyrus?"

They turned to look at him. Jeevan raised his eyebrows, pointing his finger at the guano mound. The pieces fell into place.

Izy and Al smiled, nodding. Izy grabbed the stallion's mane, pulling the animal away from the site.

Jeevan stepped up and chipped at the hardened mound with his pickaxe. With every strike, chunks of the casing shattered and slid across the floor. He delivered one final blow. The metal tip landed with a dull, hollow thud. An immemorial, dark wooden chest was exposed.

Together, they hauled the artifact from the crumbling mound, using their tools to break the brittle metal latch. Jeevan pried the lid open. Izy reached inside the dark interior to lift out a fragile bark papyrus, unrolling two distinct codex pages. The center portion of each sheet was missing, torn away centuries ago.

Moving with precision, Izy extracted the matching manuscript pieces Aunt Cocco had given him in New Orleans, placing them between the centuries-old sheets.

It was a seamless fit.

SKREEECH.

A piercing wind shrieked through the cavern arches. The stallion reared onto his hind legs, pawing at the air. The dancing blue flames across the subterranean lake flickered, popped in unison, and went out.

The last rays of the sun sank beneath the horizon, visible through the cave opening. Al looked into the darkness, sighing as he adjusted his pack. “Looks like we’re camping right here tonight.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Next Day

The morning sun caught the peak of the mountain as the three men traveled down the steep stone pathway. The stallion navigated the narrow gully ahead of them, carrying the wooden chest across his back. Together, they emerged from the cloud bank, the beach stretching below.



Burly Man One lowered his binoculars, looking from the upper deck to the rear lounge. Jaguar Man and Dr. Seronjo sat at a glass table, having lunch. The guard called to them, his voice cutting through the engine hum.

“Boss, they’re coming down,” the guard yelled. “They’ve got a chest.”

Jaguar Man smiled, adjusting his gold rings. “I told you, Jonathan. Let them do the heavy lifting.” He took another bite of his food, chewing as he shook his fork at Seronjo.

“Finish your lunch, there’s no hurry,” Jaguar Man chuckled. “We’ll meet them on the beach later.”



The three men emerged from the underbrush, stepping onto the sand toward their campsite.

Burly Man One stepped from the foliage ahead, blocking their path. The team dropped to a halt. The guard continued his advance toward them.

“Good to see you, Al,” the guard said, a smirk on his face.

The men tightened their stances, ready for a fight. Al shifted his hand, reaching toward his belt for the handle of his pickaxe.

“Don’t bother,” a cold voice echoed from behind.

They spun. Jaguar Man and Dr. Seronjo walked from the opposing tree line, advancing across the white sand. Izy and Jeevan stood shocked.

“Well, Professor,” Dr. Seronjo said, offering a patronizing smile as he looked at Izy. “You were right about the gold after all. Too bad I won’t be remembered as the one who found it... because nobody will ever know you were here.”

Izy fixed Dr. Seronjo with a hard glare, unmoved by the threat. “There isn’t any gold, Seronjo,” Izy said levelly. “Only torn papers and a bat cave.” He patted the side of the chest strapped to the horse.

Dr. Seronjo looked at Jaguar Man, confused. Annoyed, Jaguar Man stepped forward, yanking open the lid.

It was empty. They turned their glares onto the three men, their facades hardening into malice.

“Don’t play games with me, Smith,” Jaguar Man snarled, stepping into Izy’s space. “I know what you’ve found.”

“Then you know there’s only torn papers and a bat cave,” Al said, shrugging without fear.

Jeevan looked at Izy, playing along with a deadpan expression. “I don’t remember anything else being in there, do you?”

“No,” Izy said levelly.

Jaguar Man nodded, a cold smile breaking across his features. “Perhaps I can jog your memory. The construction man told me he gave you papers. And you? You gave me a cheap tourist trinket and claimed you were heading to Guatemala. Yet, here we are. I followed you to this beach.”

Al let out a sarcastic snicker. “Obviously.”

The others shared a laugh at the failed deception.

“That’s amusing, yes?” Jaguar Man asked, his tone dropping to a whisper. “Then let me display something truly amusing.”

Jaguar Man nodded to Burly Man One. The guard whistled, the sound echoing off the cliff face. The foliage rustled.

Maria and the shaman stumbled from the underbrush near the campsite. Walking behind them was Burly Man Two, brandishing an automatic weapon.

Izy and Maria locked eyes across the sand.

“Now that’s highly amusing, don’t you think, Professor?” Jaguar Man smirked, gesturing with his gun. “You have what I want, and I have what you want.” He motioned toward the center of the camp, forcing the prisoners forward.

The moment she was close enough, Maria broke into a run toward Izy. Burly Man One stepped in to intercept. He shoved Izy back, grabbing Maria by her arm.

Izy snapped. Years of repressed restraint vanished as he threw a punch that connected with the guard's jaw. *CRACK*.

The burly man stumbled back, eyes flashing with rage as he lined up to attack. Before he could strike, Dr. Seronjo shook his head, gesturing for the guard to stand down.

"There is no need to conduct ourselves in this primitive manner, Professor," Dr. Seronjo said, adjusting his sleeves. "We are educated men. Let us reason together." He gestured with a flat hand for Izy and Maria to move back. "By the way, Jeevan was right. Getting those designer glasses really helped your aesthetic. It's good to see you in love."

Izy and Jeevan exchanged a puzzled look. Dr. Seronjo shrugged.

"I bugged your office weeks ago," Seronjo said. He gestured toward the armed guards, shifting his weapon. "You won't win a power struggle here, Smith. Share what you've uncovered."

"We already told you," Izy spat, standing in front of Maria. "Torn papers and a bat cave."

Jaguar Man rolled his eyes, letting out an impatient exhale. "You like hard facts, Professor? Let me share some with you. I want the gold. And I will hurt people—badly—to get it."

Izy glanced toward Jeevan and Al. They returned a subtle nod. There was no other choice.

Reaching into his jacket, Izy withdrew the codex pages they had recovered from the mound. He stepped forward and handed them over. Jaguar Man seized the parchment sheets, studying the interlocking glyphs with a widening smile.

"You are a man of truth, Professor," Jaguar Man purred. "Merely torn pages... containing the spell structure required to recall Queen Izta. She will reveal the path to the lost gold."

"Or die forever," Dr. Seronjo added coldly.

"There are still sections missing," Izy countered, trying to buy time. "The text is incomplete."

Jaguar Man flashed a grin. "Cocco indicated you possess them."

Anger flaring, Izy lunged toward the businessman, but Burly Man One stepped in, slamming a forearm against Izy's chest.

"You better not have touched her—" Izy roared.

"Cocco is secure... secure," Jaguar Man interrupted, his voice dripping with malice. "Fine... really fine."

He threw his arm across Maria's shoulders. She flinched from his touch, her green eyes wide.

Jaguar Man ignored her, looking at Izy while tapping his fingers against the codex sheets. "Make this simple, Professor."

Defeated, Izy handed the document tube to Jaguar Man.

The businessman popped the cap, extracted the codex fragments Aunt Cocco had preserved, and aligned the pieces on a flat rock. He looked at Izy. "It appears we will encounter our associate Izta once more. And you, Professor, may have the honor of releasing her from the spell."

Jaguar Man smiled at Dr. Seronjo, who nodded.

Nearby, the shaman cast a measuring look across the group, his clouded eyes unreadable.

Breaking the silence, Al raised his hand like an anxious to answer schoolboy.

"Quick question on that spellcasting protocol," Al called out. "We're not going to require any—"

He wiggled his fingertips, flashing a mock-evil smile before adopting a craggy voice. "'Eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat, or tongue of dog' are we?"

He scanned their perimeter with an exaggerated frown. "Because I don't spot a marketplace close by, and I definitely ain't got none of that inside my bags—"

"Check your flask," Jeevan muttered.

Al and Jeevan shared a laugh, exchanging a fist bump. Al looked around the silent circle of armed men, shaking his head. "Okay, zero Shakespeare enthusiasts in the group. Then—"

He adopted the witch voice a second time, mimicking the motion of stirring a cauldron in the sand. "I'll just make a fire and we can all chant, 'Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble.'"

Jaguar Man shook his head in disgust.

He swung the butt of his automatic weapon into the back of Al's head.

THUD.

The blow knocked Al unconscious, his body crashing limp onto the sand.

Jaguar Man looked down at the driver, adjusting his grip on the gun. "I knew there was an off button."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Next Morning

The first pale light bled across the Pacific horizon, casting sharp shadows over the mountain. Izy stood rigid beside King Chac's basalt statue, his hands steady as he lifted the heavy jade medallion, aligning the artifact with the horizon.

Beside him stood Al, a bruise dark on the back of his head, anchoring the complete codex layout.

A few feet away, Jaguar Man kept his weapon trained on Izy's chest, his gaze unblinking. "Align it directly east."

Izy consulted the compass, waiting for the needle to settle on true coordinates.

Jaguar Man checked his digital watch, his breathing tight. "Three minutes until sunrise," he barked, tightening his grip on the grip.

Silence stretched over the clearing. The shaman fell into a rhythm, chanting under his breath as the shadows lengthened. Izy initiated the final translation, reading the complex spell aloud from the parchment.

"Hear me, Kinich Ahau," Izy chanted, his voice carrying a sacrosanct weight in the Mayan tongue. "As you took the sun into the dark space and the first father has been reborn..."

Izy hesitated, the raw energy of the words vibrating in his throat. Every gaze locked onto him. He pushed through the remaining text.

"Release Chac from the darkness to free his queen, Izta."

The sun broke the horizon, casting a blinding glare across the water.

"That they be reborn in the new age," Izy shouted.

The morning sun blurred through the quivering air. The very geometry of the horizon warped and bent before them.

"Let the sylphs open the path for the spirits."

The wind blew with sudden fury, and a wall of clouds arched around the sun.

"Return the spirits to their bodies!"

The wind howled into a deafening roar, splitting the air. Nearby trees toppled, their roots snapping. Izy shouted over the roar of the tempest.

“Return them reborn to this new age! Return them to their thrones now!”

Clouds like sharp swords arched around the sun. Thousands of translucent sylphs swarmed from the horizon toward the island. The winds rose to a hurricane force.

The shaman threw his arms toward the sun, welcoming the storm.

The two guards broke into a run, but falling trees crushed them. Maria slammed into Izy’s arms, gripping his shirt.

The sun flattened to a single, black line.



The Milky Way arched across the expanse of space. The cosmic center quivering and blurring.

Blackness grew from the core, blotting out the stellar cluster. A blast of fire shot from the dark, rushing toward Earth.

The flame shifted into the translucent figure of King Chac, towering and burning as it struck the upper atmosphere.



The black line collapsed, and the sun returned as a blinding orb. The sword-shaped clouds raised their tips, and the swarming sylphs aligned into a corridor.

Chac’s translucent figure descended toward the island and stopped. From the opposing horizon, Queen Izta’s spirit appeared. He reached out to her. Hand-in-hand, the two figures moved through the arched clouds, descending toward the mountain.

The howling winds settled to a gale. The spirits swept toward the basalt statue. As they neared, the primeval stone cracked, pieces shattering on the earth.

The entities closed in on the group. Dr. Seronjo collapsed onto the dirt. Jaguar Man dropped his weapon to the sand, staring in paralyzed disbelief. Jeevan stood frozen, his jaw slack. Beside him, Al grinned.

Izy held Maria tight against his chest. The shaman fell to his knees.

The translucent figures swept through the circle and straight through Izy, a wave of electric heat washing over him.

The basalt statue crumbled into a pile of gray dust. In its place stood King Chac and Queen Izta, the vapor hardening into living flesh. Queen Izta appeared in her thirties—tall, lissom, with flowing black hair.

The gale settled to a gentle breeze, and the dark clouds vanished from the sky.

Izta and Chac extended their hands. Izy took them, the physical touch solid and warm. Izta studied Izy's face.

"The son of my son's many sons," she whispered, her voice melodic. "Our blood."

Izy stared at her. "You're real. You're flesh and—"

"Your blood," she repeated softly.

They embraced. Beside them, King Chac stood, his gaze sweeping over the landscape. He lifted the jade necklace resting against Izy's chest, holding the stone between his fingers, and smiled. "I thought I lost this."

Izy unclasped the heavy necklace and handed it to Chac.

Everyone stood in breathless amazement until the quiet shattered.

Clap, clap.

Al clapped his hands together, executed a quick, ridiculous dance wiggle, and pointed a finger directly at Izy. He began to sing Johnny Rivers at the top of his lungs, dancing across the sand:

"In the whole wide world there is only one. And you're the one. You're the one. You're the one they call the seventh son!"

Al finished his performance with a dramatic spin, a final loud clap, a wide smile, and an outstretched hand. Jeevan let out a sudden laugh, breaking his paralysis. Chac and Izta merely stared at Al, puzzled by the modern display.

Chac walked past Al, looking at him suspiciously, and approached the shaman. He reached down and drew the old man up into a powerful, deep hug.

"It's good to see you again, old friend," King Chac said.

The others watched in silence as history blurred before them. Maria's jaw tightened with doubt. Jaguar Man simply stared, paralyzed.

"You're really here," Jaguar Man whispered, his voice trembling. "Alive."

Queen Izta turned her gaze directly to Jaguar Man, then down to the unconscious Dr. Seronjo.

“Yes,” Chac said, his deep voice slicing through the tension. “And I know exactly what you seek.”

Chac stepped forward, confronting the two men. “Only I know where the lost gold is hidden,” he continued, his eyes flashing. “Give your word that no one else in our party will be harmed, and I will bring you directly to it tomorrow.”

He extended his arm.

Jaguar Man hesitated, then reached out. The two clasped forearms, staring unblinking into each other's eyes.

“We want to leave this island before sunset tomorrow,” Dr. Seronjo insisted, adjusting his jacket to hide his trembling hands.

Chac gave a single nod.

Nearby, the shaman glared at the Dr. Seronjo, his grin widening.

“Enjoy the beautiful sunset before you, Professor,” the shaman whispered. “For you will not live to see another.”

Dr. Seronjo paled. He snapped his head toward Jaguar Man, terror locked in his eyes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Next Day

The breaking surf crashed against the shoreline. Mist covered the beach, and low clouds obscured the pinnacle of Las Casas cliff.

Clap, clap, clap.

Dr. Seronjo clapped, nudging the others with the toe of his shoe. The camp stirred, travelers groaning on the cold sand. Twenty feet away, Chac and Izta sat with their backs turned, staring at the gray ocean.

Jaguar Man stood, shaking sand from his clothes. “Well, Chac,” he yelled. “Time to make me a rich man.”

Chac slowly turned.

Everyone in the camp gasped.

Over a single night, Chac and Izta had aged a decade. Silver streaked their hair, and deep lines of exhaustion carved their faces. They stood, leaning on each other as they walked toward the group.

Everyone stared in silence.

“It is the cost of the spell,” Chac explained, his voice rougher. “We could be resurrected, yes. But for us, each passing day is a decade of mortal life.”

Chac held Izta’s hand, fingers interlocked. They turned toward the ocean. Before leaving the camp perimeter, Chac paused.

“We would like some time alone,” he said softly.

They continued down the shoreline. Out of the underbrush, a herd of Paso Fino horses emerged, silently trailing a few paces behind like a royal guard.

Jaguar Man glared at their retreating backs. “What about the gold?” he snapped.

Panic and greed overriding his caution, Jaguar Man broke into a run down the wet sand. Seeing him approach, Chac motioned for Izta to return to the camp.

Jaguar Man stepped directly into the old king’s path, cutting him off.

"I don't have time for your games, old man," he snarled. "Bring me to the gold. Right now."

Chac looked at him with profound pity.

"Your impatience far surpasses your greed."

Chac turned toward the tents.

"If I wait any longer, the secrets will be gone forever," Jaguar Man roared.

Jaguar Man grabbed Chac by the shoulder, spinning him and punching him across the face.

Chac stumbled, but the warrior blood within him surged. They fought on the sand. Despite his sudden age, Chac threw a counter-punch that sent Jaguar Man crashing to the sand.

Jaguar Man growled, wiping blood from his lip as he stood. He reached inside his jacket and pulled his weapon.

Nearby, horses neighed, the sound echoing off the dunes.

"Enough of this," Jaguar Man hissed, his hands trembling. "Bring me to the gold!"

He aimed the weapon at Chac's chest.

Thump-thump, thump-thump.

Hoofbeats and snorting suddenly filled the air. Horses exploded from the mist.

Jaguar Man was trampled beneath the charging hooves. The rest of the camp watched in shock.

As the herd thundered into the brush, leaving a limp form on the sand, the shaman turned. He offered a smile directly to Dr. Seronjo.

Dr. Seronjo lunged. He grabbed Izy, wrapping an arm around his throat and pressing his weapon against Izy's temple.

"Enough of this voodoo hoodoo!" Seronjo screamed, his eyes wild. "Bring me to the gold right now, or the family tree dies right here on this beach!"

Dr. Seronjo waved his weapon through the air, his breathing shallow as he motioned the group through the dense brush toward the cavern entrance.



One by one, they entered the dark threshold. The cave swallowed them in darkness.

Dr. Seronjo clicked his flashlight, but the bulb remained dead. Cursing, he struck the plastic casing against his palm, then threw the tool against the stone wall, where it shattered.

Chac turned to Al and Jeevan, nodding for them to ignite their driftwood torches. The torches crackled to life, casting long shadows across the Maya drawings on the walls.

“Get straight to it,” Seronjo commanded, his voice echoing off the high ceiling as he kept his gun trained on the group. “Make it quick, and everyone lives happily ever after.”

Chac walked to the back of the cavern, tapping a heavy hand against the boulders that blocked the rear channel. He looked back at Dr. Seronjo.

“You will need to manually move these,” Chac said. “The gold is located at the bottom of the lake.”

Dr. Seronjo stepped forward, peeking through the narrow crack between the rocks, staring into the subterranean darkness where the blue flames flickered across the water. He turned to face the king.

“I am going to assume you put the gold in there, and that you know exactly how to get it out,” Seronjo hissed, his upper lip trembling. “So quit wasting my time, let's get the treasure, and I will be out of your lives for good.”

The shaman let out a soft chuckle from the shadows. “Yes, you will, Professor... very, very soon.”

Dr. Seronjo spun around, waving the weapon toward the old man. “Stop the psychological games! Get to the gold. The faster we do this, the more time you young lovers will have together.”

He gestured toward Izy and Maria.

Chac gave a slow nod. Without another word, the king knelt by the water channel, gathering handfuls of damp moss and thick river mud. He moved methodically, packing the wet sludge around the narrow cracks and seams of the boulders.

Dr. Seronjo stood a few feet away, watching the preparation with a confused expression.

“The boulders need to be blown backward,” Chac explained, his voice rough and heavy with sudden age. “We will seal the chamber and let the gas build underneath. Then, I'll light the stream.”

Chac stood still, waiting for the subterranean pressure to rise.

Dr. Seronjo grew impatient, his eyes darting around the dark cavern walls. "What now?" he demanded, waving his gun. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Letting the methane gas build up inside the cavern," Chac replied. "Then, I will ignite the water."

Dr. Seronjo looked baffled, his academic mind failing to grasp the primitive engineering. Nearby, the shaman offered him a wide smile, the flickering torchlight dancing inside his cloudy eyes. Unnerved, Seronjo looked away.

"What is to stop the blast from blocking the cave?" Seronjo asked, his voice shaking. "Or crushing us alive?"

"It will only roll the rocks away," Chac said.

"Then do it," Seronjo hissed. "Do it now."

The party retreated, diving behind the protective structure of a natural rock wall. Moving on instinct, Chac tossed his burning torch into the running stream.

The water ignited.

BOOM.

The blue fire raced into the sealed chamber, triggering a sharp blue flash and a deafening explosion. A shockwave rumbled through the mountain, sending a final swarm of bats pouring out of the deep darkness.

The packed mud held the pressure. The boulders dislodged, rolling down the slope before grinding to a halt five feet away from their defensive position.

Before the dust could clear, Dr. Seronjo ran out from behind the protective stone wall, his greed driving him forward. He skidded to a halt, facing a billowing lake of neon blue fire.

The lake of fire rushed outward.

The others watched from the safety of the rock recess as Dr. Seronjo was swept away by the burning current. He let out an agonizing scream as the flames took him, dragging him into the subterranean abyss.

Within seconds, the trapped water emptied into the lower mountain fissures. The fiery stream dropped to a quiet trickle.

Izy, Maria, Jeevan, Al, and the royals emerged from behind the protective stone wall, stepping into the empty lake bed. The cavern floor glittered with thousands of gold coins.

A low growl echoed.

From a recess of the cavern, three black jaguars emerged into the firelight. Snarling but showing no aggression, the cats walked across the sea of gold toward Izy, Izta, and Chac.

The predators sat at their feet, purring.

The royals knelt to pet the black pelts. A moment later, the jaguars turned, disappearing back into the dark depths of the cave.

They stood in the pool of shimmering gold, rejoicing at their survival, while Chac and Izta shared a quiet smile.

The Paso Fino horses walked into the cave chamber, their hooves clicking against the gold coins.

Smiling through their exhaustion, Izy and Maria reached out to pet the black stallion and the palomino mare.



The group descended the steep trail of the Las Casas cliff. The horses carried the packed wooden chests down the mountainside, the weight of the treasure balanced across their backs.

Reaching the beach, the men began unloading the gear packs from the horses. A stream of gold coins spilled out of a loose canvas pack, tumbling onto the dark sand.

Al dropped to his knees, running his hands through the gold cache.

“Too bad Seronjo and Jaguar won’t be able to enjoy any of this,” Jeevan muttered, looking back at the mountain.

Al looked up, a handful of gold coins clutched in his fist, smiling. “Yeah... gosh. That is just so tough.”

Nearby, the shaman watched the two men play inside the gold cache, his expression turning solemn. He turned his head to address Chac.

“Your time in this world passes quickly, old friend,” the shaman whispered. “It is time you tell Iztali the truth.”

Izy looked up from where he was unpacking a horse. Intrigued, he walked over to stand before Chac. “Tell me what?”

“About the New City,” Chac said, his silver hair catching the ocean breeze. “And the real treasure of our people.”

He pointed a finger toward the stacked sacks of gold on the sand. “That treasure there? That is just loose change we gave to the Spanish conquistadors to buy them off when they captured me. Chimbelu never knew about the existence of the New City, or the true treasures hidden away there.”

Queen Izta walked over, a smile on her face as she held Chac’s arm. “We built the New City ourselves,” she said. “And we hid the spiritual and intellectual riches of our culture inside its walls. We were going to move our population there, far away from the encroaching world.”

“There is still much to share with you, Iztali,” Chac pressed. “But our time grows short. We must leave this island tomorrow.”



The group sat in a circle around a campfire. The orange flames crackled and danced in the wind, mirroring the rhythmic sound of the breaking Pacific surf.

“We can reach the entrance of the New City in two days,” Chac said, staring into the embers. “Once inside, you will see that the true treasures and sacred secrets of our people have nothing to do with gold or currency.”

Maria shivered, looking cold against the ocean breeze.

Noticing her fatigue, Izta stepped forward and wrapped a blanket around the woman’s shoulders. “And very soon, you will be healthy again, my dear,” Izta promised.

She ran her hand through Maria’s hair, while Chac reached to hold her hand.

“The New City holds the lost medicines of the old-growth forest,” Chac revealed. “Nature has a cure for every ailment. So much of this vital knowledge has been lost to time.”

Chac looked across the faces in the circle, nodding with gravity. “I have many things to teach you, and you have many things to learn. Let us rest now. Tomorrow, our real journey begins.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two Days Later

The group navigated the oppressive terrain of the Campeche region, accompanied by a team of local tribesmen who hacked a path through the tangled forest with machetes. The Paso Fino horses they had recovered from the island carried Maria, Izta, and their gear supplies through the mud.

Over the course of the journey, Izta and Chac had aged further, their movements slowing but their dignity remaining absolute. As they traversed the wilderness, Chac frequently stopped to gather plants along the way, explaining their medicinal properties and biological lineages to Izy and Jeevan.

After hours of marching, they stopped to rest.

Chac looked at Maria. She appeared weak, her face pale and in physical pain from her illness. He handed her a selection of freshly gathered leaves.

“Chew on these leaves, Maria,” Chac instructed. “It will remove the pain from your body.”

Chac drew Izta to his side, holding her. Together, the monarchs looked out at the canopy of the surrounding Mexican forest.

“It is so good to be back in the forest,” Chac murmured, a sadness in his voice. “But so much has changed. The world... it is dying now. And we were so close to moving our people to our true home.”

Izta looked up at him, rubbing his arm in silent comfort.

“It awaits our return, Iztali,” Izta whispered, her voice fragile but steady. “I can feel it in the air.”

Izy matched his pace to hers, helping her navigate a tangle of roots. “Why did you choose to build so deep within this specific region?”

“To save our people from the devastation of Spanish diseases and their destructive ideals,” Chac answered. He shook his head, dropping his gaze to the damp forest floor. “Too little, too late.”

They resumed the march in silence, the humidity pressing on them. The jungle transitioned into rolling terrain, thick and alive with foliage.

Suddenly, Chac and Izta halted. They stared ahead as wide smiles broke across their faces. Turning to one another, they shared an embrace.

“We’re home,” Izta breathed.

Chac pointed a finger forward. The others strained their eyes, scanning the tree line, but they saw nothing out of the ordinary—just unbroken forest sitting atop a series of small, green hills.

Izy pushed his glasses up his nose, confused.

“Is it gone?” Izy asked, his heart sinking. “Did we miss it?”

“It’s right there, in front of you,” Chac smiled.

Al looked around the sun-dappled clearing, then fixed his eyes on the monarch. “King daddy, I’m definitely missing something here.”

Chac let out a soft chuckle, nodding. “That is the beauty of our city, Al. You cannot see it. And what the world cannot see, it cannot harm.”

The others stared at the landscape, bewildered by the riddle. Chac motioned with his arm for them to follow his lead.

“Magicians in your modern world have used mirrored surfaces to create the illusion that something has disappeared,” Chac explained.

The group peered into the trees, trying to catch a reflection. Chac gestured for them to halt. He took three steps forward into the brush and vanished from sight.

His voice echoed from the empty air. “Follow my path, and you will see.”

Izy stepped forward along the trajectory, Maria clutching his arm. The moment they crossed the invisible threshold, the illusion shattered.

Chac was standing twenty feet before them in a paved corridor. He tapped his hand against a smooth wall surface to his side, stepped behind it, and disappeared a second time. A moment later, he reemerged.

The group stood mesmerized.

“Polished stones sheathed in a thin layer of gold,” Chac said, patting the wall. “They mirror the surrounding forest, rendering the perimeter invisible from the outside.”

He walked behind the optical wall. The others followed through the hidden threshold.

It was the portal leading into the heart of the New City.

Together, they emerged into the expanse of the central plaza.



The city glimmered under the midday sun. A limestone temple sat at the far end of the plaza. Its tiered peak rose above the city walls, fading into the sky.

“Descendants of our trusted people have maintained this city for generations, awaiting our return,” Chac said, his eyes misting. “The temple has been sealed for hundreds of years. Come.”

The others, alongside the tribesmen who carried wooden poles, followed Chac toward the temple steps.

The temple base was constructed from interlocking stones that fit together without mortar. Carved statues of gods and beasts were positioned around the perimeter.

Three of the tribesmen crossed to a snarling jaguar statue near the entrance. They inserted their poles into the seams to turn the artifact.

GRIND.

The sound of stone grinding on stone emanated from within the temple structure. The interlocking blocks separated, parting across the front facade.

Izta and Chac held hands, stepping forward. The stone walls opened, exposing the temple’s main interior chamber.

Moving with reverence, the group stepped inside the illuminated space. The main chamber towered above them, the air cool and crisp. Historical drawings and sacred glyphs were carved into the smooth stone walls.

Diffused sunlight streamed from hidden skylights to illuminate the polished temple floor. A series of arched antechambers ran off the chamber.

Chac and Izta looked around the space, smiling, while Izy and Jeevan gazed around in astonishment.

Chac turned to face the group. “Welcome to our home.”

Izy shook his head, tears gathering behind his lenses. "This is beautiful... this is incredible."

"Untouched by time and man," Izta whispered. "The true splendors of the Maya, perfectly preserved. Let the guides open our personal quarters first. Rest for a while, and then we will eat."

The tribesmen led the group into a side antechamber, using their poles to unlock the reinforced doors. Personal quarters were revealed, lined with furs and woven tapestries.

Izy assisted Maria, helping her lie on a comfortable bed.

Nearby, a servant accompanied Izta and Chac to their chamber entrance. The servant turned a wall relief, placing his pole into the opening. The rhythmic sounds of internal unlocking mechanisms echoed behind the stone wall.

He pushed the doors open, bowing low to the floor.

"Welcome home, my king and queen," the servant said, his voice trembling. "Your chamber has awaited your presence."

Chac looked at his wife, his eyes full of devotion. He scooped Izta into his arms, carrying her through the threshold into their sanctuary.

The stone doors closed behind them with a soft, final thud.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Next Morning

Izy and Maria sat eating a meal inside the dining hall, the ambient light soft and warm. The drapes parted, and Izta and Chac entered the room.

The toll of the spell was visible; over the course of a few hours, they had both aged drastically into their late seventies, their posture stooped but their spirits unbroken.

“Good, you eat,” Izta said, walking to the table. “You will need your strength for what comes next. Maria, please, drink plenty of fluid.”

Chac nodded in agreement, leaning against the stone table. “When you finish your meal, Iztali, I will show you the greatest treasure of the New City—our medicines.”

Chac and Izta took their seats at the head of the stone table and began to eat, their movements measured with the grace of their advanced age.

A moment later, Al and Jeevan burst into the dining hall, their faces flushed.

“This place is incredible, bro,” Al said, pulling out a stone chair. “There’s technological stuff engineered into the architecture that our modern world doesn’t even have yet.”

Jeevan sat beside him, shaking his head. “If the world only knew what they missed out on when your civilization vanished.”

“Soon, they will,” Chac said, offering a serene smile. “Feel free to explore the grounds as you like. We will be quite busy for the rest of the day.”

As Al and Jeevan loaded their plates, Chac stood, motioning for Izy and Maria to follow him.

They exited the dining hall, following a network of narrow stone corridors that wove through the temple structure. Chac came to a halt in front of a seamless wall, delivering a slow nod to the waiting temple servants.

The servants stepped forward in synchronization. They turned the stone wall reliefs, inserting their poles into the cavities and turning the locking mechanisms in a rhythmic sequence.

THUD. GRIND.

The stone blocks opened, separating to expose a medical room filled with hundreds of alcoves containing dried herbs, ground powders, and crystalline vials. Together, they entered the space.

“In here,” Chac said, his voice echoing off the stone rafters, “is a natural cure for every ailment known to man.”

He placed a reassuring hand onto Maria’s shoulder, leading her to a contoured stone lounge built into the center of the room. She sat, her breathing shallow from the lingering pain of her illness. Chac looked at her and smiled.

“Including the disease currently resting within your body,” Chac promised. “Let me prepare the botanical potions that will make you whole again.”

Chac and the shaman moved through the alcoves, gathering roots, leaves, and ground powders, mixing them into a thick, dark liquid potion.

Maria accepted the ceramic cup and drank the bitter fluid without hesitation, then lay back on the stone lounge.

Moving to her side, Izta applied a fragrant, emerald-green salve across Maria’s torso, chanting rhythmically. Chac stepped forward to light several small stone bowls positioned around the lounge; they immediately emitted waves of dense, sweet blue smoke that filled the air.

The shaman circled Maria’s position, his low voice joining Izta’s in the chant.

Suddenly, Maria gripped her stomach, her muscles tensing as she let out an agonizing moan. A second later, her eyes rolled back and she passed out.

Izy stepped forward, his heart in his throat, but Chac held up a silencing hand.

Chac took two smooth, translucent crystal stones from a velvet tray, moving them slowly inches above Maria’s exposed torso.

To Izy's horror and amazement, Maria's skin rippled. Beneath the surface, the hardened tissue lumps shifted, converging and moving toward her stomach cavity.

The shaman raised her head by the chin, pouring a clear liquid into her mouth. Maria gasped, awakening as the fluids hit her throat.

Chac held a deep stone bowl beneath her as she leaned over and vomited a dark, viscous liquid into the vessel. Izta stepped in with a damp cloth, wiping the sweat and fluid from Maria's face.

"How do you feel, my child?" Chac asked.

Maria rubbed her stomach and her sides, testing her body. She looked up at the royals, the gray pallor gone from her skin, replaced by a healthy glow.

"I feel... pure," Maria whispered, a look of wonder on her face. "Aligned. Better than I have in years."

"By tomorrow morning, you will be healed," Chac smiled. He turned his gaze to Izy, gesturing toward the stone lounge. "Now, it is your turn."

Izy hesitated, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"As your friend Al says, you look very cool," Chac chuckled, pointing a finger at his face. "But you must remove those glasses."

Izy sighed, pulled off his designer frames, and sat on the contoured stone lounge, the world turning into a soft, near-sighted blur.

Chac prepared a fresh potion and a heavy topical salve. Izy drank the dark liquid, grimacing at the grit, before Chac applied the salve onto his closed eyes.

"It's getting hot," Izy muttered, his hands gripping the edges of the stone. "Is it supposed to get this hot?"

"Yes," Chac replied. "Now, wait."

After a few minutes, Chac used a cloth to wipe away the remaining salve. He then held two flat, cool stones against each side of Izy's head. Izy's eyes widened behind his eyelids; he was nervous as the energy shifted.

"Okay," Izy stammered. "I'm feeling a weird, intense pressure moving through the center of my head."

He tried to turn his face away from the stones to break the contact.

“Be still,” Chac commanded, his voice brooking no argument. “Be quiet. Be a man, Iztali.”

Chac massaged the muscles around Izy’s temples and eyes, letting the pressure dissipate. He pulled his hands back.

“Open your eyes,” Chac said. “Tell me, what do you see?”

Izy opened his eyes, blinking as the blur cleared. The lines of the stone walls, the colors of the herb jars, the details of the carvings—everything snapped into a focus. He didn’t need lenses anymore.

His eyes swept across the room and stopped on Maria. A wide smile broke across his face.

“The love of my life,” Izy murmured, his voice thick with emotion. “I can see the love of my life.”

Chac looked at Maria, a knowing glint in his eyes. “Do you believe his words, Maria?”

She smiled, tears spilling over her lashes as she nodded in assent. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

“And how do you feel about Iztali?” Chac pressed.

Maria stepped to the lounge and took Izy’s hand, lifting her other hand to run her fingers across the curve of his cheek. “I’ve loved him since the first day we met.”

Chac smiled, laying a hand across both of their shoulders.

“To be whole, Ch’ulel is necessary,” Chac explained with gravity. “Your soul and your physical body are intrinsically connected, and they must always remain balanced. To complete this balance... the two of you should marry tomorrow.”

Both Izy and Maria looked up at him, shocked by the decree. Maria didn’t say a word; she simply took a tighter hold of Izy’s hand.

“It’s not too soon?” Maria whispered, her green eyes searching his face.

Izy shook his head, his hand tightening around hers. “Waiting an entire lifetime for you? Too soon? No.”

“The two of you will bring forth our people of the new age,” Chac declared, his voice carrying the weight of a prophecy realized.

Maria and Izy looked into each other’s eyes. Moving on instinct, Izy dropped onto one knee on the stone floor, holding her hand.

“Will you marry me, Maria?”

She smiled, her eyes filling with tears as she nodded. Izy stood, and they shared a kiss. Breaking away, he looked toward the others, a flush on his face.

"I had to do it that way," he mumbled. "I'm old-fashioned."

Izta smiled. She slipped a green ring off her finger and handed it to him, nodding toward Maria. Izy took the artifact and slid the jade ring onto Maria's finger. They kissed a second time.

"Tomorrow at the sun's zenith, the shaman will perform the ceremony," Chac announced. He looked at his wife, his eyes crinkling with a memory. "He's quite good at weddings."

Maria looked at the shaman with a flash of suspicion. She walked to his side, holding his hand as she looked into his cloudy eyes.

"You're not actually my grandfather, are you?" she asked.

"No," the shaman answered. "Your family was killed because you held the secrets—your birthmark. After your parents died, I took care of you. I protected you from the world to bring us here to this moment."

Maria didn't hesitate. She drew the man into a tight embrace. "I love you... grandfather."

Chac and Izta turned to depart the medical room, their footsteps echoing. Watching them go, Maria looked disappointed.

"What about grandfather's eyes?" she called. "Aren't you going to heal his sight too?"

Izta and Chac stopped, sharing a smile before turning.

"He sees much more clearly than all of us," Izta said.

"But—" Izy started.

"I use my sight differently than you do, Iztali," the shaman interrupted. "I see in many different dimensions."

Izy shook his head, his mind reeling. "I need to start writing all of things down right—"

Chac raised a hand, cutting him off. "It is all written down already. All the sacred knowledge is secured inside the chamber of secrets. Tomorrow we have a wedding. And right after that, I will show you our true library of codices."

Izy's eyes grew huge with excitement. "A library?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Next Day

The first pale light of morning filtered through the stone slits of the royal quarters. Chac and Izta awoke in their bed.

Over the course of the night, they had aged into their eighties, their skin fragile and paper-thin, though their eyes remained vivid.

"It's a big day," Chac murmured, his voice a raspy whisper. "I will get dressed for the wedding."

"After the wedding, we must show them everything," Izta said, her breathing shallow. "There is so little time left."

Chac nodded. He reached with a trembling hand to caress Izta's face, looking into her eyes.

"So many centuries," Chac whispered, a sorrow in his voice. "So few days."

A tear rolled down the curve of Izta's cheek. Moving closer, they drew each other into a silent embrace, holding onto the remnants of their mortal time.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Later That Day

Al and Jeevan stood atop the stone temple under the afternoon sun, both dressed in full Maya ceremonial clothing. Izy stood beside them, wearing a custom woven loincloth decorated with parrot feathers that caught the breeze.

The inner doors parted, and Chac walked onto the stone platform. He was wearing his full king's regalia, the gold and feathers gleaming.

Seeing him, Jeevan delivered a nudge to Izy's arm.

"A god dressed up," Jeevan whispered.

The shaman stood waiting before the stone altar, the blue smoke from the pots swirling around him. Down below, Maria stepped onto the plaza.

The sun reflected off her white skirt and brocaded blouse, creating a halo around her form. Izta walked beside her, guiding her up the steps.

Jeevan let out a low mumble next to Izy. "And a new queen will arise. Man, the prophecy is being fulfilled."

"This is so way cool, bro," Al grinned, adjusting his ceremonial headpiece.

"Shh," Izy hissed. He stepped forward, his eyes locked on his bride as he joined Maria at the top of the altar. They stood side by side, their hands interlocked before the shaman.

The shaman stepped forward, dipping his fingers into a clear liquid. He anointed their foreheads, praying over them in a low, rhythmic chant.

Together, the newlyweds dropped their heads to pray under the sky.

The ceremony concluded. Breaking the silence, Al raised a camera and snapped a photograph.

Click.

The spell broke, and the group turned to enter the sanctuary of the temple.



Inside the temple corridor, the tribesmen stepped forward in unison to swing open the carved doors.

Izy smiled at his wife, scooped Maria into his arms, and carried her across the threshold into their chamber. The doors closed behind them, sealing out the rest of the world.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Later That Evening

The torches were lit, casting a warm glow through the structure. Izy and Maria entered the chamber hand-in-hand, where the rest of the group was engaged in a quiet conversation.

Seeing them approach, Izta rose from her seat to greet them, her silver hair gleaming in the torchlight.

“Ah, the newlyweds,” Izta smiled, her voice full of warmth. “And now, in Maya tradition, you return to everyday life.”

Before they could answer, she took a hold of their hands, pulling them behind her toward a dark corridor. “But first,” she whispered, her eyes flashing with secrets, “we must give you your wedding present.”

The group navigated through a network of stone corridors, the tribesmen following close behind. At the intersection, the corner wall transitioned into a single, large sloped stone. Inlaid lines of dark metal radiated outward across the stone floor like a sunburst.

Moving with agility, the tribesmen scaled stone blocks jutting from the wall. They inserted their poles into hidden holes, jumping onto the pole ends to pull them downward with their body weight.

CLANG.

The inlaid metal floor lines lifted like railroad tracks, mechanically lifting the sloped cornerstone. They inserted their poles into adjacent wall reliefs, and the cornerstone slid forward to reveal a hidden passage.

A steep stone staircase descended into the pitch-darkness. Together, they entered the threshold.

The moment Chac’s foot touched the first step, the staircase became illuminated by a sequence of glowing golden bulbs. The others gasped, staring at the warm light.

Chac came to a halt, smiling at them. “They are exactly what you think—light spun from gold, powered by the river current flowing below the temple structure.”

They continued the descent into a cavernous subterranean chamber. The walls were constructed from thick layers of carved stones. The room cast a deep golden hue from the glowing bulbs—and the gold itself.

Immense stacks of gold bricks and silver bars filled the floor. Expansive shelves packed with hundreds of codices lined the rear wall.

Chac led the group through the chamber, stopping in the center to extend his arms and turn in a circle. “The treasures of our people, preserved, waiting for the new age... waiting for you.”

He gestured toward the masonry paneling. “The wall carvings tell the history of the Maya.”

Chac motioned toward the wall of codices. “The codices contain enlightenment to the heavens and earth—both the seen and unseen worlds.”

“You are now the keepers of knowledge,” Izta added, her voice soft but powerful. “The codices scared the world, for they lived in darkness.”

“But you have witnessed knowledge that heals and enlightens,” Chac pressed. “Knowledge is to be shared.”

Izy turned, taking in the sight of a library he had spent his life searching for. “That’s what I’ve been saying,” he mumbled.

Al stared at a geometric symbol carved into the stone wall, his mouth dropping agape. He pointed a finger, looking at Chac. “Hey, king daddy... that looks like—”

He pulled up his shirt sleeve, exposing his forearm tattoo to the light.

“The final overlay of the calendar,” Chac said. He walked over to Izy, placing a hand onto his shoulder. “The age where you’ll share the knowledge and prophecies of the codices.”

Izy stood speechless, searching for words in the golden light. “This is—”

“Way cool, bro,” Al finished for him.

Chac wrapped an arm around Izta, raising his free arm toward the space. “Come, let us feast.”

Chac looked at Izta, sharing a smile as he touched her face; their eyes remained vibrant. Watching them, Maria looked at Izy, the bittersweet reality of time settling over her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Next Morning

Izy, Maria, and the shaman looked on from the courtyard as Al and Jeevan saddled their horses and the tribesmen loaded supplies.

“When you get back to New Orleans, get directly with the university,” Izy instructed his assistant. “Seronjo’s fate should be known. Show them pictures of what we’ve found.”

“Never speak of the temple,” the shaman warned. “The treasures must remain here.”

“I’ll be back next month,” Izy promised, shaking their hands. “Maria and I have a lot to go through here first.”

A look of sadness grew across their faces at the impending farewell.

The temple doors parted, and Izta and Chac walked into the sunlight. Over the course of the night, they had aged into their nineties. Their skin was fragile, and their eyes were old and cloudy.

Jeevan and Al walked over to face the monarchs.

“This has been an absolute honor,” Jeevan said, his voice cracking. “It has—”

“Been really tripping, king daddy,” Al grinned, bowing his head.

Chac and Izta let out a soft laugh. Chac reached out and shared a knuckle bump with Al.

Jeevan and Al mounted their horses, delivered a salute, and rode into the tree line.

Chac turned to face Izy. “It is our last day with you,” Chac said, his voice a raspy whisper. “We must show you the final pieces needed to decipher the knowledge.”

He took Maria by the hand. “I’ll show you the medical books and the inner workings of the stones.”

They turned to walk away, but Chac stopped, looking at Izy one last time. “I’ll send Maria back to you, then Izta and I will meet you in the chamber of secrets before the sun sleeps.”

He shared a look with Izta, smiling. Chac and Maria entered the temple.

Izta took hold of Izy's hand. "Come," she said. "I'll tell you the real Maya history as it was recorded on these walls."

They walked toward the temple doors, crossing the threshold inside.

Behind them, the tribesmen pulled the doors closed; the carved symbol of the dual swords and the imperial crown was left guarding the exterior wood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Chamber of Secrets Later That Night

“It is the time. Come,” Chac said.

Izta and Chac were seated on thrones, carried across the polished stone floor by four tribesmen. The monarchs were dressed in ornate funeral clothing beaded, embroidered, and flowing with bird feathers. The tribesmen carrying them wore black loincloths and masks with no facial features. Other tribesmen walked ahead of the thrones, holding carved masks of Izta and Chac.

The procession came to a halt. Maria held back her tears, her hands trembling. Seeing her grief, Chac extended his fragile hand to her.

“No sadness in death, my child,” Chac whispered, his voice thin but resolute. “Only life.”

Chac released Maria’s hands, touched her cheek, and offered one last smile.

“Men believe time to be real, but it exists only in their imagination,” Chac said, looking between Maria and Izy. “Soon, we will be rejoined.”

With a movement, Chac took off the jade medallion from his neck and gave it to Izy. “It will bring oneness to your mind.”

The procession continued toward the rear wall of codices. The tribesmen stepped forward and pulled a stone column downward.

Rumble.

The wall opened, exposing a descending staircase. The sound of running water vibrated from below. Together, they entered the threshold.

The procession made its way down the stairs to a subterranean plaza of polished stone. The black onyx walls featured carvings depicting the journey of the soul into eternity.

A river cut through the plaza’s end, and a wooden barge was moored at the stone dock.

The tribesmen carried the thrones aboard the barge. Izta and Chac held hands, looking ahead into the darkness of the river tunnel.

The tribesmen boarded the vessel, handing the shaman two cups filled with a dark liquid. He raised the cups to Chac and Izta's mouths, and they drank in unison. The tribesmen took the empty cups and disembarked.

Next, the tribesmen bearing the ceremonial masks boarded the vessel. They placed the carved masks over Izta and Chac's faces, handed them their scepters, and lit the torches positioned on the four barge corners.

The shaman bowed low, and all remaining attendants disembarked the vessel.

Suddenly, out of the dark onyx walls, two black jaguars leaped onto the deck of the barge. They sat before the thrones like guardians of the underworld.

Chac raised his scepter.

The tribesmen untied the mooring lines. The current caught the vessel, carrying the barge downstream.

Izta and Chac's heads dropped in their final sleep.

The barge disappeared into the tunnel, and the flickering torchlight illuminated the stone walls behind them.

The jaguars let out a growl that echoed through the mountain, before the torchlight faded to black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

New Orleans, Louisiana
Two Years Later

The branches of live oak trees framed the sunny view of Orleans University.

A streetcar's bell echoed through the morning air as the vehicle swayed to a stop on St. Charles Avenue. A vibrant advertisement stretched across its side, heralding the world premiere of *Lost Maya Treasures* at the Orleans Museum of Art.

The streetcar pulled away, exposing the arches of Gibbons Hall.

The office was large, cluttered, and filled from the floor to the ceiling with Maya treasures. Izy worked at his desk, reviewing research notes.

Resting on the wood was a brass nameplate that read: *Dr. Iz'tali Smith, Director of History*. A framed wedding photograph of Izy, Maria, Chac, Izta, and the shaman sat on the desktop. On a nearby mahogany bureau, guarded by the sunlight, rested the jaguar mask.

A knock sounded at the door. Izy looked up, his vision locking onto the frame.

Maria entered, a smile on her face, holding the hand of a boy named Chuck. The boy reached his arms toward Izy.

"Daddy!" Chuck squealed.

Maria scooped the boy up, walking to the desk to plant a kiss on her husband's lips. She set Chuck on the rug and sat on Izy's lap, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"You're finished for the day?" Izy asked, smiling.

"Yep," Maria beamed. "Took my final exam this morning, finished teaching my Alternative Medicine class, and just picked Chuck up from the nursery."

Another knock sounded at the frame. Jeevan and Al entered the office, dressed in suits but carrying their high energy.

“We need to run to the museum and make sure the exhibit layout is ready,” Jeevan said, checking his tablet. “Remember, you have interviews with the morning shows every fifteen minutes tomorrow.”

Al grinned, leaning against the doorframe. “Say, bro, you need me to bring—”

Before he could finish, Izy’s secretary—a librarian-looking woman—barged into the room, cutting between them as if they were a bother. She dropped a stack of papers onto Izy’s desk.

“Before you go, Dr. Smith, I need you to confirm the interview slot with *Time* magazine,” the secretary insisted.

“Tell them that’ll be great,” Izy said, not looking up.

“The *National Geographic* film crew wants to confirm their shooting schedule for October.”

Izy gathered his research papers, nodding to Maria. “Tell them that’ll be great too.”

“Your publisher called,” the secretary pressed, flipping through her notepad. “*The Truths of the Maya* is officially number one on the bestseller list, and—”

Izy stood, grabbing his leather briefcase—embossed with the geometric insignia of the dual swords and the imperial crown. “That’s great,” Izy interrupted. “We’re leaving.”

He grabbed Maria’s hand, and she reached to grab Chuck’s hand. Together, the family headed toward the exit while the secretary followed behind them down the corridor.



Izy and Maria strolled along the walking path of Audubon Park. Above them, the Spanish moss draped across the branches of the live oaks, swaying in the New Orleans breeze.

Maria walked with a rhythmic grace along the concrete path.

“So, between the books, the museum shows, the television appearances, and you finishing school this semester—plus your upcoming residency and teaching—when exactly are we going to start on our next big project?” Izy asked, glancing at her.

Maria punched Izy’s shoulder, a smile crossing her face. “We’ll have a baby girl soon enough, Iztali. But for right now, let’s go check on our newest baby.”

They turned off the path, walking through the entrance gates of the Audubon Stables and heading toward the barn structure. Together, they entered the threshold.



The interior of the stables was breathtaking. It featured herringbone brick floors and wood panels, resembling the hall of a castle rather than a barn.

A neigh vibrated through the rafters. A black stallion poked his head out from a stall. Izy walked over and handed him an apple, rubbing at the horse's forehead. The engraved brass nameplate on the latch read: *King Chac*.

Right next door, a palomino mare's head popped from the adjacent birthing stall. Maria walked over to join her, her eyes lighting up. The nameplate on the latch read: *Queen Izta*.

Maria leaned over the stable gate, peering into the straw-lined stall. Inside, a wobbly colt was struggling onto its feet.

"The first of the new breed," Maria whispered.

The sound of footsteps echoed across the herringbone brick floors from the back of the barn. "And judging from the amount of phone calls I've been getting, you two best start making some more," a voice called.

Izy turned with a smile. Louis, the man who ran the operations of the stables, walked to join them. He greeted Izy before reaching a hand to pet *Queen Izta's* nose.

"You know, Doc," Louis said, shaking his head. "My family has run this facility for over a hundred years, and we have never seen a breed of horse as pure as these two."

"Being isolated on an island for hundreds of years definitely helped keep the genes pure," Maria noted with a grin.

Louis nodded, patting the palomino's flank. "Yes, sir. The minute that newspaper article hit, people started calling from all over. Say, Doc... are you two actually going to start breeding?"

Izy displayed a smile. "Already have."

They let out a laugh. Izy stepped forward, placing a hand on Louis' shoulder. "It'll be a few years down the line, Louis, but we're taking names of potential buyers now."

“Well, the little one is doing fine,” Louis said, looking at the foal. “I’ll be here working all weekend—”

“Except for the museum show?” Izy interrupted, raising an eyebrow.

Louis nodded, a proud smile breaking across his face. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Doc. The world and I have been waiting a long time for the truth.”

“Great. We have to go catch the streetcar, but we’ll see you there, Louis. Thanks for everything.”

Izy, Maria, and Chuck exited the shade of the stables, stepping into the sun as the distant chime of a streetcar bell echoed through the park trees.



Maria sat by an open window of the streetcar, her hair blowing in the breeze. Dapples of sunlight fell across her skin as the vehicle swayed down the avenue, rumbling past the mansions of St. Charles.

Izy held her hand, smiling at her, while Chuck sat on his lap, looking out the glass.

The car rolled to a stop at an intersection. Maria looked out the window, a smile on her face as she waved through the frame to the shaman, who was standing on the porch of a raised cottage. The man returned the wave with a nod. A painted sign in front of his property read: *Alternative Medicine*.

The conductor pulled the lever, and the streetcar continued its route, rumbling down the avenue.

Izy rubbed Chuck's hair, made a face that made the boy giggle, and laughed. He turned his focus to Maria, his eyes full of devotion.

“Of all of the incredible, supernatural things that have happened to me,” Izy murmured, “I would have never thought I would have you.”

He leaned in to kiss Maria, a long moment, before drawing Chuck into an embrace and kissing the boy's head. “And all of this, too.”

The conductor clanged the bell.

Clang, clang.

The streetcar slowed to a stop. Izy stood, extending his hand to his wife. “We’re home.”

They walked toward the front threshold of the car, exiting the step and setting foot onto the pavement.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Moments Later

In a blur of green and iron, the streetcar pulled away down the track, exposing a Greek Revival mansion towering over the avenue. A wrought-iron fence framed a manicured lawn, dappled by the branches of live oak trees.

They entered the yard, walking past rows of azaleas that led up to an expansive, wrap-around porch. A collie raced across the grass, barking to greet them.

The front door opened. Aunt Cocco stepped onto the porch, smiling as she shook her head at the sight of them.

“Um-um,” Cocco said, her Yat dialect filling the afternoon air. “I was just sitting inside thinking about the night I told you your life had changed. And I knew it had, baby.”

She stepped forward to take Izy’s briefcase, guiding them through the frame. Her back was turned as she walked into the residence, talking over her shoulder.

“Yep, I knew it had,” Cocco chuckled. “I just knew some designer glasses would help you get yourself a good woman.”

Izy smiled at Maria, his eyes dancing. Without a word, he scooped his wife into his arms. He looked at her face, kissing her as she wrapped her arms around his neck. Together they crossed the threshold.

Izy pushed the door shut with the heel of his foot; it closed against the frame.

“They sure did, Cocco,” Izy said, looking at Maria in his arms. “They sure did.”

He pushed the door shut with his heel. It closed with a definitive click, sealing out the rest of the world. The final ray of evening light caught the beveled crystal insignia of the dual swords and the imperial crown, igniting its angled edges into a brilliant prism of fire.